

Then Jesus answered and said to them... “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life;”

“And These Are They Which Testify of Me”

Sermons on Genesis

Sending the Son

Genesis 37:1-22

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
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Genesis 37:1-22

Preface

Of all the principal figures in Genesis—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.—no one receives as many chapters of attention as Joseph. From this chapter until the end of Genesis, Joseph will be the focus of attention. There are a number of guesses as to why this is the case.

It may be due to the story of Joseph being the natural bridge between Genesis and Exodus. It is the saga of Joseph that finds God's people in Egypt, thus fulfilling the prophecy made to Abraham (Genesis 15:13).

Or perhaps it is due to the striking number of similarities between Joseph and Jesus. There is perhaps no single character in the Old Testament who foreshadows Jesus in so many ways. And, of course, we will pursue these as the story unfolds, thus keeping in line with our theme for our study of Genesis. As Jesus taught,

“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39).

But equally profound and perhaps more vexing is another truth regarding the fourteen chapters before us—the truth of it all being God's design. If we were to insert a sub-theme at this juncture it would have to be the words of Joseph in Genesis 50:20:

“But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is this day*, to save many people alive.”

The prophecy made to Abraham would most assuredly come to pass. We will now read of the means by which it would come to pass. And we shall see how God ordains the anger, hatred, envy, and murderous hearts of evil men to bring about His own glorious purpose. This is a notion which, although not contradictory to true biblical logic, has perplexed great thinkers, and even great theologians, to the extent that they reject it in their ignorance. But rejecting this will lead us to an image of God which is less than God. Heaven forbid!

The Favorite Son

Now Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. ² This is the history of Jacob. Joseph, *being* seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers. And the lad was with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father. ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of *many* colors. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him (Genesis 37:1-4).

To Make Matters Worse

Seventeen year old Joseph is feeding the flock with his brothers. But the brothers mentioned at the outset are his half-brothers. To make matters worse they are the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, whose positions as wives were clearly inferior to Leah and Rachel (being their maidservants). To make matters worse Joseph brings a bad report regarding his brothers to his father (the details of which we do not know). To make matters worse, Joseph was Jacob's favorite and to make matters even worse, Jacob made Joseph a coat of many colors which, no doubt, flaunted his pre-eminent position before his brothers.

Raised by Israel

It might be observed and argued that Joseph, being a child of Jacob's old age, was spared from Jacob's reprehensible behavior seen in the earlier chapters. Joseph was raised by Israel rather than Jacob. Joseph was also, no doubt, uninvolved in the mischief at Shechem. Perhaps Jacob saw in Joseph the kind of son he could have, or should have, had all along. The mistakes we make as parents should be repented of, rather than merely justified or rationalized. In all of this, there is no excuse for the hatred of his brothers.

No Excuses

We can easily argue that a parent shouldn't play favorites and that Jacob incited this hatred in his licentious sons. But this will never be an excuse for their maliciousness. A poor upbringing, miss-spent youth or clinical psychological disorder, though, perhaps, valid in analysis, will never be a valid excuse for sin before God. He simply won't buy it.

He Came to His Own

Jesus, as God's Son, would receive the same welcome from His brothers. As John records, **"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11)**. And later in the same gospel, more specifically of Jesus' half-brothers, **"For even His brothers did not believe in Him" (John 7:5)**. And of course we know that the unfaithful Jews' hatred grew as they came to realize Jesus' favored status before the Father; for Jesus always did the things which pleased the Father (John 8:29). As the perfection and majesty of Christ surfaced, so did the hatred of His detractors. This we shall we with Joseph as well.

Father, Not Creator

One more point is worth noting here. Though Jacob might be in error by loving one Son over another, this accusation cannot be leveled against God the Father; for it is different to be a father than it is to be a Creator. A Creator has rights a father does not, as the lump of clay analogy in Romans 9 so clearly conveys. Christians, therefore, should not downplay the biblical doctrine of God's election for fear of God appearing unfair. Christians need not diminish God's God-hood in order to pacify the dust. In doing so there is a great danger of presenting a diminished law and gospel and diminished Christianity altogether.

The Dreams

Now Joseph had a dream, and he told *it* to his brothers; and they hated him even more. ⁶ So he said to them, "Please hear this dream which I have dreamed: ⁷ There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Then behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸ And his brothers said to him, "Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Then he dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, "Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me." ¹⁰ So he told *it* to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What *is* this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?" ¹¹ And his brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter *in mind* (Genesis 37:5-11).

Truth to a Hostile Crowd

Two dreams are given to Joseph. In one dream the sheaves (or binding of some form of harvest) of Joseph's brothers bow down to Joseph's sheaf—indicating some form of dominion for Joseph over his brothers. In the other dream the sun, moon, and stars all bow down to him—indicating his dominion over his entire household. Considering his brother's attitude toward him, one might ask whether revealing these dreams was a very smart thing to do. As one theologian put it, "Joseph was more of a prophet than a politician." But the antagonistic attitude of his brothers did not keep Joseph from proclaiming God's prophecy. Nor should the law and gospel be altered to somehow domesticate a mind hostile to heavenly things. Joseph didn't soft pedal and neither did Jesus.

Jacob's Pondering

Jacob's response to Joseph's dream, although he rebukes Joseph initially, is reminiscent of Mary's response to the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, where she pondered these things in her heart (Luke 2:19). Quick responses aren't always the best. In debates and on the radio, hesitancy can be viewed as a sign of weakness and equivocation. But it can actually be a sign of wisdom to deeply consider the matter at hand before responding.

Not by Chance

And why dreams? Why does not God simply work His plan out in history? God tells us what He will do that we might not think that it is merely fortuitous or by chance that things unfold. The godless romance of an ungoverned universe may exalt human volition or a sort of lifeless providence, but it is neither logical nor biblical. God desires that His creatures know that the world, and its affairs, are very much in His hands.

Deity of Christ

And lastly, as we see a preview of Christ in Joseph, note the words of Paul revealing the full expression of Joseph's foreshadow.

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹ and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

And let's add this to our multi-variegated argument for the deity of Jesus by comparing these words to their obvious starting point in Isaiah.

Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I *am* God, and *there is no other*. ²³I have sworn by Myself; The word has gone out of My mouth *in righteousness*, And shall not return, That to Me every knee shall bow, Every tongue shall take an oath (Isaiah 45:22, 23).

Joseph Sent to Shechem

Then his brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. ¹³ And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers feeding *the flock* in Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." So he said to him, "Here I am." ¹⁴ Then he said to him, "Please go and see if it is well with your brothers and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me." So he sent him out of the Valley of Hebron, and he went to Shechem. ¹⁵ Now a certain man found him, and there he was, wandering in the field. And the man asked him, saying, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶ So he said, "I am seeking my brothers. Please tell me where they are feeding *their flocks*." ¹⁷ And the man said, "They have departed from here, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan (Genesis 37:12-17).

Scene of the Crime

The brothers go off to feed their father's flock in Shechem. So in the backdrop of our minds is the place of their bloody massacre. To a genuinely repentant heart, the scene of the crime ought to bring forth shame and sorrow; it will be quite the opposite for the sons of Jacob. At times it seems almost impossible to bring a person to recognize the error of their heart. Truly only God can soften a stone.

Sending the Son

The father now sends his son. How many parables repeat this theme—a father or a king, or a land-owner sending his son to a certain place (Mark 12:1-11; Luke 20:9-19; Matthew 21:33-42) only to be beaten and killed. And similar to the magnificent condescension of Jesus, upon Joseph's arrival the sons are not where they are supposed to be. They should have been in Shechem, but were in Dothan. Israel should have been walking in faith; instead they were walking in works.

The Conspiracy Against Joseph

Now when they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him. ¹⁹ Then they said to one another, “Look, this dreamer is coming! ²⁰ Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, ‘Some wild beast has devoured him.’ We shall see what will become of his dreams!” ²¹ But Reuben heard *it*, and he delivered him out of their hands, and said, “Let us not kill him.” ²² And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood, *but* cast him into this pit which *is* in the wilderness, and do not lay a hand on him”—that he might deliver him out of their hands, and bring him back to his father (Genesis 37:18-22).

Pre-meditated Evil

This is no sudden act of rage but a pre-meditated plan of vicious envy. A heart that devises wicked plans is truly something the Lord hates (Proverbs 6:18). They hated him and his prophecy. To help us grasp the intensity of their hatred consider that nine brothers conspire to kill their innocent younger brother. How far would we need to search in paganism to find such a heinous act?

No Laughing Matter

Why couldn't they simply laugh this dream off? If it be the simple self-esteem of an impetuous teenager, should it be treated with such serious contempt? But the gospel cannot be laughed off. It will either bring to salvation or to anger. It is either the smell of life or the smell of death (2 Corinthians 2:16).

Where Sin Abounds

And similar to the cross, the brothers now conspire to kill that which will eventually be their only hope of continuing to live. And similar to the cross, their very act will bring to pass the necessary course of events assuring the salvation of their family. No wonder Paul must warn us that we should not sin all the more that grace may abound.

Remnant Reuben

Reuben, though he had defiled his father's bed, as the first-born, seeks to protect his younger brother. Evil in one venue doesn't always mean evil in all venues. Similar to Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, God had provided the necessary advocates for His plan. Reuben's plan was to come and rescue Joseph from his grave.

The Grave

Of course, Reuben would not be able to rescue Joseph from his grave. Nor would Jesus be rescued from His grave. Men always think they can devise a plan superior to God's. God's plan with Christ was the perfect plan. Jesus would face and conquer the grave. And so far from men rescuing Him, He would rescue men.

Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose the story of Joseph has such a prominent place in Genesis (page 1)?
2. Explain how the events in chapters 37 through 50 were both the plans of men and the plans of God (page 1).
3. What are some reasons why Joseph's brothers hated him so much (page 2)?
4. Why do you suppose Joseph was unlike his brothers (page 2)?
5. Do you think Joseph's brothers could justify their sin (page 2)?
6. How was the response of Joseph's brothers similar to the nation of Israel's response to Jesus (page 3)?
7. Discuss the distinctions between the rights of a father versus the rights of a creator (page 3).
8. Why must we never alter, or soft-pedal the gospel regardless of the hostility of the crowd (page 4)?
9. Why does God use dreams (page 4)?
10. How is Jacob's sending of Joseph similar to the Father's sending of His Son (page 5)?
11. Why is pre-meditated evil worse than spontaneous evil (page 6)?
12. Why couldn't Joseph's brothers just laugh him off (page 6)?
13. How could we be tempted to sin all the more that grace may abound (page 6)?
14. Who rescues whom (pages 6, 7)?