

“A Tapestry of Grace”

Genesis 37:1-4

The TIME100 is an annual list published by Time magazine that recognizes the top 100 individuals who've significantly influenced the world over the past year. The list is made up of a wide range of people from different fields, including politics, entertainment, science, business, sports, and more. Inclusion on the list is based on impact—whether positive or controversial—not necessarily on popularity or moral standing. The fact of the matter is that the world has always had its list of people whom it recognizes as movers and shakers. God has a list too, but the names of those on His list are there for totally different reasons. Hebrews 11 mentions the names of the men and women from biblical history who had a stand out faith, those men and women of whom the world was not worthy. One of the names on that 'list of faith' is the character that you and I know as Joseph.

Turn in your Bibles with me to Genesis 37 where we find a story that has captivated minds and hearts throughout the centuries. There is just something about a good story that draws us in. The movie industry has realized this. There are many movies being made nowadays that come in two or three installments. They are more 'epic' than they are movie. But I have always appreciated the value of a good story. More than any other literary genre, I find myself being drawn to biographies of great men and women who lived in history. The stories of people who lived significant lives challenge and inspire me. The thing about biography is that we all have one, and so did the men and women in the Bible.

John Lennox — *“If the Bible told us stories only of people who came from good backgrounds and developed into strong men and women of God, most of us would end up being very discouraged. But it doesn't. The Bible talks about life*

as it is: petty, messy, full of strained relationships, dysfunctional, unfair, and sometimes even murderously violent.”

Romans 15:4—“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

2 Corinthians 10:11 —“Now these things happened to them as an example but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”

That doesn't mean the characters of the Old Testament were to be our primary examples, but that there are things which we learn from them. Their mistakes, their failures, and their trust in the promises of God. Now, despite of its being familiar to us, the story of Joseph is by no means sentimental. It is captivating, but it pulls no punches. For there is much more to the story than we realize when we remember those flannel-graph pictures of the boy proudly wearing his coat of many colors. It presents us with the ugly reality of sin as it is manifested through jealousy and envy, but it is also a story of grace and salvation. Joseph's story is an incredible one, filled with emotion and intrigue. We are introduced to him as a teenager who travels from Canaan's pastures in search of his brothers. We weep with him as he is betrayed by those same brothers and thrown into a pit. We ache for him as he is slandered and falsely accused, sent to Egypt's prison, and then shout with joy as he is taken from that prison and given a high place of leadership in Pharaoh's palace. If ever there was a 'rags to riches' story, this one is it.

From the pit of betrayal to the pinnacle of power. From the prison to the palace. And yet, what many people fail to see is that it was those difficult and painful

things that God used to shape him into the man that he became. Which is really important for us to know. Great men and women are not born—they're shaped by God. I believe it was Leonard Ravenhill who used to tell the story about a traveler who once asked the village wise man, "How many great men were born in this village?" The wise man answered, "None, only babies." God used all the traumatic experiences from Joseph's childhood into his adolescent life and then as an adult to shape him into a man who loved God. And Joseph followed God with all of his heart. So that he was God's man. Can anything more important be said of a man or woman? (Read)

The story of Joseph is much more than a story about him, but is a story that magnifies God's providence. It is one of the most comforting truths in Scripture. The providence of God is His active and sovereign oversight in human history working through and arranging the circumstances of life to accomplish His purposes. That word 'providence' comes from a Latin word 'providēo'—the word 'pro' which means before, and 'vidēo' which means to see. 'Providēo' means to see beforehand. So providence is God seeing ahead of time the events of life, arranging those events in order to work out the intricate details of His divine plan.

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.”

Providence is about the 'hidden hand' of God. He is providentially working in the details of every day life. That is what we see illustrated in the life of Joseph. He is an instrument in the hands of God to bring about salvation for Abraham's descendants. And in this sense, his story points us to a much greater redemptive story. Joseph points us to Jesus!

Derek Kidner — *“The story is a classic text of providence. It also exhibits, as Stephen was to show, a human pattern that runs through the Old Testament to culminate at Calvary, the rejection of God’s chosen deliverers through the envy and unbelief of their kin—yet a rejection which is finally made to play its own part in bringing about the deliverance.”*

Joseph is a favored son, a rejected brother, a faithful servant, a lowly prisoner, and an exalted savior. Yet it was through rejection that he becomes the savior of his people. At nearly every point, the life of Joseph bears resemblance to that of Jesus. Beyond being merely an example for you and me to follow, the life of Joseph is an Old Testament signpost pointing us to Jesus saying, “Here is the way! The Messiah, the Savior of the world, is just up ahead!” In theology we call this a ‘type.’ Joseph is an Old Testament ‘type’ of Christ. A type refers to a person, event, or thing in the Old Testament that prefigures or symbolizes a greater reality in the New Testament. A type is a form of prophetic symbolism where the ‘type’ (the foreshadowing element) finds its fulfillment in the ‘antitype’ (the ultimate reality it points to). And there are a lot of these in the Scriptures. Now, as we come to our text, I want you to consider first:

1—The BACKGROUND to Joseph’s story (37:1-2a)

“Jacob lived in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob.”

How many of you are familiar with the expression ‘family drama?’ I suspect most of us are. Family drama refers to conflicts, emotional struggles, and complex relationships within family. No family is immune, and Joseph’s certainly wasn’t. The story of Joseph begins with the statement, “These are the generations of Jacob,” who is Joseph’s father. This is the tenth time the statement ‘these are

the generations' has been made in the book of Genesis and it serves as a transition. Used here, it marks the beginning of the last division in Genesis which tells the story of Jacob's family, which consisted of his two wives, two more surrogate wives, so that there is in this family one husband, four wives, and at least thirteen children distributed among them. You think your family is messed up. This is a family that has all the ingredients for a psychological nightmare.

Someone has suggested a helpful outline for the book of Genesis is that its first 11 chapters are the record of four key events—creation, fall, flood, confusion. Then the rest of the book tells us the story of four key individuals—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

And so Joseph is the great-grandson of Abraham to whom God made an unshakeable, unchangeable promise:

Genesis 12:2-3—“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

It would be through Abraham's descendants that God will bring blessing to the world. The promise is narrowed down to Isaac, who has twin sons—Jacob and Esau. Genesis 36 records the account of Esau's family line and the Edomite kings which come from him. So that the chapter mentions five sons of Esau, and his sons' sons who become 27 tribal chiefs and clans, from whom come eight kings in Edom. But as wealthy and powerful Esau's descendants become, the covenant promise is not with Edom. It is with Israel. It would be Jacob, and not Esau, through whom God would bring blessing into the world. Of course, this has nothing to do with Jacob, and has everything to do with the purposes of God.

God didn't choose Jacob because of any virtuous thing about him. In fact, Jacob was so named because he grasped the heel of Esau at birth. Jacob means deceiver. He was skillful at manipulating situations to get what he wanted. Genesis 25 says that he manipulates Esau into giving away the birthright. 27 reveals that he deceived his father into securing the blessing of the firstborn. And this creates such tension between the two brothers that Jacob's mother sends him away to her family in the land of Paddan Aram. There, he meets and falls in love with Rachel where he is told by her father Laban that if he works for him seven years, he can have her hand in marriage. Ironically, Laban is a bit of a deceiver himself, so that the tables are turned on Jacob. The one who had deceived others becomes the victim of deception when Laban pulls the old switcharoo on him and tricks him into marrying Leah, and will give Rachel as his wife for seven more years of labor.

Genesis 29:31 — “When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.”

Jacob loved Rachel, but Leah was the one who started to give him children. And this begins to create conflict among the two who become rivals. We read in Genesis 30 that Leah gives birth to Reuben, who is Jacob's firstborn son. Three more sons will be born to her—Simeon, Levi, Judah.

Genesis 30:1-3 — “When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, ‘Give me children, or I shall die!’ Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, ‘Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?’ Then she said, ‘Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her.’”

Bilhah becomes Jacob's wife, and she has two sons—Dan and Naphtali. But then Leah does the same thing with her servant Zilpah, who becomes Jacob's wife, and she bears him two more sons—Gad and Asher. And so at this point, the family household has become its own maternity ward of babies. In rapid succession, the Bible describes how the first 12 children of Jacob were born—eleven sons and a daughter. Leah bore Jacob 6 sons and a daughter. Bilhah and Zilpah each have two apiece, for a total of four more sons. And all the while Rachel has had no children of her own. But the Bible says:

Genesis 30:23-24—“Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, ‘God has taken away my reproach.’ And she called his name Joseph, saying, ‘May the Lord add to me another son!’”

Here, Joseph's birth is recorded where we find his name first mentioned. It will briefly be mentioned once again in Genesis 35:23-26 where the 12 sons of Jacob are listed. But once we get to chapter 37, the story will shift to Joseph for the remainder of Genesis. And I find it remarkable that nearly 25% of the book of Genesis is devoted to telling us the story of Joseph's life. There is more said about him in Genesis than any other character—more than Adam, more than Noah, more than his great grandfather Abraham, more than his grandfather Isaac, and more than his father Jacob.

These are the generations of Jacob. Twelve sons by four different women. And so verse 2 shows us how Joseph's story is God being faithful to keep His promise with Jacob. Joseph will be the instrument that God uses to provide for the family, even save the family in a time of hardship. If we wonder how the nation of Israel will end up in Egypt, it is the story of Joseph that provides us with the answer.

William Philip—*“The God whose tenacious grace has stuck firmly to His covenant purpose despite all, whose transforming grace has been at work in Jacob’s life through out, is seen ultimately in these chapters as the God whose triumphant grace will forge this people for a glorious future. But it will be through fires of affliction, and on the anvil of testing, that this future is forged.”*

Now, that is the background Joseph comes from. But in the second place, notice with me:

2—The BROKENNESS in Joseph’s story (37:2b)

“Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.”

Between Joseph’s birth and appearance on the scene for good in Genesis 37, his name appears only three times, and in each of those he is given just passing mention (33:2, 7; 35:24). However, he was still part of the family during the events recorded in Genesis 31-36 which cover the first 17 years of his life. Think about what he experienced in his childhood. So that by the time he is 17, Joseph has plenty of life experience already under his belt. Verse 2 says, “He was a boy with the sons of his father’s wives.” He doesn’t come from a perfect family, but from one that is riddled with its share of problems and dysfunction. If you’ve got your own family drama that you’re dealing with, then you ought to be encouraged by what you see in the Bible. Don’t think that God’s people are perfect and have their act together. Far from it, friend! But we have a God in heaven who is faithful despite our repeated failures. His grace is sufficient for our weakness and we trust that He providentially and sovereignly carries out His purpose in our lives, even when we’ve made a hot mess of things.

When Joseph's story picks up in chapter 37, we're told that he is a teenager who is no more than 17 years old. And the statement is made in verse 3 that Jacob (Israel) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was the son of his old age. He was the son of Jacob's wife Rachel, along with his younger brother Benjamin. Joseph had been out in the pasture with his brothers, the sons of his father's other wives, and he brought back a bad report about them to their father. So we can gather from the text that there is some 'family drama' going on. A father who plays favorites, a 17 year old who daddy is doting on, and an envious bunch of older brothers make for a recipe that leads to disaster. If we go back a few chapters, there were some other factors that bled into Joseph's young life. What were these? Well, there was...

The conflict with Laban

As I said a moment ago, Joseph's birth is mentioned in chapter 30. However, the very next chapter tells us how a few years later Jacob packs up his family and all of their possessions and flees from Laban, who was Joseph's maternal grandfather. Things had gone 'south' in their relationship. Laban doesn't like the fact that Jacob tries to leave without allowing him to say goodbye to his daughters and grandchildren. Now, can you imagine being a young child and living with the memory of having to flee in the night all because daddy and granddad have had a fight? I wonder just how many children are living under the tension caused by the adults in their life who cannot get along for whatever reason. Far too many, I would say.

The confrontation with Esau

Then in chapters 32-33, there is another dramatic situation involving Jacob's brother Esau. There had been bad blood between these two brothers for years.

And now, Jacob is under the impression that Esau is coming to meet him to settle the score. Not only is daddy at odds with granddad, but uncle Esau might come kill us all! I mean all of this is really beginning to sound like an episode of the Young and the Restless...

The crime with Shechem

Now if that is not enough, chapter 34 presents us with the awful crime of rape which was committed against Jacob's daughter Dinah. A young man by the name of Shechem committed the crime, and Genesis 34:5 says that Jacob heard about it. When Dinah's older brothers get wind of what happened, they deceive Shechem and his men and slaughter them all. Listen to Jacob's reaction:

Genesis 34:30-31 — “You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land...if they gather against me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.’ But they said, ‘Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?”

Jacob doesn't do anything about the crime, and when his sons take up their sister's cause, Jacob is only concerned for himself. Their actions brought him bad press. It is the classic example of a 'passive' father. A passive father is typically one who is physically, emotionally, and spiritually disengaged from his parenting role. It does not necessarily mean he's absent completely, but that he is less involved in the active shaping, guiding, and nurturing of his children.

Some signs of a passive father may include ways that he is:

- Reluctant to confront or discipline his children
- Emotionally unattached and disengaged
- Absentee when it comes to leadership

A passive father leads to consequences in the life of a child such as a lack of respect for authority, a lack of confidence, or a lack of ability to work through things. The tragic thing is that these same patterns are often passed down generationally. That is a theme we find which emerges in a careful study of the lives of many men and women in Scripture.

The calamity with Rachel

In chapter 35, we're told that Rachel went into 'hard labor' as she was giving birth Joseph's little brother Benjamin, and she tragically died. Jacob enters into mourning and sets up a pillar over Rachel's grave. Can you imagine what this must have been like for Joseph, losing his mother and caregiver, the one who nurtured him and wiped his tears or tucked him into bed at night? Now she was gone. One of the other wives in the family will have to step in and try to assume that role. And so verse 3 says that Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons. He is the firstborn son of the wife that he loved, and now she's gone. He then shows favoritism to Joseph above the other sons, which is a generational sin pattern in Jacob's family. Remember, it was Isaac who loved Esau more than Jacob, and Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau. Jacob loved Rachel and her children more than Leah and hers, and so a pattern is once more showing itself. A father who plays favorites among his children will only foster resentment, envy, and division.

Based upon what we read in Scripture, we can come to the conclusion that Jacob was not the model father. Passive in his approach, partial in his treatment. And all of that led to some very real dysfunction within his family.

Now, I need to pause here and make some application. It is obvious that the American family is in crisis. A report from the U.S. Census Bureau a couple of

years ago indicated that 40% of births in 2022 in the U.S. were to unmarried women. This means that roughly 4 out of every 10 children born in the U.S. are born to unmarried mothers and there is no father in the picture in most cases. Birth rates are down, divorce rates are up around 50%, and an growing number of American adults are never marrying. In fact, the New York Times recently promoted an article that actually celebrated the declaration that the nuclear family is no longer the norm in the United States. (Mohler)

Research from Focus On the Family has pointed out that in 1978, 59% of young adults (18-34) were married, while today it's 30%. But nearly five decades later, a significant portion of adults (18-44) have cohabited at some point in their lives, with 59% of those having done so, compared to 50% who have ever been married. And in some American neighborhoods, children and teenagers have never even been to a wedding, since marriage has simply ceased to exist as an expectation. Even when parents are married and live in the same house with their children, many of the children are being raised by social media, and a lot of older children and teenagers often living in a digital world that is disconnected from their parents. And these devices have become babysitters or surrogate parents in some cases.

So I say all of that to emphasize the need for husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, to recognize the nature of the battle. For the enemy of your soul would love nothing more than to destroy your family. Now, in no way are we to be under the impression that family is perfect, for where you have people, you will always have problems. It is the consequences of our sin and selfishness. And we'll see that the problems in Jacob's family are patterns that he passes down to his kids. However, something else to keep in mind is that Jacob is a worshiper of God! He is a man who knows the Lord, and the Lord God is his saving grace.

1 Timothy 1:15—“This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”

All of carry into our adulthood those painful memories that may still haunt us from our childhood. Things we've seen, things we've heard, and things which have happened to us or to the people we love. Decisions made by other people that have impacted us. Experiences which have seemed to etch themselves permanently into our memory. The typical person who walks through the door on Sunday may in fact look like he or she has it all together, but the reality is that we really have no idea what another person has seen or been through. But nothing escapes the careful, watchful eye of a sovereign God whose grace we're all desperately in need of. Grace for those who have failed, and grace for those who have been wronged. Christ's goodness always outshines man's badness. Praise God that His grace goes much further than our disgrace!

3—The BEAUTY of Joseph's story (37:3-4)

“Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.”

The background of Joseph's life is seen in the lineage of the patriarchs, and being far from perfect, it was filled with dysfunction and brokenness. But God's grace will be on display in his life in hidden ways. This grace is hinted at in verse 3 in the gift that his father Jacob gave him—“And he made him a robe of many colors.” And its this very thing with which most people are familiar with Joseph's story and his 'coat of many colors.' Noah and the ark, Jonah and the whale, Daniel and the lions' den, and Joseph and his coat of many colors.

John Lennox — *“Jacob didn’t keep his preference under control but expressed it by giving Joseph a magnificent robe, a many-colored robe that distinguished him visibly from the other brothers. Moreover, such a robe in that culture may well have been associated with authority and leadership. It would have been taken as a symbol of Jacob’s designation of Joseph as the (potential) clan leader. It had the effect of pouring gasoline on the flames of the brothers’ hatred.”*

Though he could not see it in the individual moments of his life, God was working in the details. One of the keys to understanding Joseph is provided by Stephen in Acts 7:9 where he says of Joseph, “God was with him.” And that is what makes all the difference in the world. Frequently in these chapters in Genesis, we will come across the phrase, “And the Lord was with Joseph.” Whether it was in a pit of rejection or a prison of false accusation, or in the palace of responsibility—the Lord was *with* Joseph.

It is said that when John Wesley died, all his friends and family were gathered around his beside, and the very last words he spoke were these: “Best of all, God is with us.” Can there be any better thing than that? The psalmist said it this way, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are *with* me!” It is hard for us to remember this truth when our emotions get the best of us, when we feel abandoned to circumstances, or alone in our struggles. But the promise of God in Christ is that He is a very present help, a very present guide, and a very present Savior. And we can trust that He is working out the details of His plan even when we may not be able to see it. That’s what He did in Joseph’s life. Providence often hides behind the scenes of circumstance, but it will one day be visible. One day we will be able to look back and see our Father’s faithfulness, and there will not be a shred of doubt about it.

Conclusion...

In Joseph, we find a story of a son who is loved by his father, envied by his brothers. Their envy motivates them to betray him and sell him for a few pieces of silver. He's cast down into a pit of death, made a prisoner even though he is innocent, but he's vindicated and elevated to a place of supreme importance, by which he provides salvation for those very same ones who betrayed him. So that when we examine the life of Joseph at any point, we can find some aspect of the person and work of Christ revealed.

Blaise Pascal — *“Christ is prefigured by Joseph. Innocent, beloved of his father, sent by his father to see his brothers, is sold for twenty pieces of silver. Through this he becomes their lord, their savior, savior of strangers and savior of the world. None of this would have happened but for their plot to destroy him, the sale, and their rejection of him. In prison, Joseph, innocent between two criminals. Jesus on the cross between two thieves. He foretells the salvation of the one and the death of the other when to all appearances they are alike... Joseph asks the man who will be saved to remember him when he comes in glory. And the man Jesus saves asks to be remembered when He comes into His kingdom.”*

I believe this is why the life of Joseph takes up so much space in the biblical record. That's the beauty of his story. He points us to salvation in Jesus—death, resurrection, and glory! And Jesus ought to be the beauty of your story too. All of your mess, all of your baggage, all of your past failures find their answer in Him. Friend, just like Joseph's little coat of many colors, God takes the good, the bad, and the ugly of our lives and weaves it all together into a 'tapestry' of grace. Have you ever compared the front and back of a tapestry? The front of a tapestry is a work of art. In the hands of a skilled weaver, it displays incredible artistry and fine detail. The back of a tapestry is a mess. A tapestry is made by weaving

together different-colored threads, and the images are created by the different colors and textures. What is clear on the front is unclear on the back. The back shows something of the image, but it looks more like an amateur's attempt than a master's. Where the front is smooth, the back is covered in knots and loose ends. We are meant to see and admire the front of the tapestry, not the back, and this has often served as an illustration of the truths of Romans 8:28, that God promises to use every single event in our lives to bring about His good purposes.

Corrie ten Boom once wrote:

*My life is but a weaving
Between my God and me. I cannot choose the colors
He weaveth steadily.*

*Off' times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper,
And I the underside.*

*Not 'til the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas
And reveal the reason why.*

*The dark threads are as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned*

*He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim.
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him.*

Right now, we get to see only the underside of all God is weaving together in this world, while clinging to the promise that someday we will see the upper side. We will one day see the beautiful tapestry that God has been weaving through our suffering, through the events we never would have chosen. Some day God will show us His tapestry, and we will see how He has woven each of those 'grace threads' together to His own glory, and we will rejoice.