

Genesis 37:12-36 | Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³ And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." ¹⁴ So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. ¹⁵ And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶ "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷ And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

¹⁸ They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams." ²¹ But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." ²² And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. ²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. ²⁴ And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵ Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. ²⁸ Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

²⁹ When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes ³⁰ and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?" ³¹ Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. ³² And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, "This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not." ³³ And he identified it and said, "It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." ³⁴ Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him. ³⁶ Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

Genesis 37.12-36 | Plot Against Joseph

In the middle of the greatest exposition of the gospel in history Paul writes this.

Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

It's a lovely and wonderful verse. It should be written on coffee mugs and immortalized in needlepoint with a rose border. But man that's a hard one to believe. It's just so comprehensive. I mean there must be exceptions right? I know you are facing terrible things right now from which you can see no way out. How is it that all things, even the wicked and terrible could be accomplishing God's good purposes for his people? Joseph's story is about this hidden work of God.

The story of Joseph pushes us into a world of dual purposes, the purposes of sinful man and the purposes of a gracious God. Both are real. One always wins. The story of Joseph presses us to consider how God is working amid this brokenness, even working to accomplish his glorious and good purposes for his people, by showing us in sharp relief how all this wickedness that Joseph experiences, almost didn't happen. It is in that way contingent. Yet we see in these "almosts," that it had to happen this way. In that way it is necessary. Us humans are good at seeing the contingency, we run counterfactuals and what ifs and if onlys. But the necessary goodness accomplished by God, is only available to the eyes of faith. But it always wins. And we love God for that. That's why we live in the world guided by faith, hope, and love.

1. Almost Missed

Genesis 37:14 So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

Jacob sends his son Joseph to bring a report back regarding his brothers who are shepherding the flock in Shechem. Joseph had previously reported faithfully to Jacob regarding his other brothers, and it seems that this dangerous pattern remains. Likewise remember that Shechem is the town where Jacob's brothers had slaughtered all the men and taken the women for themselves in an act of vengeance regarding the rape of their sister. It is a place of the brothers violence. All the ingredients are present for disaster. But Joseph arrives in Shechem and his brothers are not there.

Genesis 37:15-17 And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶ "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷ And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.' " So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

Joseph almost missed his brothers but a nameless wanderer guides him straight to them. Dothan, a land 15 miles from Hebron his home. What if Joseph didn't run into that man? It's as though he is being funneled towards his brothers. A strange contingency, a strange necessity. Dothan.

2. Almost Rescued

Genesis 37:18-20 They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.”

The brothers spot Joseph in the distance. It was probably the coat. And they begin to conspire to kill him. We’ll kill him, dispose of him in one of these dry cisterns, and the alibi is simple, devoured by an animal. Then we will see what becomes of his dreams. Do you feel the tension. What is more solid, what is more in control? Our ability to take him now and kill him or his flighty little dreams! Enter the oldest brother, Rueben.

Genesis 37:21-22 But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” ²² And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father.

Rueben, the eldest son of Jacob. Last we heard of him he had slept with one of his father’s wives. In that sense he sought to grasp equality with his father, but in the same move lost hope of being the son who might receive the blessing of his father. Yet here he sees an opportunity to save his brother and restore himself to his father. Do not kill him, do not shed his blood just throw him into the pit. His intention was to return and rescue him. We’re his motives mixed. Perhaps, but part of the mixture was good, that Joseph’s life would be spared. So that is precisely what they do, strip him of his robe and throw him into a pit. Rueben’s plan to restore Joseph is now in action.

Now as the brothers sit eating. Perhaps one of the more callous details in the whole story, they spot a band of ishmaelite traders in the distance. Yes Ishmaelite, the sons of the promise, see the offspring of the rejected son. And Judah gets an idea.

Genesis 37:26-27 Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him.

Suddenly, with the introduction of a profit incentive, this dreamer, becomes our brother our own flesh. So they sell Joseph to the traders.

Genesis 37:28 And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

20 shekels, the cost of a live slave. Jesus was sold for 30, the cost of a murdered slave.

3. Cover Up

Genesis 37:29-30 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes ³⁰ and returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?”

Rueben apparently had not joined his brothers in the meal, nor in the negotiation to sell his brother. Remember his plan was set in motion, throw him in the pit come back later and restore both Joseph and himself to his father. But while Rueben thought he was living in his plan, his brothers were living in another. The boy had already been sold. “The boy is gone and I where shall I go?” We here echoes of the homelessness of Cain after the murder of Able. A wanderer on the earth. There is no return home. The flaming sword is in place.

Genesis 37:31-32 Then they took Joseph’s robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. ³² And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son’s robe or not.”

The robe of many colors is now red. A goat was slaughtered to mimic the blood of Joseph. Remember it was with a goat that Jacob had deceived his own father. Now it is with a goat that his sons now deceive him. They ask Jacob to identify the robe. “Is this your son’s?” Would it not better have been asked, is this our brother’s?

Genesis 37:33-34 And he identified it and said, “It is my son’s robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.”
³⁴ Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days.

All the sons and daughters of Jacob seek to comfort Joseph, but the patriarch is inconsolable. And then this:

Genesis 37:36 Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

Meanwhile. Joseph is sent to find his brothers but can’t, meanwhile a nameless man was wandering. Rueben plans to rescue his brother but for some reason leaves, meanwhile his brothers spot some traders. Jacob mourns the death of his son, meanwhile Joseph is alive, sold into the house of Potiphar, captain of the guard of Pharaoh. If we remember our verse in Romans, how God is working together all things for the good of his people, we see that all of life has this great meanwhile attached. Just beyond the line of sight of all involved a meanwhile is taking place. If only we had eyes to see.

There is one other story in the Bible that takes place in Dothan, recorded in 2 Kings 6. The King of Syria kept getting frustrated by his inability to pin down the Israelites. It was as

though they had a spy on the inside who knew their plans. But the King's men assured him of no leak in the seals, but Elisha the Israelite was a prophet who "knew what the king said in his bedroom." We might even say he could interpret dreams. So the King of Syria asks where this Elisha is, and his men tell him Dothan and he sends an army to kill Elisha.

Elisha's servant sees the army and runs to Elisha in fear. To which Elisha says,

2 Kings 6:16-17 "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." ¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

The unstoppable armies of Syria surrounded the man and his servant. *Meanwhile*, The armies of God surrounded the armies of Syria. One contingent, one necessary. You cannot live in this world, unless you live by the eyes of faith. To be a Christian is to have tacked on to all the pains and sufferings of your life a *meanwhile*. *Meanwhile, God is accomplishing his good purposes for me.*