
From Son to Slave

Genesis 37

“Do you know why Satan is angry all the time? Because when he works a particular clever bit of mischief, God uses it to serve His own righteous purposes.”ⁱ This stunning bit of wisdom is no more evident than in the majestic sweep of story we take up this morning.

This story has been the source for a great novel by Thomas Mann. Andrew Lloyd Webber composed the smash hit *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* set to this storyline. Kent Hughes writes, “The divinely inspired account exceeds its fictional renditions with a depth and theological subtlety beyond the intent and capacities of Mann and Webber... The biblical account is at once theological narrative and historical literature that will instruct and challenge all who seriously engage it.” (Hughes, p.435).

The hand of God is all over this long and lovely story. But there are no real miracles here. Here, we do not see the hand of God in parted rivers, water from rocks, morning manna or burning bushes. Instead, we find the hidden hand of God in the ordinary events of life. People’s thoughts are filled with lies and lusts, beliefs and desires that drive some of the most appalling actions and generate powerful emotions. Choices are made. Consequences flow. People thrive or suffer. And over twenty-two years, God is at work bringing about His determined purpose and plan.

Now some of you will be familiar with this story. For that I am glad. Some will not. Let’s come to this as though for the first time, to hear it with all our might. Here is the story this morning of a shocking descent, from son to slave.

From a Privileged Position (v.2-11)

Moses seems to be showing that all is not well with Joseph.

²These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

Is there some pride of place and folly of youth that is mixed in here? There is certainly the growing conflict, rivalry and strife that will have long and far-reaching consequence. So, Joseph is exalted, elevated as the apple of his father’s eye and in the pride of his own heart.

A Father’s Favor Provokes Rivalry (v.2-4)

Joseph is a responsible and faithful son, even as a seventeen-year-old. He is sent out to help his half-brothers tend the flocks. He is already showing the promise that would later, through seasoning and suffering, grow into mature leadership. But like all believers, there are remaining elements of sin that God must work on in Joseph’s life. Moses records that he brought a bad report about his stepbrothers to Jacob. This report is about the 5 sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. The Hebrew word for report here has the undertone of a slanderous report. Whether or not Joseph is wrong in this report is not clear from the text. What is clear is that it contributes to the animosity between Joseph and his brothers. Right or wrong, in their minds, he is a talebearer, a tattler. This cannot have endeared himself to them.

NOTE: The giving of Joseph’s age here, along with other information in Genesis, allows us to date this event and what follows. This was 1898 BC. This is confirmed by calculating backward from 966 BC, the year the Temple construction began (1 Kings 6:1) with 480 years between the Exodus and the Temple beginning, 430 years between the Exodus and Jacob

moving to Egypt (Exodus 12:40; Genesis 45:6) and 22 years between Jacob moving and Joseph's being sold (Genesis 41:46-47).

Further, Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph and favored him. As a sign of that favor and maybe as a response to his faithfulness, Jacob gave him a coat of many colors, a richly ornamented robe. It probably was a long outer tunic or garment worn over the regular work clothes. Its description may point to its multi-colored hues and dyes which would have marked Joseph and made him stand out in any setting, his brightly colored tunic a sharp contrast to the normally dull colors of the rest. Most are agreed that it also marked Joseph as the favored heir. Jacob, the younger who inherited his father's place sees no wrong in displacing his eldest son, Reuben, with the eldest son of his favorite wife, Rachel.

O, how the brothers hated him. In their minds, he is the spoiled brat, the mouthy little brother who ratted them out. Of course, he just has to wear that coat to flaunt in their face (whether or not this was what Joseph intended this is how it was taken.) The Hebrew here is interesting, "They could not speak peaceably to him." They rebuffed all attempts to join in with them, to talk with them. They were harsh, sarcastic, and mean.

A Dream of Ruling Provokes Hatred (v.5-8)

Then, Joseph has a dream.

⁵ Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: ⁷ Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸ His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Here is a bit of foreshadowing. Moses is using the dream to put people up on the edge of their seats. The dream is agricultural in nature. In the dream, he and the brothers are out harvesting. They are cutting the wheat, tying the sheaves together to dry, and be collected later. Then, Joseph's sheaf stands upright. The rest of the sheaves gather around and they bow down before his. Clearly, the dream is intimating that Joseph will become the ruler over his brothers.

Joseph may be using the dream as a Divine affirmation of his status as the heir and future patriarch of the clan. Joseph is either innocently naïve or is poking at his brothers. It just seems that discretion would have served him better. Maybe a little sinful pride and self-centeredness is bearing fruit.

God is using the dream to further provoke the brothers. They listen to this dream and recognize what it may intimate. "So, you think you are going to rule over us?" This snot-nosed daddy's boy? You think so? While the story of their father Jacob being loved and chosen, though he is the younger, has to be rattling around in their heads. They hate him for his dreams and for his telling them.

A Dream of Submission Provokes Jealousy (v.9-11)

But this is not enough, he has a second dream.

⁹ Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰ But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your

mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?"
¹¹ And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

He chooses to relate it as well. This dream is celestial in nature. In it, the sun and moon and eleven stars bow down to Joseph. It is obvious that the sun and moon are Jacob and Rachel and the eleven stars are the brothers. He tells the brothers his dream and then repeats it to Jacob.

Well, this is a bit much even for Jacob. He rebukes Joseph. The first dream did not say anything about Jacob. It is focused on earth and is temporal. But this second dream is involving the heavenly bodies and Rachel, who has already died. From Jacob's reaction, there is probably some "attitude" in Joseph's repeating the dreams.

Joseph's second dream provokes the brothers even more. The jealousy here now is venomous and vitriolic. His obvious first place in his father's heart has now led to usurpation of first place in the family. Now these dreams, coming as a couplet signifying that the events are sure, seem to them to be an attempt to have a Divine attestation. But, this does cause Jacob to pause and reflect on them and to wonder.

To a Terrible Betrayal (v.12-28)

Joseph is in a difficult spot. He is favored by his father and faithful in his responsibilities. He is unwise in managing his relationships with his brothers. Now he is the object of their jealousy, hatred, and anger. No matter what he does in approaching them, they rebuff his overtures (v.4). This will lead to a terrible betrayal.

In the Providence of God (v.12-17)

The brothers have taken the flocks and are pasturing them in Shechem.

¹² Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³ And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." ¹⁴ So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. ¹⁵ And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶ "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷ And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

Jacob is concerned for their safety in this region. He sends Joseph to get a report on how they are doing. Unknown to Joseph, the brothers have moved the flocks up to Dothan. So Joseph is wandering around looking for them. A man gives him directions to where the brothers are, having overheard them say where they were going.

Here is the providence of God at work. Jacob thinks the boys are in a dangerous place. God causes someone to meet up with Joseph and give him directions. God could have prevented what was about to happen any number of ways. But there is no "what if..." history in God's world. There is the path that it took and no other. The terrible betrayal is in the providence of God.

With a Murderous Intent (v.18-24)

See the brothers gathered on a hillside, the vast herds scattered around them.

¹⁸ They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.” ²¹ But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” ²² And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. ²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. ²⁴ And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

From the distance they can see the teen in his robe toiling along the path heading up out of the valley up to hillside towards them. “O, look whose coming! Here comes the dreamer. Let’s kill him and be rid of him. Then what will come of his dreams?” So with murderous intent they plot to kill. But Reuben is shocked. He is not going to let this happen. He counters their plan by suggesting they throw him in a pit or dry well and leave him to die like that. That way, he argues, they will not be shedding his blood with their own hands. But, he is intending to rescue and restore Joseph to his father.

The Bible leaves the ambush to our imaginations. Certainly they hide their intent with smiling faces. Is Joseph hopeful that maybe all is well? He comes into their midst. They jump him, wrestle him to the ground. They hold him and strip him of his robe. They take him to an old, dry pit or well and throw him down into it. It is too deep and the sides too steep for him to escape.

By a Shameful Act (v.25-28)

What shameful acts.

²⁵ Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. ²⁸ Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

You have to think that Joseph is stunned, hurt, and bewildered. He must also be crying out for them to help him, to think about what they are doing. As his pitiful cries ring up from the depths of the pit, they sit callously down and have lunch. Are they sullen and quiet? I think not. You can hear their jeering and laughter. You can hear them savoring what is going to happen to him. You wonder if they are thinking about the moment when they must tell Jacob.

Then over their lunch and laughter comes the sounds of a camel caravan wending its way around the base of the hillside. They are led and ridden by a team of Ishmaelites. The camels are loaded down with trade goods bound for Egypt. Now Judah has a bright idea. “Rather than killing Joseph, let’s sell him. He wants to rule over us, let’s sell him as a slave. He wants to be the heir, let’s turn him into trade goods. Let’s not have his blood on our hands – after all, he is our brother. Let him suffer the rest of his life as a slave. Besides, if we sell him, we can make a profit.” The callous shamefulness of this suggestion is almost hard to believe.

Now we have an interesting problem in the text. Look carefully again at verse 28. The brothers planned to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites in the caravan going by. However, verse 28 clearly says the Midianite merchantmen came by. "They" took Joseph up out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites. Who is the *they*? Two possibilities exist:

They are the Midianites who discover Joseph in the pit and sell him to the Ishmaelites. The brothers do not know this happened, even though they planned to do it until Reuben discovers it in verse 29 and reports it to the brothers who frankly, don't seem to tell Reuben what they have done.

They are the brothers, minus Reuben. The Ishmaelites and the Midianites are the same people identified by their tribal background (Ishmael) and their homeland (Midian). The brothers sell Joseph to the passing merchantmen.

The second is the most commonly accepted and certainly what almost all standard commentaries say. There is a reason for this. Genesis 45:4-5 says, "4 So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. " This settles it. The brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites who were from Midian.

The brothers join in together, drag Joseph up out of the pit. They hail the Ishmaelites and make their offer. Certainly, there was bartering. Here stand ten brothers (Reuben is absent) bargaining to sell their own flesh and blood. Do they own him as their brother? Do they laugh as he pleads with them? Do they shake their heads in wry denial when he claims to be family? The final price is set at twenty shekels of silver (about 8 ounces) – two coins for each brother. What are 2 shekels each in the midst their vast wealth?

There Joseph goes. What an awful betrayal sends him down from being a favored son to a life of slavery.

With a Deceitful Cover-Up (v.29-36)

The brothers head back up the hill to finish their meal. Are they quiet? Are they solemn? Has the weight of their deed begun to settle heavily in their hearts? Or are they relishing the misery this tattler, this daddy's boy, this dreamer, this usurper is going to experience? Do they amusingly rehearse the tales of Egyptian slavery they know? They plop back down to finish their interrupted lunch.

In a Vile Conspiracy (v.29-33)

Reuben returns to find that Joseph has disappeared.

²⁹ When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes ³⁰ and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?" ³¹ Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. ³² And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, "This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not." ³³ And he identified it and said, "It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces."

His plan to rescue Joseph has failed! Where has he gone? Reuben is concerned, not only for his father, but also for himself. He will almost certainly be accused of causing his disappearance – he has the most to gain as the natural heir. Could these idiots have killed Joseph in his absence? No, but they have sold him.

Well, how and what are they going to tell their father? Plan A, part 2 of their vile conspiracy. They slaughter a goat, spreading the blood and gore onto Joseph's coat. Probably they shredded the robe to add to the realism. Then they come to Jacob, dripping, befouled coat in hand. "We have found this coat. It looks like Joseph's. Please identify it." Their words as Moses record them are still full of callous venom. They cannot even identify him as their brother, saying "your son."

Jacob certainly recognizes the robe as Joseph's. Does he look up into the stern, callous faces of his sons and wonder? But he supplies the obvious interpretation. And along with it will come all the self-accusation and guilt. He has sent Joseph on this mission. He knew the area was dangerous. And now Joseph has met a terrible end, torn to pieces by a wild and fierce animal. If he only knew what kind of fierce animals it truly was!

By a Dishonest Comfort (v.34-35)

Now they cover up their evil deed by a dishonest comfort.

³⁴ Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him.

Jacob's grief is deep and terrible. See him stooped and broken. See his garments rent, his head and beard grey with the ashes of mourning. Hour after hour, day after day, he grieves. And they rise to give him comfort, these his sons and daughters. Yet not one of these sons will break their silence. Not one will give true comfort. Not one can say, "Dad, he is not really dead. His fate is terrible; but there is still hope." And so, he refuses to be comforted. His grief is great, but it is idolatrous. Grief is good; refusing to be comforted is not. Setting oneself to grieving the rest of life is symptomatic that Joseph was an idol of Jacob's heart.

With a Dreadful Consequence (v.36)

Finally, the cover-up continues with dreadful consequence.

³⁶ Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

Someone could have told what actually had happened and a pursuit could have ensued. They could have run down the Ishmaelites and rescued their brother. Their silence condemns Joseph. He is sold in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer in Pharaoh's court.

Reflect and Respond

What a terrible and sad story. From the heights of being a favored son to the lowliness of slavery in Egypt, Joseph endures such pain. What challenges us and changes us as we apply some lessons to our lives?

Bad things happen to good people. This is a difficult truth running like a sad and tortured melody through the themes of the Bible. We may be faithful and favored by some; but we may well be despised and hated by others. And sometimes and most painfully, we may be rejected by our families.

We must learn to handle the elevation and honoring of others well. Joseph's brothers found each step in his rise fueling more and more anger and hatred. We must be alert to every symptom of

jealousy. Others may be promoted and honored. You may even deserve what they are receiving. None the less, we must humble ourselves and allow God in His due time to honor us.

The doctrine of the providence of God is not a theological, academic idea to be debated, parsed, and relegated to ivory towers. It is a truth, a deep and strong foundation on which to rest at all times. May we be a people whose great inner calm comes from our trust that our Redeemer and Ruler, our kind, loving and sovereign heavenly Father is guiding all things for His glory.

This is the kind of descent our Redeemer made. What amazing parallels are here! From the high favor of His heavenly Father, to the lowly servanthood here on earth, betrayed by one he is close to. But this was so that He could go to a cross-kind of death. There He would bear the punishment for our sins that we might be reunited to our God. This is the gospel, the good news that God has provided His son as the only way to Him. So, believe in Him and bow to Him today.

ⁱ O.S. Card, *Ender's Shadow*, (New York: Tor, 1999), 236-237 cited in *NIV Application Commentary*, Walton, p. 697.