

## Genesis 37:18-36

### *Joseph's Dream Causes Trouble, pt. 2*

I sure hope that you are enjoying our study of Genesis

- It has been such a joy for me

This is the book of beginnings

- This is where it all started

God graciously created the heavens and the earth

- He populated the Earth with animals, plants, and humans

But humans rebelled against God

- Adam and Eve chose to rebel against God

As a result of this rebellion, they were banished from the Garden of Eden

- They were separated from holy God

About 300 years ago, a book was written by Ralph Venning entitled, "Sin, the Plague of Plagues"<sup>1</sup>

- It was later renamed, "The Sinfulness of Sin"

What a fitting title

- Sin is sinful

We can look around the world and see examples of sin

- We can look in the book of Genesis and see examples of sin

This morning, we will see further evidence of the sinfulness of sin

Last week, we were re-introduced to young Joseph

- We know from previous chapters that Joseph was the firstborn son of Rachel
- And we know that Rachel was Jacob's beloved wife

The first half of Genesis 37 gave us a glimpse into the life of Joseph and his family

- He experienced preference from his father (37:2-4)
- He experienced jealousy from his brothers (37:5-11)
- He experienced help from a total stranger (37:12-17)

The theme of partiality and favoritism emerged once again

- Verse 3 tells us that "**Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons**"

Previously in Genesis, such favoritism caused problems

- And this chapter is no exception to that principle

Verse 4 tells us that the brothers of Joseph saw that their father loved him more than them

- The result was that "**they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms**"
- That word "**hated**" will be repeated three times in this chapter (37:4, 5, 8)

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.gospeltruth.net/sos/sos\\_sinfulnessofsin.htm](http://www.gospeltruth.net/sos/sos_sinfulnessofsin.htm)

To add insult to injury, Joseph relays two dreams to his brothers

- In these dreams, God uses symbolism to show that Joseph will one day be in a prominent position where his brothers will bow down to him
- In the second dream, Israel himself will bow down to Joseph

Obviously, this didn't set well with Joseph's brothers

- They rejected the idea that their younger brother would rule and reign over them
- The result was that **"they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words"** (37:8)

Furthermore, verse 11 told us that Joseph's brothers were **"jealous of him"**

- They hated Joseph
- They were also jealous of him

For some reason, the older brothers of Joseph decided to go back to Shechem and take care of Israel's flock

- Shechem was about 50 miles from Canaan
- About two or three days of travel between these two cities

After some amount of time, Israel becomes concerned for his sons

- So he sends young Joseph to check on them

When Joseph arrived in Shechem, his brothers were no longer there

- God had placed an anonymous man in the path of Joseph to tell him that his brothers had moved on to Dothan
- This was another 15 miles north of Shechem

Verse 17 told us that **"Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan"**

- It's been a long journey for Joseph
- Would he be upset about their decision to leave Shechem and go to Dothan?

Suspense and tension are in the air

- What will happen between Joseph and his brothers?
- Israel is not around – he is outside of his paternal protection

This morning, we will look at the second half of Genesis 37

- The focus is clearly on the brothers of Joseph

Joseph's name is mentioned 12 times in this chapter

- The term **"brothers"** is mentioned 20 times

### **Let's read Genesis 37:18-36**

Moses puts the spotlight of attention on the brothers of Joseph so that we learn just how deep-seated their anger and hatred was displayed toward their younger brother

- The brothers displayed murderous thoughts (37:18-24)
- The brothers displayed greedy motives (37:25-28)
- The brothers displayed deceitful actions (37:29-35)

## I. The brothers displayed murderous thoughts (37:18-24)

<sup>18</sup> When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death.

Up to this point, we have seen events through the eyes of Joseph

- We have seen how others have treated him

We now switch over to the perspective of the brothers

- We see the events unfolding through their eyes

The brothers look up and see Joseph “**from a distance**”

- He was recognized while still far away

But before Joseph was too close, his brothers “**plotted against him to put him to death**”

- We were told three times that they “**hated**” him
- We see very clearly just how much they hated him

The chapter gives us three clues as to why the brothers hate Joseph so much

- First, Joseph had given a “bad report” about them to their father (37:2)
- Second, Joseph experienced preferential treatment from their father (37:3-4)
- Third, Joseph relayed these dreams wherein he would be in a position of authority (37:5-11)

Which one of these made the brothers hate Joseph the most?

- Which one of these made the brothers so hateful that they would plan on killing him?
- Verse 19 tells us the answer

<sup>19</sup> And they said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer! <sup>20</sup> Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, ‘A wild beast devoured him.’ Then let us see what will become of his dreams!”

While still far away, Joseph’s brothers voiced their hatred and murderous thoughts toward their younger brother

- They call him “**dreamer**”

With great sarcasm, Joseph’s brothers insinuated that he was good only for dreaming

- He wasn’t good for anything else<sup>2</sup>

The plan of the brothers was rather simple

- They would kill him – we are not told how
- They would dispose of his body by throwing it into one of the pits
- They would lie about the manner of his death by blaming it on a wild beast

The end of verse 20 makes it crystal clear why Joseph’s brothers were so hateful, even to the point of murder, “**Then let us see what will become of his dreams!**”

- The brothers were fully persuaded that if they killed Joseph, this would be the end of his fanciful dreams
- Murder would be the means of preventing his dreams from coming true

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<sup>2</sup> Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record*, 541.

<sup>21</sup> But Reuben heard *this* and rescued him out of their hands and said, “Let us not take his life.” <sup>22</sup> Reuben further said to them, “Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him” – that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father.

It seems that the brothers are in agreement about the murder of Joseph

- Then Reuben voices his opinion

Reuben offers an alternative solution to murder

- They shouldn't kill Joseph
- Instead, they should throw him “**into this pit that is in the wilderness**”

In other words, they shouldn't actively murder Joseph

- Instead, they should throw him into a pit
- He will probably die of thirst or starvation

But Reuben wasn't being grim

- Rather, he had another plan in mind
- The end of verse 22 tells us that Reuben's plan was that “**he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father**”

Why does Reuben offer an alternative plan than murder?

- Is he having compassion for the boy?

Reuben is Jacob's firstborn son

- As the firstborn son, there was a measure of responsibility that fell on his shoulders

But we also know from Genesis 35:22 that Reuben disqualified himself in his father's eyes by laying with Bilhah, Israel's concubine

- Israel certainly think too highly of this

Perhaps Reuben thought that sparing the boy's life might gain some brownie points from his father

- By showing compassion for Joseph, perhaps Israel would think more highly of Reuben
- Some fatherly favor

Reuben was clear in his motives

- He wanted to return Joseph back to his father

But would the brothers listen to Reuben?

- Would they change their mind?
- Would they spare Joseph from being murdered?

<sup>23</sup> So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; <sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it.

Finally, Joseph arrives near to his brothers

- All of this conversation up to this point has been while Joseph was making his way to them

As soon as Joseph came near to his brothers, they took action

- This action is recorded using a series of verbs, almost in a staccato or machine-gun fashion
  - o They stripped Joseph of his tunic
  - o They took Joseph
  - o They threw Joseph into the pit

Attention is drawn once again to this tunic

- Israel had given this special tunic to Joseph
- It was a reminder of the preferential treatment that Joseph received

The act of stripping the tunic from Joseph was a symbolic act of taking away the preferential treatment

- Joseph was away from his father's protection
- Joseph was at the mercy of his brothers

They threw Joseph into a "pit"

- These were probably cisterns used to hold water
- It would be like our modern-day well

These pits were shaped like a bottle

- They had a narrow neck which increased as the pit went further into the ground<sup>3</sup>

These pits ranged from 6 to 20 feet in depth<sup>4</sup>

- There would be no way for Joseph to escape by himself
- He would need the assistance of someone else

We are told that the pit didn't have any water in it

- Perhaps it was abandoned
- Perhaps the dryness of the well was a hint of the coming famine in the land of Canaan

The primary reason why the absence of water is mentioned is to reassure us that Joseph did not die of drowning<sup>5</sup>

Joseph's brothers displayed murderous thoughts toward him

- They hated him
- They were jealous of him
- They wanted to kill him!

The dominant reason for their hatred and murderous thoughts was because of Joseph's dreams

- The brothers didn't want Joseph ruling over them
- The brothers revolted against the idea that their younger brother would rule and reign over them

These brothers were rash and ravenous in their thoughts toward their brother

The brothers could have repented

- They could have realized their wrongdoing
- But they didn't

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<sup>3</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *NICOT, Genesis 18-50*, 418.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 502.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 2*, 354.

## II. The brothers displayed greedy motives (37:25-28)

<sup>25</sup> Then they sat down to eat a meal.

After stripping Joseph of his tunic and throwing him into a pit, what we read in verse 25 is so cold and callous<sup>6</sup>

- “they sat down to eat a meal”

Imagine the audacity!

- Consider this heartless and coldhearted response!

In Genesis 42, when the brothers make their first trip to Egypt, they look back upon this very event recorded in Genesis 37 of throwing Joseph into a pit

- Listen to their words, “Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us”

Imagine being one of these brothers

- You throw Joseph into the pit
- You see the distress of his soul – he is fighting for his life!
- You hear him pleading with you – he is begging you to save him!

But the brothers didn’t listen

- They just walked away and didn’t rescue Joseph

Moreover, the brothers sit down and enjoy a meal

- All of the activity of stripping Joseph of his tunic and throwing him in a pit was exhausting!

We have to keep in mind that two of Joseph’s brothers – Simeon and Levi – had single-handedly killed every man in the city of Shechem<sup>7</sup>

- These were cold-hearted killers!

Could the brothers hear Joseph’s cries for help while they were eating?

- Did this not bother them?
- Wouldn’t they do something besides leave him there to die?

They do take action, but not what you would expect...

And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt.

During their meal, the brothers look up and notice a caravan approaching

- Verse 25 speaks of this as “a caravan of Ishmaelites”

Ishmael – the non-elect seed of Abraham

- Some of his descendants are passing through the area

They are going down to Egypt in order to conduct business there

- This area around Dothan was near a busy trade route

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Kidner, *Tyndale OT Commentaries, Genesis*, 182.

<sup>7</sup> W.H. Griffith-Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary*, 359.

<sup>26</sup> And Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; for he is our brother, our *own* flesh.” And his brothers listened to him.

Judah speaks up and offers an idea

- This is now the second time that a brother has spoken up and offered an alternative solution

The brothers were set on killing Joseph

- But Reuben spoke up

Now the brothers are set on leaving Joseph in a pit

- But Judah speaks up

Judah asks, “**What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood?**”

- Perhaps Judah’s conscience was convicting him
- Perhaps Judah felt guilty for leaving his brother to die

So Judah proposes that they sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites

- They wouldn’t have to kill him
- They wouldn’t have to leave him in a pit

After all, Joseph’s brothers didn’t want to be around Joseph

- They wanted to be as far away from him as possible

In Judah’s mind, this was the best option!

- His life would be spared
- But they would never see him again!

Judah’s rationale for sparing Joseph’s life is given in verse 27, “**he is our brother, our *own* flesh**”

- Joseph is called “**our brother**” in verse 26 & 26
- This is the only time in the entire chapter that the relationship is stressed

The result was that the rest of the brothers “**listened**” to Judah’s plan

- The Hebrew word here has the connotation of obedience
- They now set Judah’s plan into motion

<sup>28</sup> Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty *shekels* of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt.

This caravan is referred to as “**Midianite traders**” in verse 28

- But in verse 27, they were called “**Ishmaelites**”

These two terms are used interchangeably in this chapter and in Judges 8:24<sup>8</sup>

- Ishmael and Midian were both sons of Abraham (16:15; 25:2)<sup>9</sup>
- Perhaps they intermarried at some point

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<sup>8</sup> John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison*, 265.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, 543.

### Imagine being Joseph

- You were going to check on your brothers
- Your tunic is stripped off of your back
- You are manhandled by your brothers
- You are thrown into a pit
- You are left for dead

### Then you hear some voices

- You recognize your brothers
- They are coming to rescue you!

### Soon there is a rescue attempt

- Your brothers pull you to safety

### Everything will be ok

- You are safe

### Then you realize that your brothers have sold you to a traveling caravan who is going down to Egypt

- You are taken away against your will
- You are forced to go with these men

### Joseph's brothers displayed greedy motives in rescuing him

- They didn't want to kill him outright
- They didn't want to leave him to die in a pit – they would have felt guilty about this

### So the brothers decided that this would be a way for them to make a profit

- They were thinking about a financial gain!

### Joseph was sold for “*twenty shekels of silver*”

- It was below the going rate for a slave in that day and age
- He wasn't even worth the full asking price!

### Perhaps Joseph's brothers feared that someone may pass by and hear Joseph's cries for help

- If Joseph was delivered from the pit and made it back to tell Israel what his brothers did to him, they knew that their father would be furious!<sup>10</sup>

### So selling him and shipping him off to Egypt was the best proposal

- After all, they were even paid for this!

### The brothers must have thought that they would never see Joseph again

- But they didn't realize that they had actually assisted in the fulfillment of Joseph's dreams!<sup>11</sup>

### But the brothers aren't finished displaying sin

- Somehow, some way, someone has to tell Israel what happened to Joseph
- The last portion of Genesis 37 highlights their sinister plan

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<sup>10</sup> Morris, 543.

<sup>11</sup> Wenham, 356.

### III. The brothers displayed deceitful actions (37:29-35)

<sup>29</sup> Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. <sup>30</sup> And he returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is not *there*; as for me, where am I to go?”

Verse 29 informs us that “**Reuben returned to the pit**”

- Supposedly, Reuben had left at some point
- Exactly when, we don't know

The last time that Reuben was clearly around his brothers was verse 22

- He talked his other brothers out of killing Joseph
- Reuben wanted to have Joseph thrown into a pit – and he would come back later and rescue Joseph

Was Reuben around when the brothers stripped Joseph of his tunic and threw him into a pit?

- Perhaps
- Perhaps not

Where did Reuben go?

- As the firstborn, Reuben was primarily responsible for the flocks of animals
- Perhaps he went away to check on the animals

When Reuben returned, he looked in the pit

- But Joseph wasn't in there

Reuben “**tore his garments**”

- This was a sign of extreme grief and sorrow

Reuben's plan didn't work!

- He planned on returning to the pit and rescuing Joseph

He goes to his brothers and says, “**The boy is not *there*; as for me, where am I to go?**”

- Notice that Joseph is spoken of as “**the boy**”
- This may help us to understand how Joseph's older brothers viewed him
  - o Young
  - o Helpless
  - o Immature

Reuben wanted to rescue Joseph and return him back to his father

- But Joseph was nowhere to be found!

<sup>31</sup> So they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the tunic in the blood;

Once again, the tunic of Joseph is brought back into focus

- What was a visible reminder of Israel's favoritism toward Joseph would now become a visible reminder of Joseph's staged death

The brothers “**slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the tunic in the blood**”

- They went to great lengths to masquerade their sin

Notice that an innocent animal had to die in order for their to cover up their sin

- Sacrifices were offered to cover sin
- Not to cover up sin

This goat would help to deceive Israel

- History is repeating itself

Back in Genesis 27, Isaac wanted to bless his son Esau<sup>12</sup>

- But Rebekah and Jacob hatched a plan whereby Jacob would pretend to be Esau
- This way, Jacob – not Esau – would obtain the blessing

You remember that Rebekah prepared a meal in a way that Isaac loved

- But Jacob also put on Esau’s best garments in order to appear like him
- Rebekah also “**put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck**” (27:16)

Goats were used on Jacob to deceive Isaac

- To make Jacob appear to be Esau

Here in Genesis 37, a goat is slaughtered

- The blood of this goat gave the appearance that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast

In both cases, a father was deceived by his child

- In both cases, a goat was used

<sup>32</sup> and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, “We found this; please examine *it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not.*”

After preparing the tunic in a way that would make it seem that Joseph was killed, the brothers took it to their father

- This also reminds us of Genesis 27 where Jacob deceived Isaac
- A child is coming before his father in order to deceive him

The brothers’ words are carefully selected, “**We found this; please examine *it to see whether it is your son’s tunic or not*”**

- No mention of stripping the tunic from Joseph
- No mention of the intention to kill Joseph
- No mention of throwing Joseph in a pit
- No mention of selling Joseph to Ishmaelite traders
- No mention of killing the goat to deceive Israel

The character of these brothers is less than honorable

- They simply present the evidence
- They await Israel to draw his own conclusions

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<sup>12</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 608.

<sup>33</sup> Then he examined it and said, “It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!”

Israel examines the tunic

- It would have been very familiar to him
- After all, verse 3 told us that Israel had “made” this tunic for Joseph
- Israel exclaims, “It is my son’s tunic”

The conclusion that Israel reached was, “A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces”

- The plan of the brothers worked!
- Israel came to the very conclusion that they wanted him to have

I can’t even imagine the grief and anguish that Israel must have felt

- The only reminder of your favorite son was a bloody tunic

Moses gives us some more details about his grief in verse 34-35

<sup>34</sup> So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup> Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted.

Jacob responds in a similar manner as Reuben did earlier

- They both tore their garments as a sign of their grief
- But Israel experienced much more sorrow than Reuben

Israel’s sorrow over Joseph’s staged death is expressed through three descriptions

- Jacob “tore his clothes”
- Jacob “put sackcloth on his loins”
- Jacob “mourned for his son many days”

His family attempted to comfort him

- However, Jacob “refused to be comforted”

Verse 35 is a telling commentary on the character of these sons

- How did they attempt to comfort their Dad?
- They knew the truth, but didn’t tell Israel
- They just let Israel believe that Joseph had been killed

And he said, “Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.” So his father wept for him.

Israel’s words are piercing and numbing, “Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son”

- In modern-day vernacular, we may say, “I will go to my grave in mourning”

Sheol was the place where departed souls were gathered after death<sup>13</sup>

- There was an obvious belief in life after death

If the chapter ended here, it would be a depressing and discouraging conclusion

- But Moses gives us a glimpse of what was happening to Joseph

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<sup>13</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 217.

- Of course, neither Israel nor his sons knew what was taking place with Joseph

<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard.

We are told that Joseph was sold again

- He is passed from person to person – from owner to owner
- He is treated like a pawn

Joseph ends up in the care of “Potiphar, Pharaoh’s officer, the captain of the bodyguard”

- This was a high-ranking official of Pharaoh
- Most likely, Potiphar was the officer in charge of executions in Egypt<sup>14</sup>

This will come into focus in the near future

- A very unlikely event takes place in Genesis 39 between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife
- We will study that in two weeks

God’s quiet providence was at work here in Genesis 37

- He was working behind-the-scenes in order to bring about His perfect purposes

Israel thought that Joseph was dead

- Joseph’s brothers knew the truth, but didn’t know the exact details of what was happening to Joseph
- They were glad that they wouldn’t have to deal with him any more

But what about Joseph?

- Was he bitter?
- Was he angry at his brothers?
- What happened to Joseph in Egypt?

Those are all questions that will be answered as we continue our study of the book of Genesis

- Thanks for staying with us
- Thanks for praying for us

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<sup>14</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, 218.