

LESSON 1

Joseph the Dreamer

His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

— Genesis 37:11

God is nowhere named in Genesis 37, yet He is at work in every verse of it.

Introduction

GENESIS 37 IS A STRANGE PLACE to begin a story about the providence of God. If we were writing the first chapter of a book on how the Lord quietly guides history toward good, we probably wouldn't write it this way. There is no vision in this chapter, no altar, and no voice from heaven. Nobody prays, and nobody is rescued. A father plays favorites and a boy talks too much. Ten brothers decide to commit murder and then settle for selling him into slavery instead. By the end of the chapter, a teenager is standing on an auction block in a foreign country, and an old man back home wants to die.

Something else needs to be seen. **God's name does not appear once in this chapter.** He isn't mentioned in the dreams, at the pit, with the caravan, or in Jacob's grief. In thirty-six verses, no one says a word about Him.

That silence is deliberate. Thirteen chapters from now, Joseph will look back on these days, on the coat and the pit and the silver and the lie, and say that God meant it. He doesn't say God made the best of a bad situation or fixed things afterward. He says God intended it.¹

The Lord was at work in this chapter from beginning to end, and not one person in it could see Him.

Hold on to that thought throughout this study. It is the hardest part of Joseph's story to live with, and it is also the most helpful. We rarely feel the providence of God while we are going through something. We usually see it later, looking back, and usually only if we kept walking with God when life stopped making sense.

The Coat and the Hatred (37:1–4)

Verse 2 opens with a phrase Genesis uses whenever it begins a new section. The CSB reads *These are the family records of Jacob*. The Hebrew word behind it is *toledot*, and it marks each new division of the book. What is interesting is that this section carries Jacob's name, yet it immediately turns to talk about Joseph. From here to the end of Genesis, the story belongs to the son more than to the father.²

We learn three things about Joseph in these first two verses, and two of them aren't flattering. He is seventeen years old. He is working with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, the sons of Jacob's secondary wives, who stood at the low end of the family. And he brings a bad report about them to his father.

CHART 1

The Ladder Only Goes One Direction

Verse	What Genesis says	Who is in it
37:2	Joseph brings a bad report of his brothers	The four sons of Bilhah and Zilpah
37:4	They hated him and could not speak peaceably to him	All ten brothers
37:5	They hated him even more	All ten brothers
37:8	They hated him even more than that	All ten brothers
37:11	His brothers were jealous of him	And now his father rebukes him too

Genesis never tells us whether the report was true. It probably was, since nobody in this family had a reputation for honesty. Even so, when the favorite son carries tales to the father who favors him, he is giving his father ammunition against his brothers.³

Four rungs. And the circle of people who hate him widens at every one.

Then we come to verse 3 and the coat.

There are two things we should know about this famous garment. First, the "coat of many colors" is a guess. It is an old guess that comes down to us from the Septuagint and the Vulgate, but it is still a guess. The CSB gives us what the Hebrew most likely means, a *long-sleeved robe*, which was an ornamented tunic reaching to the wrists and ankles. The only other place this garment appears in the Old Testament is 2 Samuel 13:18, where it describes what the king's daughters wore. It was royal clothing, and it was useless for work. Nobody could herd sheep in sleeves like that. Every morning Joseph walked out in that robe while his ten brothers watched him in their work clothes.⁴

The second thing is more serious. This was the clothing of the one who would receive the birthright. Reuben, the firstborn, had lost his claim to it when he slept with his father's concubine (35:22; see 1 Chronicles 5:1–2). When Jacob dressed Joseph this way, he was announcing to the whole family which son he had chosen to succeed him, and he did it without saying a word.

Jacob of all people should have known better. He grew up in a home where his father loved one son and his mother loved the other. That favoritism cost him his brother, his home, and twenty years of his life. Jacob knew firsthand what it could do to a family. Yet he did the same thing to his own children, and he did it on a larger scale.

Sin has a way of running in families. It keeps running until someone in the family decides to stop it.

Verse 4 tells us the brothers hated Joseph and **could not bring themselves to speak peaceably to him**. The word behind "peaceably" is *shalom*. Things had gotten so bad that the brothers couldn't even manage a civil greeting. There was no peace left in that household.⁵

Note how the hatred grows. In verse 4 the brothers hate Joseph. In verse 5 they hate him even more, and in verse 8 they hate him more than that. By verse 11 they are jealous of him.

Two Dreams and Two Reactions (37:5–11)

CHART 3

The Dream Everyone Laughed At

37:7	The sheaves bow down	<i>His brothers laugh at him</i>
37:9	Sun, moon and eleven stars bow	<i>His father rebukes him</i>
42:6	His brothers bow, faces to the ground	<i>They do not know who he is</i>
43:26	They bow again, bringing gifts	<i>They still do not know</i>
44:14	They fall on the ground before him	<i>Judah speaks</i>
50:18	They fall down and offer to be his slaves	<i>Their father is dead</i>

The two dreams are ochre. The four times they come true are not.

In the first dream, Joseph and his brothers are binding sheaves of grain in a field. Joseph's sheaf stands upright, and the others gather around and bow down to it. It is an odd picture for this family because they were herdsmen and not farmers. Still, it fits perfectly with where the story is headed. Before long, the whole world will be coming to

Egypt begging for grain.

The second dream goes further. This time the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bow to him, which means his father and mother are bowing too. Even Jacob has heard enough, and he rebukes his son: *Am I and your mother and your brothers really going to come and bow down to the ground before you?*

Did Joseph have to tell his brothers about the dream? No. Did he need to tell them the *second* dream after he saw how they reacted to the first? Certainly not. Genesis allows Joseph to look exactly like what he was at this point in his life, a young man with no sense of how his words would land.

Notice what the dreams themselves tell us. Joseph doesn't ask for them, and he doesn't make them up. Nothing in the text suggests he understood them either. He never says they came from God, and he never explains what they mean. He just talks. Whatever God was doing through these dreams, Joseph was not the one in control of it.⁶

Joseph has two dreams, and this is the first pair in a book full of them. The cupbearer and the baker will have the next pair, and Pharaoh will have the third. Later, Genesis explains what the doubling means: *the matter has been determined by God* (41:32). Joseph never has another dream after this chapter. He spends the rest of his life interpreting other people's dreams. And the dream his brothers laughed at comes true four separate times before Genesis ends: 42:6, 43:26, 44:14, and finally 50:18, when ten grown men fall on their faces in front of the brother they sold.

This brings us to verse 11, the key verse of this lesson. Here, we see two different responses to a word from God, placed side by side:

His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

The brothers react quickly and angrily, and they are sure of themselves. Jacob responds slowly and quietly, and he keeps an open mind. The dream rebuked him too, since he was the sun in the dream. But Jacob had lived long enough to know that God makes His own choices, and that those choices had never

followed the order of birth. God chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau. So, Jacob doesn't argue with the dream, and he doesn't brush it aside. He keeps it in mind and waits.⁷

Luke describes Mary in much the same way: *Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them* (Luke 2:19).

Two men heard the same dream. One of them kept it in mind, and the others decided to kill it. **People still divide this way whenever God says something they didn't want to hear.**

The Road to Dothan (37:12–24)

Verse 13 is one of the saddest verses in Genesis. Israel says to Joseph, *Get ready. I'm sending you to them.* Joseph answers with a single word. The CSB translates it *I'm ready*, and the Hebrew is *hinnehi*, **here I am.**

Abraham said that same word on Mount Moriah. Moses would say it at the burning bush, Samuel in the dark of the tabernacle, and Isaiah in the temple. It is the answer of a willing servant. Joseph's willingness sent him more than fifty miles from home to Shechem, the town where his brothers had carried out a massacre back in chapter 34. From there he went another fifteen miles to Dothan, right into the hands of brothers who couldn't speak a peaceful word to him.⁸

Along the way, Joseph met a stranger. Verse 15 says *a man found him wandering in the fields.* We are never told this man's name, and he has only one line to say. He points Joseph north toward Dothan, and we never hear of him again.

Think about what would have happened if that man hadn't been there. If he had kept quiet, or if he had been somewhere else that morning, Joseph would have gone home to Hebron. There would be no Egypt, no grain stored up for the famine, no Israel in Goshen, and no Exodus. In a chapter where God is never mentioned, an unnamed man in a field changed the course of history by giving directions.⁹

Then comes the ambush. In verse 19 the brothers say, *Oh, look, here comes that dream expert!* In verse 20 they add, *Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams!* They thought they were putting an end to a prophecy, when in fact they were helping to fulfill it. Every step they took to stop those dreams from coming true moved them closer to coming true. That irony runs through the rest of Joseph's story.¹⁰

Reuben does try to help. He is the oldest son, he is already in disgrace with his father, and he knows a brother's blood cries out from the ground. So, he suggests they throw Joseph into a pit instead of killing him, planning to come back later and rescue him. It was a half-measure. Reuben was willing to object, but he was not willing to confront his brothers, and his plan failed the way half-measures usually do.

The brothers strip Joseph. The Hebrew verb here is the same one used for skinning an animal, and it is used both for the robe and for Joseph himself. Then they throw him into a pit that was empty and dry.¹¹

Then verse 25 says, **They sat down to eat a meal.**

Think about that for a moment. The brothers sat down to eat lunch a few feet away from their brother, who was in a hole in the ground.

Genesis doesn't tell us what Joseph did while he was down there. We don't find out until twenty-two years later in 42:21, when the brothers, in a moment of panic, finally say it out loud: *We saw his deep distress when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen.* They heard every word he said, and they ate anyway.

Sold for Silver; the Robe Comes Home (37:25–36)

Judah speaks the coldest line in the chapter: *What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?*

Judah doesn't say that killing Joseph would be wrong. He doesn't remind them that Joseph is their brother or that losing him would break their father's heart. All he asks is what they stand to gain. Kidner points out the sting in the word *profit*. It is a hard, commercial term, much closer to "loot" than to anything a brother should be saying. Twenty shekels of silver was the standard price for a male slave of Joseph's age (Leviticus 27:5). That was about two and a half times what a hired shepherd earned in a year.¹² Remember Judah's words here. In a few lessons we'll meet him again, and he will be a different man.

CHART 4

What Joseph Is Wearing

37:3	A long-sleeved robe, given	Loved above his brothers	Genesis 37
37:23	The robe, stripped off him	Sold to passing traders	Genesis 37
37:31	The robe, soaked in goat's blood	Declared dead	Genesis 37
39:12	His garment, left in her hand	Sent to prison	next week
41:42	Fine linen and a gold chain	Second man in Egypt	later

Three of the five happen in this chapter. You can tell where Joseph stands by what he has on.

The brothers then complete a pattern that had started a generation earlier. They kill a goat, dip Joseph's robe in its blood, and use the two together to convince their father that his son is dead. That is *exactly* what Jacob did to his own father in Genesis 27. He used a goat and a borrowed garment to deceive Isaac, who couldn't tell his

sons apart. Now Jacob's sons deceive him the same way.

Note what has happened to the robe. Jacob gave it to Joseph out of love. The brothers tore it off him out of hatred. Now it has been dipped in blood and carried home as evidence. Joseph isn't finished losing his clothes, either. He will leave a cloak in a woman's hand, and later he will be dressed in fine linen with a gold chain.¹³

The brothers choose their words in verse 32 very carefully: *We found this. Examine it. Is it your son's robe or not?* They never actually tell a lie. They hand their father the evidence and let him reach the conclusion on his own. Remember those two words, *examine it*. Before long, someone is going to say them back to Judah.

Jacob tears his clothes and refuses every attempt his children make to comfort him. He says, *I will go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.*¹⁴ Notice the word *down*, because we will see it again and again in this story. The chapter ends in verse 36 with Joseph sold in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. There is no rescue at the end of this chapter, and there is no word from heaven explaining any of it.

This is where our first lesson ends, and Genesis intends for us to feel the weight of it.

Looking to Christ

We'll build the connection between Joseph and Christ slowly over the course of this study, so it doesn't need to carry much weight yet. But it does begin here.

A father has a son he loves. He sends that son to check on his brothers. They see him coming from a distance and say to one another, *here comes the heir — come, let us kill him.* They strip him, plot against him, and hand him over for silver.

That is the story of Genesis 37. In outline, it is also the parable Jesus told about Himself in Mark 12:1–8.

Stephen made this connection in the early days of the church. When he stood before the council in Acts 7:9, he reached for this very story. The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt, *but God was with him.* Stephen's point was that God's people have a long history of rejecting the deliverers God sends them. God has an even longer history of using that rejection to bring about deliverance.¹⁵

We shouldn't press every detail. Joseph isn't a picture of Christ in every particular. At this point he is a seventeen-year-old who talks too much and wears an expensive coat. But the *pattern* is clear, and it runs through the whole Bible: **the one who is rejected becomes the one who rescues.**

Applying the Text

God is still at work when His name doesn't appear. Nobody in Genesis 37 knew they were living in the opening chapter of a rescue. If you are going through a season where you can't see God's hand anywhere, that doesn't prove He isn't working. It may only mean you are still in chapter 37.

Ask what you are passing down. Jacob repeated his parents' worst mistake and made it worse, and he doesn't seem to have noticed. The patterns we grow up with don't break by accident. They break when someone decides to be the last one in the family to carry them.

Objecting to something is not the same as stopping it. Reuben said the right words and came up with a reasonable plan, and then he walked away. Joseph went to Egypt anyway. Where have you settled for objecting to something you should have stopped?

Take the long view of your own story. At the end of Genesis 37, a boy has been declared dead who is still alive, a father refuses to be comforted, and ten brothers are learning to live with a secret. All of that is true, **and none of it is the end of the story.**

For Discussion

1. Genesis 37 never mentions God. Why do you think Moses wrote it that way? What would we lose if verse 28 added "*but the Lord was with him*"?

2. Verse 11 gives us two reactions to the same dream, jealousy and careful thought. What accounts for the difference between the brothers and their father?
3. Joseph is not blameless in this chapter. Does that make the story harder or easier to apply to your own life?
4. Reuben objected and then left. When have you settled for objecting to something you should have stopped?
5. Jacob repeated the favoritism that nearly destroyed his own life. What pattern from the home you grew up in are you most likely to repeat?
6. Have you ever looked back on a season of your life and seen God's hand in it when you couldn't see it at the time? What changed the way you saw it?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 2: The Lord Was with Joseph (Genesis 39, with Genesis 38)

Joseph goes down to Egypt, and Judah goes down to Adullam. Genesis places their two stories side by side on purpose, and the comparison does not make Judah look good. Borthwick points out that because Joseph endured for twenty-two years, he lived to see his brother changed. If you set Judah's speech in Genesis 44:18–34 beside his words in chapter 37, the difference between them shows what God did in his life.¹⁶

Before you come, read Genesis 38 and 39 together, in that order. Watch for how differently these two men handle going down.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967). In his introduction to chapters 37–50 Kidner calls the Joseph narrative a classic instance of providence, and argues that placing the dreams at the very outset makes God, not Joseph, the hero of the story. It is not a tale of human success but of divine sovereignty.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004). On 37:2 he identifies this as the ninth and next-to-last occurrence of the *toledot* formula in Genesis, and notes that Jacob's section is largely taken up with the life of his son. Michael R. Grigoni, Derek R. Brown, Miles Custis, Douglas Mangum, and Matthew M. Whitehead, *Joseph: Understanding God's Purpose*, Studies in Faithful Living (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012). On 37:2 they explain *toledot* as the structural marker Genesis uses throughout to open major divisions.

³ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 37:2 he cautions that Joseph's report should not be judged by the standard of family solidarity, since his first duty may well have been to his father (cf. Leviticus 5:1). Paul Borthwick, *The Life of Joseph*, LifeGuide Bible Studies (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 000). Borthwick raises the same possibility from the other side, asking whether the brothers were cheating Jacob and Joseph could not stomach watching it.

⁴ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 37:3 he notes that the “many colors” rendering comes from the Septuagint and the Vulgate, and that the term more likely describes a sleeved coat reaching to the wrists and ankles. Kidner, *Genesis*. On the same verse Kidner compares the garment named in 2 Samuel 13:18, worn by royal daughters, and calls Joseph's robe ostentatious and provocative. Borthwick, *Life of Joseph*. Borthwick adds that the long sleeves signal a wearer exempt from manual labor and that the coat functioned as a mantle of authority, citing John H. Walton and Victor H. Matthews, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 70.

⁵ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 37:4 he cites Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989). Sarna's sense is that the brothers could not abide a friendly word from Joseph; they rebuffed every approach he made.

⁶ James E. Smith, *The Pentateuch*, 2nd ed., Old Testament Survey Series (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1993). On 37:5–11 Smith points out that the text itself never presents either dream as a revelation from God; that is a conclusion the narrative leaves the reader to reach later. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. They note that the ancient world nonetheless took dreams seriously as

messages from the gods, freighted with omens about the future, which is why the brothers treat these as a threat rather than as nonsense.

⁷ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 37:11 he calls these the two attitudes that always divide people in their reactions to news from God: the brothers' skepticism is emotional and hasty, while the father's open mind is the product of some humility. Israel had learned by now to allow for God's hand in affairs, and for his right of choice among men.

⁸ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 37:12–17 he reckons the distance from the Hebron Valley to Shechem at roughly fifty miles, with Dothan another fourteen beyond that, putting Joseph some sixty-four miles from home and well outside his father's protection. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. They give approximately fifty and fifteen miles for the same two legs.

⁹ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 37:12–24 he observes that everything — the ill-conceived errand, the chance meeting with the stranger — combined to deliver Joseph into his brothers' hands, and yet God proved as watchful in his hiddenness as in any miracle. Kidner notes that the two extremes of God's methods meet at Dothan: here Joseph cried out and went unheard (cf. 42:21), and here Elisha's servant would later find the hills full of horses and chariots of fire (cf. 2 Kings 6:13–17). Hughes, *Genesis*. Hughes follows Kidner and presses the point further — the angels were as present for Joseph at Dothan as they later were for Elisha.

¹⁰ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 37:19 he cautions that the older rendering “master of dreams” over-translates what is a common Hebrew way of denoting a characteristic. The CSB's “dream expert” catches the mockery in it.

¹¹ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 37:23–24 he notes that the verb translated “stripped” is the one used for skinning an animal (cf. Leviticus 1:6). Kidner, *Genesis*. On 37:24 Kidner explains that the absence of water is worth the narrator's comment, because these pits were cisterns. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. They add that cisterns doubled as hiding places and temporary prisons (cf. 1 Samuel 13:6; Jeremiah 38:6).

¹² Kidner, *Genesis*. On 37:26–28 he observes that “profit” is a harshly monetary word, and identifies twenty shekels as the going slave price in the early second millennium (cf. Leviticus 27:5). Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. They supply the wage comparison: a hired shepherd could expect about eight shekels a year, which puts the sale at roughly two and a half times a year's wages. They also note that Dothan sat on the caravan route running from Gilead down into Egypt, and that Egyptian records confirm the traffic in slaves along it.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982). Quoted in Hughes, *Genesis*. On 37:31–33 Brueggemann traces the robe's career: given in deep love, torn in deep hate, and now the instrument of a deep deception.

¹⁴ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 37:32 he notes the coldness of “your son,” which disdains the personal name, and compares the same chill in the elder brother's “this son of yours” in Luke 15:30. On 37:35 he prefers “Sheol” to “the grave,” observing that the foreboding may include the idea of finding no rest in death, and that Jacob's words left a deep impression on the family; his sons quote them back years later (cf. 44:29, 31, 34). Hughes, *Genesis*. Hughes adds that Jacob was vowing to mourn publicly to his dying day, against a conventional mourning period of a week.

¹⁵ Kidner, *Genesis*. In his introduction to chapters 37–50 he argues that this story exhibits a human pattern running through the Old Testament to its culmination at Calvary — the rejection of God's chosen deliverers through the envy and unbelief of their own kin, a rejection finally made to play its own part in bringing about the deliverance. Kidner notes that Stephen was the first to draw it out.

¹⁶ Borthwick, *Life of Joseph*. In his closing notes Borthwick points to Joseph's endurance of more than twenty-two years as what allowed him to witness the transformation of Judah, and recommends setting Judah's speech in Genesis 44:18–34 against his words in Genesis 37.