

His Hand 12-9-07

Genesis 37:12-36

The first eleven verses of the story of Joseph explain to us the reasons his brothers harbored such hatred for him. He gave a bad report about them, was most favored by his father, which may have included the firstborn rights, and his audacious dreams, added together, had them treating him with contempt. Commentators disagree on how much Joseph's own attitude played a part. Some see him as a saint that never did any wrong, and others see him as a cocky young teen that liked to flaunt his father's favor. The truth probably lies somewhere in-between. More than likely he was like most young men, prone to pride but unsure of himself. He probably wanted his brothers' friendship, but reveled in his position as favorite son.

Our passage begins with the brothers taking the flocks to a great distance away for pasture. ¹² *Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem,* This was the place where some of the brothers had slaughtered the Shechemites, so we begin with an ominous warning. (Genesis 34:25) Joseph's father, Israel, probably didn't want his favorite son to go to where the locals might take revenge on his clan (Genesis 34:30), but as time passed, Israel became more concerned about his sons and the flocks.

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.* Shechem was a fifty-mile journey. Apparently both Israel and Joseph have no inclination to fear what was about to happen. They couldn't imagine the brothers doing evil to a family member, even if they didn't like him.

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.* Reporting on his brothers was what began the animosity, and now Israel is putting him in that position again. Joseph set off in his favored status robe to make the 4 to 5 day journey. Apparently he made the journey alone and on foot.

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. This is another 12 miles to the north. We are constantly reminded of the providence of God in Joseph's story. You could take out one coincidental factor and the whole story would break down. Here was a young man who approached Joseph that just happened to have heard their conversation of where they were going. We will see the effects of the invisible hand of Providence again and again. (Proverbs 16:9) Unlike the stories of the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Joseph never saw a theophany. He never had revelation of God in a dream, yet we can see God working in every detail. (Deuteronomy 29:29)

Commented [notes1]: 25 Three days later, while all of them were still in pain, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and attacked the unsuspecting city, killing every male.

Commented [notes2]: 30 Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed."

Commented [notes3]: 9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

Commented [notes4]: 29 The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.

Joseph might have thought what good fortune it was to run into this young man. He could have spent weeks wandering around and not found his brothers and not have obtained any help from the surrounding people who were in fear of the family of Israel. But God moved the heart of this young man, who happened to have overheard their conversation, to talk with Joseph. Little did Joseph realize that this "good fortune" would end with being sold into slavery. (Proverbs 27:1)

We are often confused about what is good and what is detrimental. In the microcosm of the moment, this must have seemed like the blessing of God. Take it forward a day and it must have seemed like the curse of God. Take it forward fourteen years and it would be seen as the miraculous intervention of God because of His promises to Abraham and love for mankind. Take it forward almost two millennia and we can see God keeping his prophetic word to Eve. (Genesis 3:15) Take it into eternity and your mind will not be able to fully fathom all the wondrous implications from one young man meeting Joseph at the city where a murderous event took place. What a contrast between the evil of man and the goodness of God!

It just makes me realize I can't comprehend what God is doing in any given situation. (Jonah 3:9) Every event can turn out a thousand different ways. That doesn't stop me from guessing why, but when I'm honest with myself, I have to say only God knows. (Isaiah 40:13) Why this tragedy and that blessing? I don't know, but God does. Why was this plan thwarted and that one blessed? I trust in the character of my God who loves me so much He would send His only Son to die in my place. If I try to figure it out, I'll only show how foolish and limited I am. If I were in Joseph's shoes, I wouldn't have had clue what meeting that man in the field meant. I don't have a clue what will come out of the events of this day, but I know one thing for sure. God loves me and is making me more like His Son. (Romans 8:29) I can't begin to comprehend what He has in store for us, but I know it will be good when we look back on it from eternity. (1Corinthians 2:9) But let's return to the drama of this immediate situation at a point in time in the life of Joseph.

18 But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. They could recognize the robe of the favorite son from a distance. They had gotten away with the murder of the Shechemites and thought they could get away with one more. They must have thought they were invincible. This was their chance to take back what they thought was theirs, a full inheritance with no favored firstborn. Reuben had already abdicated his position through his indiscretion with Bilhah. Now they would all share it and be rid of this thorn in their side, Joseph.

Sometimes it begins with talking in jest. *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."* Then it turns into a serious plot, murder with an alibi. The joke starts to sound like a good idea and evil intentions captivate the mind and heart and gloss over the outcome. Never forget that the Serpent is subtle. (Genesis 3:1)

Don't tell me you can't relate, because Jesus said that hatred and slander are the same thing as murder. (Matthew 5:21-22) Your pride is wounded and your feelings

Commented [notes5]: 1 Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.

Commented [notes6]: 15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

Commented [notes7]: 9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

Commented [notes8]: 13 Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor?

Commented [notes9]: 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Commented [notes10]: 9 However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"

Commented [notes11]: 1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

Commented [notes12]: 21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

hurt and then the words just come slithering out your mouth with their poison ready to infect any willing listener. (Hebrews 12:15) We tell the story from our perspective and ignore any other. Exaggeration and skipping a few details that don't add to our point of view just seem to come natural. Pretty soon we have others on our side, just as we intended from the start. We have shot our enemy with arrows of bitterness just as real as steel tipped ones. (Psalm 41:6)

Commented [notes13]: 15 See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

The festering hatred in the brothers' hearts had a way of release. The plan had been voiced and the minds were imagining the pleasure of being rid of Joseph. Actually it would enslave their thoughts for years to come. That is usually the case. We think we can walk away and leave guilt behind, but it doesn't work that way. It clings to us like some weighty foul smelling burden. But the brothers' minds only imagine the lie of the enemy to be real, that they will find a sweet release if they will only cross their conscience and just do it now while they have a chance.

Commented [notes14]: Whenever one comes to see me, he speaks falsely, while his heart gathers slander; then he goes out and spreads it abroad.

It is ironic that in their attempt to rid themselves of Joseph and see that the dreams God gave him were unfulfilled, they were actually making it possible for them to come to pass. Again we see God's hand at work even in their efforts to stay His hand. You can't fight God and win. You will only find your efforts to resist Him turning back on you. (Psalm 2:4)

Commented [notes15]: 4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.

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. Reuben, the oldest, and the one on whom this would ultimately be blamed, didn't want to get himself into any more trouble than he already was. Maybe his conscience was smarting from looting the murdered bodies at Shechem. Or perhaps he was planning on rescuing the favorite son and getting back in the good graces of his father. The author doesn't give us any insight into the intentions of his heart and leaves that for us to ponder. Reuben's words were not a suggestion but an order from the eldest.

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. Reuben's weight as older brother won out. A cistern is an underground water storage, sometimes as big as a swimming pool, but dug into the earth. Run off from rains would collect in this underground basin and then be available to draw from like a well. We know this was a particularly dry season, which is why they had wondered so far for pasture. Stripped naked, Joseph might have been dropped 20 feet or more down into this hole in the earth. The bottom was often a soft muddy collection of topsoil. Centuries later Jeremiah would be held in a cistern and sink up to his armpits in the mud. (Jeremiah 38:6) More than likely our Savior was held in the cistern under Caiaphas' home the night He was captured and tried. (See Psalm 88)

Commented [notes16]: 6 So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king's son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.

It was probably beginning to dawn on Joseph how his words and actions had affected his brothers. It was a lot more serious than he imagined. The blessing of meeting the man in the field had turned into the nightmare of being held helpless in a cistern

Commented [notes17]: 6 You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

wondering if he would die of thirst. He started the day hopeful and dressed as prince of the Hebrews, but now lay naked in a pit pleading for his life.

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. Their meal was probably sent by their father on Joseph's back. As they enjoyed it, Joseph was pleading with each one by name to have mercy. It would haunt their memories for the next 20 years. (Genesis 42:21)

Ishmaelites were half-cousins descended from sons of another wife of Abraham. They had intermarried with the Midianites. Dothan just happened to be on the trade route down to Egypt. They just happened along at the right time. Providence was orchestrating detail after detail. Here was a chance to make a little money and still follow Reuben's advice. I don't think it was sympathy but greed that caused them to favor this idea. They could be rid of him once and for all, and there would be no evidence that might later be discovered.

It is interesting that Judah is the one that intervened with this suggestion that saved Joseph's life. Skipping over the murderous Simeon and Levi, the fourth-born took the lead. He didn't realize that Reuben had a plan to rescue Joseph. Judah is the line of the Savior, but Judah had no more to do with saving Joseph and bringing the dreams to pass than his family would have in bringing the Messiah. It was all by grace that God chose to work through man for the saving of many. As in the case of Reuben, we are left to wonder about the motives in Judah's heart. Had the Tamar experience really changed him?

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. Imagine the dread that Joseph experienced as he was bound and marched off toward Egypt, seeing his brothers fade in the distance and hearing their laughter as they divided up the silver. If Hebron had been on that route, he may have convinced them to stop and have his father buy him back for twice the amount, but they were traveling the Via Maris and would not go near his home. Would he ever see it again?

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?" Reuben was sure the blame would fall on him. He was the oldest and the one under his father's disfavor. His plan had failed, but God's was steadily proceeding onward.

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

Commented [notes18]: 21 They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us."

pieces." The brothers succeeded in deceiving the deceiver, Jacob. The very coat that made them all jealous was their tool to get back at their father. But it worked all too well. They surely didn't expect the extent of the effect this had on him. Isn't it ironic that Jacob had shed the blood of goats to cover his smooth arms and deceive his father, and now the blood of a goat was deceiving him? (Genesis 27:16)

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. He was so grief stricken that he could not be comforted. It must have made everyone's life miserable. They all tried, including the daughter's in-law (daughters), but none could help. Their consciences were surely in torment as they saw what they had done to their father. The reality of the true consequences of sin slapped them with the contrast of what they imagined and what actually resulted. That is the usual course of sin. If we could only see ahead of time the price we would pay. If we could just see past the lie that says everything will be better, and see that in reality it will only get worse. Sin has us take a burden and bind it to our self for life. It would be twenty years before this burden would lift, before Jacob's grief would end.

³⁶ Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. Who should buy Joseph but Pharaoh's bodyguard. Joseph was learning a new language in a completely different culture. He was surrounded by beauty, structures he had never seen, and an abundance of false gods. He had fallen from once favored status to the lowest of all, a slave. Joseph is right where God wants him, but to Joseph, it must have seemed like death. The invisible hand of Providence is shaping him for God's plan just like He shapes your life and mine. Ours may not be as dramatic an experience but it is equally the glorious work of God. (2 Corinthians 3:18) Never forget that we cannot interpret what God is doing in our life when we myopically focus on the immediate or give in to the victim mentality. Only time will reveal the work of the Master Designer.

Consider the similarity to this point in the story of Joseph with that of our Savior who also went down into Egypt to escape being murdered in His youth. (Matthew 2:13) He had come from the Father to see to the safety of those He would one day call brothers. (Matthew 20:28) Instead of being glad to see Him, they hated His favored status with their Father. (Matthew 27:18) They hated His vision of one day being at the Father's right hand. (Matthew 26:64-67) They stripped Him of His robe too, a very special robe as well. (John 19:23) They held Him in a cistern, determined to see His dreams unfulfilled. They sold Him for the price of a slave and they thought they had rid themselves of the burden of His presence. (Matthew 26:15) They didn't know that, like Joseph's brothers with Joseph, they were setting Him up for the fulfillment of all that He had predicted. (Mark 10:33-34)

Sometimes I'm weary upon the path I tread
Sometimes my heart faints, I fear what lies ahead
But when upon my knees I seek the Father face to face
He may not give the answers, but He always gives His grace.

Commented [notes19]: 16 She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins.

Commented [notes20]: 18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Commented [notes21]: 13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

Commented [notes22]: 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Commented [notes23]: 18 For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

Commented [notes24]: 64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."
65 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy.
66 What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered.
67 Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him

Commented [notes25]: 23 When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.

Commented [notes26]: 15 and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins.

Commented [notes27]: 33 "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles,
34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

And it's just like the Lord to lead our feet in ways we cannot see
Yes, it's just like the Lord to take us where the darkness seems to be
But one day when we gather in that great and grand forever
We will see His hand has failed us never, no, never...
Trust the Lord. By Abigail Miller