

MAKING LEMONADE

"A PIT, A PALACE AND PROVIDENCE"

GENESIS 37:12-36

This Week's Core Competency

Humanity – I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior. John 3:16, *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

The story of Joseph opens with a vivid description of Jacob's dysfunctional family that sets the stage and gets the ball rolling as far as the plot is concerned. Had there been no conflict between Joseph and his brothers, there would be no rest of the story. But conflict there was, so much conflict that Joseph's brothers were prepared to take the first opportunity they had to do away with him. Little did Jacob know that he was sending his beloved son to his death, save for the providence of God, when he sent him to Shechem to check up on his unpredictable older siblings. When Joseph finally found them in Dothan, he was 65 miles from home—as one commentator observes: "the reader cannot but fear for Joseph being sent so far from the range of paternal protection" (Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2, *Genesis 12-50*, 353). When he finally found them, it was eleven against one; Joseph didn't have a chance.

The story of what happened next is told in Genesis 37:12-36, about which another commen-

A chill runs up my spine when I read what these men did to their own brother.

– Charles Swindoll

tator writes: "The dominant ideas in this section deal more with human nature than with theology proper. On the one hand, we have a sample of the suffering of the righteous at the hands of the wicked; on the other hand, we see the result of unchecked hatred and jealousy. Moreover, the brothers' deception of the old patriarch once again brought pain to one who was no stranger to deception. The predominant theological idea, then, would be evil, both its employment and its effects" (Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 604). As with all good literature, the narrator doesn't tell his readers about evil and its effects, he paints evil's portrait in the faces of Joseph's brothers and invites his readers to look evil in the eyes.

Chuck Swindoll's comments on the brothers' evil deed are worth repeating:

"You talk about hostility in a family! As soon as they saw Joseph coming, the brothers' immediate reaction was stated with clinched [sic] teeth: 'It's the dreamer! Let's kill him!' By now, the brothers had murder on their minds. Interestingly, at that point, Reuben steps in. Remember Reuben? This is Reuben, the firstborn. This is Reuben, who had slept with his father's concubine. Perhaps because he was the eldest, he felt some sense of responsibility for his younger brother. Or in an unguarded moment he was becoming a better man than he had been.

"'Look, let's not kill him,' Reuben said. 'Let's just throw him in a pit and leave him. We might teach him a lesson, but there's no reason to kill him.' Meanwhile, Reuben was thinking that he would return later, rescue Joseph, and take him back home.

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"Obviously the brothers must have agreed with Reuben's plan. But notice the first thing they did when Joseph arrived: 'They stripped Joseph of his tunic.' That hated robe of special favoritism was the first thing to go. 'Remove that robe,' they said. It was as if they were saying: 'Take off that fur coat! You're no better than we are.' Then they threw him into the pit. After that, they sat down and had lunch! All their anger has made them ravenous. Amazing, isn't it? No guilty conscience here!

"A chill runs up my spine when I read what these men did to their own brother. Spotting a caravan of traders, Judah said, in effect, 'Hey, Reuben's right. Let's not kill the kid. After all, he is a member of our family, and we don't need his blood on our hands. Let's dump him. Better yet, let's make some money in the process.' The others agreed, and for 20 pieces of silver (which is what they would have paid for a handicapped slave in those days) they turned him over to a group of total strangers—a band of Midianite traders.

"As the caravan wended its way across the fields and out of sight, the brothers calmly dipped Joseph's robe in the blood of a freshly killed goat. Then they took the bloodstained garment back to their father, tossed it on the floor, and said, 'We found this. We think it may be your son's robe.'

"When he saw the bloody evidence, Jacob came to the desired conclusion; His beloved son, Joseph, was dead" (Joseph, 14-16).

And with that their dastardly deed was done, and no one would be the wiser—or so they thought.

day **1** ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Genesis 37:12-36

12 Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, 13 and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."

"Very well," he replied.

14 So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, 15 a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

16 He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?"

17 "They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'"

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. 18 But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

19 "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. 20 "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

21 When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. 22 "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—24

and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

25 As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

26 Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? 27 Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

28 So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

29 When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. 30 He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?"

31 Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. 32 They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

33 He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

34 Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him.

36 Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Circle "Shechem" in v. 12.
- * Underline "send you" in v. 13.
- * Circle "a man" in v. 15.
- * Circle "Dothan" in v. 17.
- * Circle "plotted" in verse 18.
- * Bracket v. 20b.
- * Circle "Reuben" in vv. 21, 29.
- * Underline "stripped" (v. 23), "took" (v. 24), "threw" (v. 24), and "sat down" (v. 25).
- * Bracket "the richly ornamented robe he was wearing" used for emphasis in v. 23.
- * Circle "Ishmaelites" in vv. 25, 27, 28, and "Midianite" in v. 28.
- * Circle "Judah" in v. 26.
- * Underline the repeated word "robe" in vv. 31-33.
- * Circle "your son's" in v. 32.
- * Highlight Jacob's response in v. 34.
- * Box "but" indicating *contrast* in v. 35.
- * Box "meanwhile" indicating *temporal relationship* in v. 36.

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Jacob sends Joseph on a mission (vv. 12-14a). How would you describe it?
2. An unnamed man, who *happens* to know where Joseph's brothers have gone, *happens* upon Joseph wandering around haplessly in the fields (vv. 14b-17). What do you make of that?
3. Explain the *sarcasm* in verse 19.
4. When Joseph's brothers saw him coming, they plotted to kill him (v. 20). Why?
5. Reuben and Judah stepped forward to speak up as the brothers developed their plan. *Compare* and *contrast* your views of them.
6. What does the succession of verbs, "stripped," "took," "threw," and "sat down" (vv. 23-25), which describe what Joseph's brothers did to him, convey to you?
7. Explain the *irony* in what Joseph's brothers did with him (v. 28).
8. Joseph's robe is mentioned ten times ("robe" five times, "this" or "it" five times) in three verses. Why would the narrator so focus our attention on Joseph's robe?
9. What is being emphasized in verses 34 and 35?
10. **Discussion:** Talk about the significance of the word "meanwhile" in v. 36.

day 3

EXAMINE – an explanation of its message to clarify your understanding of the passage.

The opening episode in the Joseph story (Ge 37-50) can be divided into two acts. The first act, found in 37:2-11, describes the origin of the jealous hatred that fuels his brother's treachery in the second act, found in 37:12-36. Joseph is favored by Jacob, who elevates him to a special place in the family symbolized by the "richly ornamented robe" he has made for him. To add insult to injury, Joseph has two dreams indicating that he is destined to rule over his father, mother, and brothers, a notion that none in the family take too kindly. His brothers' subsequent seething rage inevitably boils over the first chance they have to get away with getting rid of him. Once he's out from under the umbrella of his father's protection, they get that chance and plot to kill him.

The second act unfolds in a number of short scenes marked by changes in setting or primary actors. In the first one (vv. 12-14a), Joseph's brothers go to graze their father's sheep near Shechem where Jacob owned property (33:19), and sometime later, Jacob sends Joseph there to see if all is going well and report back. The narrator tells his readers neither why they ventured so far, some fifty miles, nor why Joseph did not go with them. However, the comment in verse 11, pointing out that his brothers are very jealous, is ominous and suggests that Joseph is in for trouble when he finds them.

In the second scene (vv. 14b-17), Joseph arrives in Shechem, after a four or five day journey, but his brothers are nowhere to be found. He wanders from field to field like a lost sheep searching for them until a man, who happens to have overheard where they have gone, happens upon him. The man tells him, "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan,' so heading for this ancient city 13 miles away, Joseph resumes his quest. "This short scene keeps us in suspense by delaying the confrontation of Joseph with his brothers and by heightening our awareness of the danger he faces so far removed from his father Jacob" (Wenham, 353).

In the next scene (vv. 18-20), Joseph finds his brothers in Dothan, but they see him before he sees them, and in the short time it takes for him to reach them, they plot to kill him. Intriguingly, the setting becomes an accomplice to their fratricide by offering cisterns into which they can throw him and ferocious animals on which they can pin the crime. An unexplained death could always be chalked up to wild beasts. The goal of the brothers' smoldering animosity is obvious: prove the dreamer's dreams wrong by killing him. One commentator puts it this way: "The ultimate

attraction was to thwart Joseph's dreams of supremacy and to remove this mischief-maker from their midst" (Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50*, 160).

In scene four (vv. 21-22), Reuben intervenes to spare Joseph by offering his Plan B. The narrator does not say why. According to Reuben's counter-suggestion, they could accomplish their goal of doing away with the dreamer sans the shedding of blood. All they have to do to avoid the nasty violence is dump him in a nearby dry cistern and let nature take its course.

The next scene (vv. 23-28) contains the climax to the second act. When Joseph arrives, his brothers manhandle him. They strip him of that disgusting robe, the symbol of his special status and distinctive destiny. They take him to the mouth of the bottle-shaped cistern nearby and throw him in, after which they sit down to eat, leaving the reader shaken by their sociopathic lack of remorse. Joseph's prospects at this point are bleak, indeed, for the odds of his survival are slim. Chances are he will not live to reign over his brothers, much less preserve their lives (45:5-7). By the time they sit down, a caravan of Ishmaelites comes by, which gives Judah an idea. It makes more sense to him to sell Joseph to these Midianite merchants on their way to Egypt than leave him to die. His brothers agree—all but Reuben who is missing for some reason—better to sell him for twenty shekels of silver than leave him for dead. Only later will readers discover that rather than being agents of enslavement, the traders will prove to be God's instruments of deliverance.

In scene six (vv. 29-30), Reuben returns to the cistern, perhaps from tending the sheep, only to discover it is empty. Clearly shaken by his unexpected discovery, he goes back to his brothers to announce his discovery, which doubtless comes as no surprise to them. His plan to deliver Joseph has been foiled; all that is left now is to deceive his father.

In the next scene (vv. 31-33), the brothers carry out their cover-up. They slaughter a goat and dip Joseph's robe in its blood. Then they send the bloodstained garment back to their father with this message: "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." Of course, Jacob recognizes his son's one-of-a-kind robe and draws the unavoidable conclusion, "Joseph has surely been torn to pieces" (v. 33). With that their cover up is complete, their crime is concealed, and peace of mind is theirs. Their ruse is successful, and Jacob is tricked as he himself had tricked his father many years before.

In the eighth scene (vv. 34-35), broken-hearted Jacob refuses to be consoled. In the words of one commentator: "This father is broken-hearted, so that all his sons' efforts to comfort him prove fruitless. He insists he will mourn publicly for Joseph until his dying day. The brothers may have succeeded in removing the hated Joseph from their sight, but Jacob's gestures will always remind them where his deepest affections lie" (Wenham, 360).

Act two concludes with verse 36, which makes it perfectly clear that the readers have not read the last about Joseph.

The *upper story* of this act is about God, who providentially orchestrates human affairs to accomplish divine purposes. In this case, he turns the purpose of Joseph's brothers on its head to accomplish his own

purpose. They act to frustrate the fulfillment of their younger brother's dreams, but he uses their actions to fulfill those dreams. Joseph winds up in Egypt where his family will bow down to him.

The *lower story* is about Joseph, the suffering servant, an important character type in biblical literature. "Such a hero undergoes suffering, usually underserved, that accomplishes great good for other people. Joseph is such an innocent sufferer who becomes a savior of people. His story is dominated by the theme of providence. Although events that happen to the hero seem at the time to be tragic, by the time the story is over they turn out to have been governed by God for a redemptive purpose" (Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 100).

The Message of the Passage

Rather than bring Joseph's dreams to naught, the evil his brothers did to him providentially contributed to his dreams' ultimate fulfillment.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you through his word.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22. Reflect on the three "living questions" below to apply what you have learned this week.

- **Journal your answers to the following *living* questions:**

–How is God making himself known to you?

–How does God want to change you?

–How is God calling you to change your world?

notes **N** STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

- v. 12 **Shechem** Shechem was 50 miles north of Hebron; Dothan was 13 miles northwest of Shechem (Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis*, 502). "The journey would have taken Joseph four or five days" (John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 664). Jacob owned property in Shechem (33:19).
- v. 13 **send you** "The narrator, by repeatedly insisting that the brothers hated (vv 4, 5, 8) and were very jealous of Joseph (v 11), has awakened great apprehension in the reader, who cannot but fear for Joseph being sent so far from the range of paternal protection" (Wenham, 353).
- v. 15 **a man** God's providence is evident in the person of "a man" who fortuitously overheard Joseph's brothers say, "Let's go to Dothan" (v. 17) and in the appearance of a caravan at the opportune time.
- v. 15 **Dothan** The fact brothers were not where they were expected to be. Dothan was an urban center by this time. Perhaps they were up to no good in the city.
- v. 17 **plotted** "They plotted,' a rare word, never used positively (cf. Ps. 105:25). The Heb. verb means "be crafty, deceitful, knavish" (*TWOT*, s.v., 1366 *nakal*). "So far from home, the brothers think they can safely plan the dreamer's murder" (Baldwin, 159).
- v. 20 **we'll see** "They plan to prove his dreams wrong by killing him" (Wenham, 353). "The ultimate attraction was to thwart Joseph's dreams of supremacy and to remove this mischief-maker from their midst" Baldwin, 160). Ironically, their evil scheming played right into God's hands.
- v. 21 **Reuben** Reuben steps forward to become a major character among the brothers as does Judah in verse 26. Why he tried to rescue Joseph is uncertain. "Was he just being the responsible elder brother? Was he trying to atone for his misbehavior with Bilhah [cf., 35:22] (cf. Sarna)?" (Wenham, 354). "Reuben is depicted as a failed leader. Although his plan to rescue Joseph from the pit shows him as a responsible older brother, he fails to accomplish his plan and stands feebly before the pit (37:29-30)" (Waltke, 498). "Reuben was absent during the sale of Joseph. When he returned and found Joseph missing, he felt great distress ('he tore his garments'). Jacob would have held him responsible for Joseph's safety, since Reuben was the oldest of the brothers" (Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Genesis," 2016 ed., 264, www.soniclight.com).
- v. 23 **stripped, etc.** "The succession of verbs, 'stripped, took, dumped, sat down,' conveys the speed and roughness of the brothers' assault on Joseph" (Wenham, 354).
- v. 23 **robe . . . robe** "This unexpected expansiveness slows down the narrative for a moment and focuses on the piece of clothing that was the mark of his father's affection and the occasion of his brothers' hatred. Now we understand how they had recognized him in the distance and made up their minds so quickly to kill him. It also hints at the grief that Jacob will suffer if Joseph does not return home" (354).
- v. 25 **to eat** After their evil deed, they callously sat down to eat. "It is ironic that they had planned to say that an evil beast had devoured Joseph, and after they had attacked him, they sat down to eat. The text thus signifies what evil beasts attacked Joseph" (Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 607).
- v. 27 **Ishmaelites** The designations "Ishmaelites" and "Midianites" refer to the same people (see 37:36; 39:31; cf. Jdg 8:22, 24). Some think the first designates that they were nomadic traders, the second that were ethnically of the tribe of Midian (Wenham, 355).
- v. 26 **Judah** "Judah is a coldly calculating leader: saving his brother from immediate death to profitably sell him into a living death (37:26-28)" (Waltke, 498). "Although this speech was designed to lessen their crime by selling their brother rather than murdering him, it ultimately underscored how wicked their deed was—they sold their brother, their own flesh and blood" (Ross, 608).
- v. 28 **twenty shekels** A shepherd employed by someone else might earn eight shekels a year. The sale of Joseph yielded a tidy profit! (Wenham, 356).
- v. 31 **goat** "We are not told which brother comes up with this plot to deceive Jacob about Joseph's fate. Jacob is allowed to draw his own conclusions and is literally inconsolable" (Walton, 666).
- v. 35 **mourning** Normally such public grief lasted a week for a parent (Ge 50:10) or perhaps a month as in the case of Moses (Dt 34:8), but Jacob refused to stop mourning for Joseph despite the entreaties of all his sons and daughters. He intended to grieve publicly for Joseph until he died.
- v. 36 **meanwhile** Anticipates further episodes in the story. While Jacob is mourning the death of his son, Joseph is beginning his new life in the house of Potiphar, an influential royal official.
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Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

Having boys who are only 16 months apart, I am very aware of the dynamics of sibling rivalry. There are many ways that my boys are similar but many more where they completely differ. At some moments in the day, they are the best of friends. I love watching them "get" each other and have fun together. The tide can quickly change, however, and suddenly a sibling war erupts. They vow to never speak again and storm off to their rooms. Sibling conflict is normal and when it occurs in a healthy environment, it can be helpful in teaching them how to resolve conflict, negotiate and submit to others. I often find myself singing "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" by Aretha Franklin to my kids. They don't like it, but they get it, they have to respect each other. How do you teach kids to be kind and respectful? (1) Don't allow them to insult each other. Words can be hurtful. Use self-control and don't say it! (2) Do not play favorites or compare your kids. This can be hard, especially if you have one child who excels at something. They are created differently and gifted uniquely for a purpose. (3) Teach healthy conflict management. Show them how to express themselves appropriately and identify emotions behind actions! Praying peace for your home this week!

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Genesis 37:12-36

1. Who was Joseph looking for and why?
2. What did his brothers say when they saw him coming?
3. What did they do to him?

What Do You Think

1. What do you usually do when you have a conflict with a sibling or friend?
2. God was not surprised by what happened to Joseph. Why do you think God sometimes allows bad things to happen to people?

What R U Going To Do

Write out 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a on a piece of paper and hang it up in your house. Whenever you are tempted to argue with your siblings or friends, go read it to remember what loving others is like.

Core Comp

Humanity - I believe God loves everyone and we all need Jesus as our Savior.

Memory Verse

Romans 8:28 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized my verse _____, completed Scrolls _____, brought Bible _____, brought a friend _____.

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30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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