

Anyone who's lived near train tracks (*or ever visited La Grande, Oregon*) knows the hassle and inconvenience a passing train can cause. You're already running late... you're driving up to the track crossing... and then—the barriers start flashing. ... It's a frustrating feeling.

But imagine if that happened as you were trying to qualify for the Boston Marathon.

That's exactly what happened to more than 100 runners in Pennsylvania... as a train crossed the marathon course — and crossed it very slowly. One runner... who was using the race as his last opportunity to qualify for Boston... said that he "*missed his qualifying time by eight minutes.*"

Race officials had communicated with the railroad line prior to race day... and had received "*absolute assurances...that trains would be suspended*" during the race. ... Yet those assurances didn't stop a train from crossing the course's seventh mile. ... "*The incident is especially regrettable and was quite unexpected,*" the marathon's account posted on Facebook.

(Listen!)... You may have a plan laid out for running your best race... and you may have set goals and dreamed dreams... but the unexpected has blocked your way. (It may be a health issue... a financial crisis... an injustice done to you... or a relational matter with a friend or family member.) ... One truth makes itself abundantly (and sometimes painfully) clear:

Proverbs 16:9 (ESV)

The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

Whenever things seem hopelessly out of control in our lives... this is a truth that will get us through. “*The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps...*”

God never loses control. ... His followers might even rebel... but they cannot thwart God's plan. ... We have been studying the book of Genesis... here... on Sunday mornings... and one of the things that the patriarchs (Abraham... Isaac... and Jacob) have taught us... is that our rebellion against God... will make things tougher on us... and may lead us through difficult valleys (that we might have avoided by paying attention to our relationship to Him.) ... But... in the long run... God will always prevail. (God will make the nation through which all nations will be blessed. God will make the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to multiply. God will straighten out whatever mess the patriarchs create.)

Today... we open a new section in Genesis... and we will see this very lesson take-on a laser-like focus... through the life of Joseph. The Book of Genesis slows down (dramatically) and devotes far more chapters to the character of Joseph... than any other character. The story of Joseph is the longest and is described as the most masterful narrative in Genesis. It will take us to the end of the book.

There are perhaps few portions in all of Scripture... with which we are more familiar... than the one now before us. ... From earliest childhood many of us have listened to this beautiful but pathetic narrative. ... The aged patriarch (Jacob)... his favorite son (Joseph)... the coat of many colors... Joseph's dreams... the envious brothers... their wicked conduct — (all so true to MODERN life)... have been indelibly impressed upon our memories... since we first learned them on our mother's knee... or from the

lips of our Sunday School teacher. ... Many are the lessons which we may have drawn over the years (from our hearing it)... and pointed are the warnings... which we have acquired here.

It is not just believers who recognize what a magnificent story it is. Secular society also hails it as a great story. A three-volume novel (based on Joseph's Bible account) was published in 1930 by Thomas Mann. The New York Times book review said that it "*exceeds in drama, opulence, and movement anything that Hollywood has ever dreamed.*" Broadway musical writer and producer... Andrew Lloyd Webber... must have thought the same... when he composed the smash hit musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. ... In the early 1980's... Christian writer (Cam Floria) wrote another musical called "The Dreamer"... which has been a favorite of my wife and I over the years. We often quote lines from it and sing its songs... when something happens in our life that reminds us situations in Joseph's narrative. ... Patti and I praise God that he gave us two daughters... but if he had given us a boy... we were prepared to name him "Joseph"... because of our love for this Bible character.

Where we have left off in Genesis' account of God creating a people for Himself... is the point where we see in Jacob and his sons... human passions - at their worst. ... Extreme cruelty is the result. ... But in God's omniscience... He knew how the sons of Jacob would act. ... And He uses their natural inclinations... to work out His plan. ... The human tendencies to demonstrate favoritism (or bias)... to manifest pride and boasting... and to be controlled by envy... all manifest themselves.

Today... as Joseph's story is introduced... the writer makes clear that even though Joseph has some immaturities... Jacob does not hide his favoritism

toward him. '...He made Joseph a very special coat... that sent a definite message to his brothers.

Genesis 37:1-2

The epic begins with teenaged Joseph shepherding his father's flocks along with his half-brothers (Dan... Naphtali... Gad... and Asher.) These were the sons of Jacob's less-favored wives (Bilhah and Zilpah.) ... They were Jacob's full sons... but in Jacob's eyes... these men had a secondary status in Jacob's affections.

We have already witnessed that Jacob sought to protect Joseph and his mother... by hiding them far behind all the other brothers and their moms... so they would be killed first... if Esau was coming to slaughter Jacob and his family... when he returned to Canaan. ... In his favoritism... Jacob gave his most loved son and wife a chance to escape (if they had to.) Quite naturally... then... Joseph's (four older) half-brothers had little regard for young Joseph... the favored son of their father's favorite wife.

Now Joseph (at this point in time) was far from perfect. Through his life-lessons he would enjoy a future greatness. ... I want to point this out... because up until recently... it has been customary for preachers to bestow upon Joseph an almost sinless status... even during his younger years. ... But such a surmising... of course... is contrary to what Scripture teaches about the sinful nature of all people... and what we know about the daily sins and repentance of the most godly men and women in Scripture.

So... the elaborate attempts... to say that Joseph did nothing wrong when he "*brought a bad report of them to their father*"...(which I saw in a lot of commentaries... during my time of studying our passage for today)...

simply ring hollow to me. ... This is especially true in light of what the Hebrew text actually says about the incident.

Step into the weeds of our passage with me for just a moment. (We won't stay long.) ... The Hebrew word that gets translated into English as "report" ... is *dibbâ*. ... This word is always used (whenever we see it in the rest of Scripture) in the negative sense - of an **untrue** report. But that is not all. ... This word that always indicates an "untrue report" ... is also (here) **intensified** with the Hebrew adjective "rā 'â." "rā 'â" means "evil."

So... here is what the original language of verse two is telling us: Joseph **misrepresented** and **maligned** his brothers. ... This probably means that Joseph's report to his dad... was only partially true. Joseph added some exaggerations or inaccuracies. So young Joseph... in effect... was a bratty tattler... who delighted so much in angering his father toward his brothers... that he purposefully misspoke.

In the eyes of the disaffected sons of Bilhah and Zilpah... this was a monstrous offense. (It would be to any of us!) And when the rest of the older brothers heard about what Joseph had done... they **all** began to smolder with resentment. ... Joseph was scum to them. ... Could their fury possibly get any worse for young Joseph...? (Yes! ... and it did.)

Genesis 37:3

Jacob's blatant favoritism for Joseph was reprehensively over-the-top! The lifelong hurt inflicted by **his own father's favoritism** for his brother Esau (instead of him)... should have made Jacob wary (of even a **hint**)... of not being even-handed with his children.

This description of “a coat of many colors” is probably not the best image of what the original Hebrew depicts. “Coat of many colors” is how the Greek version of the Old Testament described it... as well as the Latin Vulgate... both of which were written HUNDREDS of years after the original Hebrew.

The Hebrew words “keth-o-neth pas-seem” can mean either “*many colors*” or it can mean “*long sleeves over the arms and legs.*” I think it was the latter... because it fits the context much better.

I think that it was a robe that had long sleeve that went down to his wrists. A normal robe of Joseph’s day... only went to the elbows. And this robe also extended down to his ankles.... while a normal robe only went no further than one’s knees. ... A person could not (of course) work in such a robe. ... This was the robe of the superior... (the overseer... the manager.) It is what the boss (not his workers who are under him) would wear. Jacob was obviously telling all of his sons... that young Joseph was now master... over them.

Note this also: the coat was probably to be worn by the son who was to receive the birthright... the blessing of the father... which gave two thirds of Jacob’s inheritance to him.

This coat was typical of that worn by tribal leaders... and it marked Joseph as chosen by Jacob to be the chief of the family. Jacob was trying to position Joseph as ruler of the 12 tribes of Israel. ... Jacob is committing a similar sin to his father (Isaac)... who sought to bestow the blessing on his favorite son (Esau.) ... He was getting ahead of God. ... God has not yet declared who will be ruler in the household.

But let me draw your attention to a certain phrase in verse three...
“*because he was the son of his old age...*” When we read that... our assumption is that “*his old age*” refers to Jacob’s old age. We automatically think that it means “*because Joseph was born when Jacob was old.*” But it probably doesn’t. (Why would that be a reason to favor him?) ... It is most likely is a reference to Joseph’s character that his father noticed in him. ... (You see)... the phrase “*son of his old age*” is a Hebrew adage... for 'a wise son' — one who possessed wisdom beyond his years. Literally it means “*the son with an old head.*” ... Because Joseph had such knowledge that only comes from experience... and that which seemed beyond his years... (in other words...“*an old head*”)... Jacob favored him.

Even though Joseph was a bratty little tattletale... who stretched the truth... Jacob saw potential in him.

However... just think what he had done to Joseph! Being only seventeen years old... he was not able to manage his older brothers (who were full-grown men.) But more than that... these brothers were rough and ungodly men. (Remember when their sister had been raped by the young prince of Shechem. In retaliation... these roughians had murdered every man in the city of Shechem and looted and enslaved every woman and child in the entire city.) ... Now Joseph was supposed to rule over them!... (I don’t think so...)

Young Joseph's sudden appearance in the distinctive robe ignited his brothers' hatred.

Genesis 37:4

The phrase *"could not speak peacefully to him"* literally is saying, *"they could not abide his friendly speech"* — that is... they rejected his every attempt to be friendly. ... Joseph's brothers sneeringly ***despised*** his very presence.

Mistakes are everywhere. Jacob (perhaps the most blameworthy) should never have entrusted this kind of responsibility to one so young. He places Joseph in a position where he could never be successful.

Ultimately... Joseph will be placed in the position of being a ruler in the most powerful nation on earth (Egypt). The early mistakes of leadership that he learns here... will be lessons that will pay off in the future. Clearly, there were mistakes made by Jacob... Joseph... and his brothers. ... God... however... was not taken by surprise... and used it as training ground. ... Joseph later understood this.

Genesis 50:19-20 (ESV)

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

There is a way to benefit from the mistakes of our life. The best way to keep a mistake from being a tragedy is to make sure we learn the right lessons from it. ... Joseph is a great example of one who always learned his lessons well... and did not repeat his mistakes.

Joseph's youthful exuberance and naivete are principle characteristics of this narrative. ... Yet... it is clear that the events are very much orchestrated by God. ... The enmity of Joseph's brothers... is already

apparent... and God allows their anger to be used in getting his divine plan in place.

Joseph has two dreams that he relates to his brothers. There is no mistaking the dreams' meaning. The brothers of Joseph immediately recognize the implications.

Genesis 37:5-8

No one... (not even the dullest of his brothers)... could miss the point. Joseph certainly must have understood it too. ... But the force of the dream... plus his naivete and self-focus (which probably came from being the center of his parents' affection)... impelled him to spontaneously share it. ... After all... the dream was the real thing... and not a concoction. ... The dream (of course)... foreshadowed the saving climax of the whole Joseph narrative... when... because he had become ruler of Egypt... his brothers actually ***did*** bow down to him.

Should Joseph have told his dreams to the family, or was this just another evidence of his adolescent immaturity? The two dreams couldn't help but irritate the family and make things worse for him. ... What could Joseph have been expecting – as a reaction from his brothers...? ... What did he ***think*** he would achieve...? No one enjoys a braggart. ***We*** sure can't see what ***Jacob*** saw in Joseph... that he had an old head.

Unfortunately... for most humans... we must be humbled before man... before we will learn life's greatest lessons that God has for us. ... Joseph will be taught a humility (that he does not yet know)... through many years of servant-hood... after his brothers commit their foul deed. ... Just as Abraham... Isaac... and Jacob had learned to submit to God's will... it is

now Joseph who must learn the lesson. ... God ultimately uses the dreams to stir Joseph's schooling. God's plan is moving forward through Jacob's wrongful favoritism... Joseph's immaturities... his brother's inflamed hatred... and now these God-given dreams add more fuel to the fire.

Joseph has another dream... and let me say something about the dreams of Joseph... which always came in pairs. (Did you know that...?) Joseph will experience more dreams before we are finished with Genesis... and every time... it isn't just a single dream that God gives him. They always come - two at a time. The reason is that it punctuates the certainty of the matter. God will sovereignly bring to pass their fulfillment. ... So Joseph has another dream.

Genesis 37:9-10

OK... Common! Joseph would absolutely have to know not to share this dream with his brothers. ... He knew how severely they had reacted before... and he knew they were going to react even more this time. Boy... Joseph has a lot to learn! It is as if the bratty little tattler... who evilly stretched the truth... now wants to dig at his brothers... and rub their noses in his special privileges. ... Joseph again unwisely shared his dream with his brothers... and this time... he also shared it with his father.

This was too much... even for his doting father. He rebuked Joseph. ... The word translated "*rebuked*" (here)... is a strong word. It means "to scream at." ... Jacob could clearly see the haughty pride and attitude in his son... and he wanted to stop it for Joseph's own good. The result could only be expected. (But not completely...)

Genesis 37:11

Jacob rebuked Joseph... but he did not hate him (as his sons did.)
Something in Jacob's inner-being gave him pause. ...Like Mary (the mother of Jesus)... Jacob pondered the meaning of what he heard in his heart. From rebuke to ruminating was a wise move on Jacob's part. He began to realize that these dreams were meaningful and had an important message. He did not understand it all yet, but he would retain the dreams in his heart and ponder them for future understanding. ... Perhaps it helped that it had a touch-point to his own life. Jacob himself knew from his own experience the mysterious ways of God... because he was the younger brother who was given preference by God in his family.

But the **brothers'** silence was ominous. Joseph's future was sealed. There was no reversing his rejection. The epic course of his life had been set.

The hand of God was everywhere in this sweeping narrative... as it orchestrated the beginning of a plan to preserve His people. God's hidden hand had its subtle way... amidst the chaos of human sin. ... The main character in the drama is Yahweh. ... The effect of the dream... set in motion a chain of events... that were **not** disasters but the work of grace.

"God's work of providence is his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions," says the Westminster Shorter Catechism. ... Our great God... uses His creative power...involving Himself in all events... in order to direct all things to their appointed end.

Do you see what that tells us? ... It reveals that any of us who follow God... will live a life that will sometimes become very tangled. ... At times complications will rise from our own sin (as with Joseph)... from the sin of

those around us. ... We live in a world caught in a web of sin... and it is constantly casting new webs. ... But we know that amidst life's complexities... the creative power of God is at work to do us good. ... This is true when we suffer with our health issues... when we have trouble with our neighbors... our spouses... our children... or grandchildren... and when financial problems engulf us.

Truly we have a God of providence... a God who sustains our souls in all of life... continuously working good. ... This is a truth to learn **now**... because life is not going to get easier. ... In fact... the more you follow God... the more complicated life will become... because your life's course will take you against the currents of this world.

But take it to heart that God is at work to do you good... and rest your soul in that. ... Submit yourself to Him in the great processes of life. Follow Him. Learn well from the life of Joseph... over the course of these next several weeks... that... Proverbs 16:9 is true:

The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.