

Genesis 37:1 – 36

¹ Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan. ² These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. ⁴ His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms. ⁵ Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, 'Please listen to this dream which I have had; ⁷ for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf.' ⁸ Then his brothers said to him, 'Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?' So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. ⁹ Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, 'Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' ¹⁰ He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?' ¹¹ His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. ¹² Then his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem. ¹³ Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them.' And he said to him, 'I will go.' ¹⁴ Then he said to him, 'Go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. ¹⁵ A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, 'What are you looking for?' ¹⁶ He said, 'I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock.' ¹⁷ Then the man said, 'They have moved from here; for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.' So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸ When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. ¹⁹ They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer! ²⁰ 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!' ²¹ But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, 'Let us not take his life.' ²² 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. ²³ So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it. ²⁵ Then they sat down to eat a meal. 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. ²⁶ Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. ³⁰ He returned to his brothers and said, 'The

boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?' ³¹ So they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood; ³² 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.' ³³ 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!' ³⁴ So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, 'Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.' So his father wept for him. ³⁶ Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard.

Historical and Cultural Background

- This was a family caught in a civil war. Recall what has happened to Jacob's family since Joseph was born in Genesis 32. Recall the theme of jealousy and hatred between brothers starting from Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, continuing on between Ishmael and Isaac, and then Jacob and Esau.
 - Joseph had grown up in a tense household with Leah and Rachel competing for attention and affection, with Jacob favoring Rachel (Gen.29:31 – 31:24).
 - Joseph had watched his father Jacob and his half-brothers Simeon and Levi disagree sharply about how to respond to the fact that Dinah had been raped by a Canaanite named Shechem (Gen.34:7 – 31).
 - Reuben had had sex with Rachel's maid Bilhah, to make sure that Bilhah did not become the favorite wife after Rachel died, but also to slap his father in the face in defiance (Gen.35:22).
 - They had probably all been losing respect for their father for a long time.
- Dreams (Gen.37:5 – 11): Joseph's father Jacob and great-grandfather Abraham had had dreams in which God spoke to them (Gen.15:12 – 21; 28:12 – 16). So Joseph's dreams would have been significant to Joseph. And the family would have known about God giving dreams.
- Ruling and bowing: God had promised Abraham that kings will come from him (Gen.17:6).
- The brothers were in Shechem (Gen.37:12), then Dothan (Gen.37:17): Not a good place; Shechem was the place that Dinah had been raped (Gen.34), and Simeon and Levi had slain the men of the town in cold blood. Interestingly, the name *Dothan* meant 'law.'
- Jacob is deceived in a similar way he deceived his own father, Isaac: through a garment (Gen.27:15 – 30).

Questions

1. What kind of family and early life experience did Joseph have? What did he see and experience from his father Jacob's story?
 - a. Positively, he knew that God had made promises to his family, and had begun to deliver on those promises. He had a sense that God wanted to bless the whole world, and somehow undo the sin of Adam and Eve by blessing this family. They were waiting for the land God promised. They were beginning to be fruitful and multiply (look at how many brothers Joseph had!)
 - b. Negatively, he has seen lots of tension.
2. What kind of personality and leadership gifts did Joseph show in his first 17 years?
 - a. He was a shepherd and pastured the flock of his family (37:2)
 - b. He told his father about the bad job his brothers were doing (37:2). Was he a tattler? Maybe, but not necessarily. He seemed to have some sense of moral integrity. And he seemed to believe that there was a right way to care for the flock, and that his brothers weren't doing it.
 - c. He seemed to enjoy the affection and favoritism of his father Jacob, since he received the multi-colored tunic and didn't make any gestures to reconcile with his brothers, even though he probably knew that they hated him (37:3 – 4)
 - d. He seemed to enjoy rubbing it in their faces when he got the two dreams (37:5 – 10)
3. What do you make of Joseph's dreams? How do you think Joseph handled them?
 - a. Notice that the narrator does not tell us that God gave both the dreams *and* the interpretations. There is ambiguity. Joseph might be doing the interpreting already in the first one. Later, Joseph will give *interpretations alone* to other people's dreams.
 - b. He could have talked to his father alone about them. He knew God had spoken to his father Jacob by a dream before. So his father would have understood something about this.
 - c. He could have kept it to himself, and waited for God to bring about the fulfillment of the dreams.
 - d. Joseph might, in this case, be having a dream but misinterpreting it, or monopolizing the interpretation. It seems that the rest of the family, including Joseph, thinks Joseph will be the firstborn and that the kingship will pass through his line. But God remained committed to recognizing Leah's validity as the first wife; later He spoke through Jacob to name Judah, son of Leah, the one through whom Israel's king would come. In that sense, it seems in Genesis 49 that Judah and Joseph *share* the privileges of the firstborn: Judah receives the kingship; Joseph receives the blessing of many descendants. Note that Judah will also numerically increase greatly as well.
4. How do we feel when God chooses to favor the already favored?
 - a. By contrast, Jacob was not favored by his father Isaac, but he was favored by God. So he was an underdog, in a sense.
 - b. Joseph on the other hand was already the favorite of his father Jacob, because he was the son of the favored wife, Rachel, and now God favored him, too. He didn't deserve this, but neither did his apparent basking in the favoritism help.
 - i. When we feel doubly favored like this, how do we respond?
 - ii. When we feel not favored like this, how do we respond?
 - iii. Application: Have you ever played the part of the brothers? Have you seen someone very fortunate or blessed become even more blessed and influential? What was your reaction? Why are jealousy (wanting what the other person has) and envy (wanting to destroy the other person's advantage) so easy to feel?
5. KEY QUESTION: Could this story have gone a different way here?
 - a. How was the dream already somewhat true? Joseph was better at caring for the flock than his brothers. He either cared more, or was better at it, or he was a better administrator.
 - b. The brothers could have considered the matter more seriously, relinquished their jealousy, and agreed to meet together as a family.
 - c. So the dreams might have been taken as a sign from God to give Joseph more leadership in the family business.
 - d. If they had prayed and sought to hear from God, He might have told them that Judah would be the one through whom the kingship will emerge. So there is a short term vs. long term issue here in the family. In this generation, the family will bow down to Joseph because of his ability to shepherd life. But in the long run, the family will look to Judah because God was honoring Leah's role as the first wife. Leah's first three sons – Reuben, Simeon, and Levi – had already committed

the acts that Jacob will say disqualify each of them from being the firstborn. Therefore, Judah will truly bear the mantle of firstborn. This will become clearer in the coming chapters. This means Jacob would have to relinquish his own favoritism towards Rachel and her side of the family. And Joseph would ultimately have to give up his own privilege as well.

- e. In that sense, the dreams could have provoked a crisis of bitterness vs. reconciliation between everyone.
 - f. Either way, everyone has to learn and accept a painful lesson from God about favoritism, reconciliation, and letting go.
 - g. Application: This means that the brothers' sin, Joseph's suffering in Egypt, and the famine were not necessary elements to the story. The true story is the internal story. That is what God was after. And that could have happened a different way. This has to shape our view of God. God is not the author of sin!
6. What do we learn about Reuben and Judah here?
- a. Reuben wants to do good, because as the oldest, he would be responsible for Joseph. But he doesn't seem to be able to stand up to his brothers.
 - b. Judah wants to make a profit and stay 'innocent' in a sense, but it's a perverse sense. He might be interested in the technical legality of the situation, and didn't want to be so guilty as to kill Joseph.
7. What is the irony for Papa Jacob?
- a. He once deceived his father Isaac by wearing a garment of his brother Esau. Now the sons of Jacob trick Jacob by presenting a garment of Joseph.
 - b. Might he think this is a 'what goes around comes around' type of thing?
8. What if we read the story from God's perspective? God's goal is to eliminate the favoritism, heal the prejudices in each person and bring reconciliation, and shape the family to be a nation that will bless the world.
- a. God is narrowing the line of Abraham and Sarah down eventually to Jesus. The blessing comes at first to one, then to others. But that interim period is hard to take, especially for those who are not blessed at first. And when unreconciliation exists, that makes things really hard.
 - b. God wants to undo all of the pain and damage and sinfulness in Jacob's family. Now things have become really complicated with Joseph separated from the family and in Egypt. We'll see what He know has to do.
 - c. Did the brothers have to betray Joseph? No.
 - d. Did Joseph have to tell his brothers the dream? No.
 - e. Did God intend for all this to happen? No. But now He starts to redeem even this. Regardless of whether we take the easier road by listening to God early, or take the hard road by listening to God later, God is determined to shape us. Each person in the family of Israel was supposed to be a spiritual leader to all their children subsequently, to prepare them to be a blessing to the nations. This is what spiritual leadership looks like. These are the hard lessons God must get through to us.
 - f. Illus: The following story by C.S. Lewis, in *The Horse and His Boy*, illustrates how we might deal with the issues of different destinies, status, and honor in a loving way:

And presently, as was certain to happen sooner or later, King Lune said it was time for young people to be in bed. 'And to-morrow, Cor,' he added, 'shalt come over all the castle with me and see the estres and mark all its strengths and weaknesses: for it will be thine to guard when I'm gone.'

'But Corin will be King then, Father,' said Cor.

'Nay, lad,' said King Lune, 'thou art my heir. The crown comes to thee.'

'But I don't want it,' said Cor. 'I'd far rather--'

'Tis no question what thou wantest, Cor, nor I either. 'Tis in course of law.'

'But if we're twins we must be the same age.'

'Nay,' said the King with a laugh. 'One must come first. Art Corin's elder by full twenty minutes. And his better too, let's hope, though that's no great mastery.' And he looked at Corin with a twinkle in his eyes.

'But, Father, couldn't you make whichever you like to be the next King?'

'No. The King's under the law, for it's the law makes him a king. Hast no more power to start away from thy crown than any sentry from his post.'

'Oh dear,' said Cor. 'I don't want to at all. And Corin--I am most dreadfully sorry. I never dreamed my turning up was going to chisel you out of your kingdom.'

‘Hurrah! Hurrah!’ said Corin. ‘I shan’t have to be King. I shan’t have to be King. I’ll always be a prince. It’s princes have all the fun.’

‘And that’s truer than thy brother knows, Cor,’ said King Lune. ‘For this is what it means to be a king: to be first in every desperate attack and last in every desperate retreat, and when there’s hunger in the land (as must be now and then in bad years) to wear finer clothes and laugh louder over a scantier meal than any man in your land.’

When the two boys were going upstairs to bed Cor again asked Corin if nothing could be done about it. And Corin said:

‘If you say another word about it, I’ll--I’ll knock you down.’

(C.S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, p.119 – 120)