

## Genesis 37-39

Genesis 37-39 introduces us to Joseph the 11<sup>th</sup> son of Jacob, and to the struggles that serve as the backdrop for his heroic faith.

Acts 7:9-14 - these 6 verses capsule 14 chapters of Genesis and serve as a summary of the life and ministry of Joseph

**9** “And the patriarchs, becoming **envious**, sold Joseph into Egypt. **But God** was with him **10** and **delivered** him out of all his troubles, and **gave him favor** and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he **made him governor** over Egypt and all his house. **11 Now a famine** and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. **12** But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. **13** And the second *time* **Joseph was made known to his brothers**, and Joseph’s family became known to the Pharaoh. **14** Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to *him*, **seventy-five people**.

Here Stephen highlights the major events in the story of Joseph

- Sold for envy
- Delivered by God
- Given favor with men
- Became a ruler
- And in adverse times delivered the people of God from certain death

Joseph is mentioned

- 128 times in Genesis
- 192 times in Bible
- 8 times in the NT

Joseph is clearly a central figure in the Bible narrative.

He receives more ink than any other character in the book of Genesis.

With the exception of an interlude in chapter 38 the remaining 14 chapters of Genesis tell his story.

He is a key figure not only because his story is a fascinating picture of a man who triumphs over great difficulty but also because he was used to rescue the children of God from certain death.

In his story we will see

- A man enduring victoriously in the midst of hardship
- An example of faithfulness
- A picture of the sovereign hand of God
- A powerful example of forgiveness
- How the work of salvation is the ultimate goal of God

The writer of Hebrews sums up the life of Joseph this way:

**Hebrews 11:22**

By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.

Two things interest me regarding the reference to Joseph in Hebrews

1. He is the only one of the 12 sons of Jacob who is mentioned

Clearly the difficulties he faced allowed for him to become a man of God with a story to tell

2. Of all the events that transpired the writer of Hebrews chose to emphasize the fact that Joseph trusted in the promises of God regardless of what present circumstances might have said.

## I. Genesis 37 – Joseph and his family

In chapter 37, Moses introduces us to Joseph and his brothers and develops the conflict that will lead to the drama that becomes the life of Joseph and the story of Genesis

In our introduction to Joseph we find that he is carrying for the family flocks along with his brothers. When he returned he gave a bad report regarding the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah or Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher

Genesis 35:25-26

the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant, were **Dan and Naphtali**; and the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maidservant, were **Gad and Asher**. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Padan Aram.

### **Genesis 37:2**

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.**

It is probable that this report was not simply Joseph "**tattling**" on his brothers but rather that he was in a position of oversight given to him by his father.

Some have suggested that the coat was more than a stylish jacket but would have been given along with a position of authority. It was not uncommon in ancient cultures, nor is it today for those who are in roles of management to wear different attire than those under them.

As his story unfolds it is clear that Joseph was abundantly gifted to both manage and rule.

This early scene in Joseph's story sets the stage for what will transpire later. We see that his brothers hated him and this hatred was **stirred by at least three things**

### **First,**

Joseph was in a position of authority over them

As the coat and the text seem to imply, Joseph ruled over his brothers. This created an animosity and even an envious attitude among his siblings

### **SECOND,**

Perhaps most impactful was that his father loved him more than he loved his siblings and that love was abundantly clear to everyone.

Genesis 37:3-4

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. 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.

This created a very unhealthy family dynamic

### **THIRD,**

Joseph shared things he probably should have kept to himself

Genesis 37:5-11 records that Joseph told his family of **two dreams** he had both of which exalt him above his brothers and even his parents. *While time will prove these dreams to be valid sharing them seems to have incited envy in his brothers and that envy led to grievous sin*

James explains how sin works and this is a vivid example

#### **James 1:13-15**

**13** Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. **14** But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. **15** Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

#### **AFTER SETTING THE STAGE THE SCENE SHIFTS AND THE DRAMA BEGINS TO UNFOLD**

Beginning at Genesis 37:12 we read that the 10 brothers of Joseph took the family flocks to Shechem for grazing and that Joseph was sent after them to check up on the labors.

#### **Genesis 37:12-14**

**12** 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.

Upon arriving at Shechem, Joseph was told that his brothers had traveled north toward Dothan and he began to pursue them.

As his brothers saw him approaching their envy gave birth to heinous sin

Genesis 37:19-20

Then they said to one another, “Look, this dreamer is coming! 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!**”

At this point an interesting twist takes place; **Reuben** the oldest son of Jacob attempts to rescue his youngest brother. He convinces his brothers to throw Joseph in a pit while he plots his escape. Meanwhile Judah suggests it would be foolish to kill Joseph while they could sell him off and make a profit

Genesis 37:28

Then Midianite traders passed by; so the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

It is interesting that later under the Mosaic Law the valuation of a slave was put at 30 shekels of silver. This meant that Joseph was sold for less than a common slave or prisoner of war.

**Exodus 21:32**

If the ox gores a male or female servant, he shall give to their master **thirty shekels of silver**, and the ox shall be stoned.

**When Reuben returned** to release his brother he found that he was gone and no doubt learned of their decision to sell him as a slave.

Reuben then went along with the other 9 in **covering up their crime**. They took a goat, (presumably from their fathers flock), killed it and covered Joseph's garment in its blood. Then they made the trip back home and presented the bloodstained garment of their brother to Jacob

who came to his own conclusion that a wild beast must have killed his youngest son.

It is frightening to think of the guilt that must have consumed Jacob for allowing his son to travel alone in search of his brothers. His mind must have been filled with countless "**what ifs**" as he grieved the loss of his son

As this chapter comes to a close we read

## **First**

The grief Jacob endured was so great he refused comfort

**Genesis 37:35**New King James Version (NKJV)

**35** And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but **he refused to be comforted**, and he said, "For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning." Thus his father wept for him.

Dealing with the death of a loved one is perhaps the most difficult part of life. Since God created us for life and it was sin that brought death into the world we were never really designed to handle death and the emotions that arise seem like more than we can bear

While death is difficult, the sorrow it brings is deep, and a season of mourning is expected *there is something unnatural about Jacob refusing comfort*. He should have been comforted by at least three truths.

## **First**

Paul declared that we, the believers, do not sorrow as those who have no hope.

Jacob should have been comforted in knowing that while life on earth ended too soon for his son Joseph, eternity was awaiting him. David in a similar situation received comfort knowing that while on earth he would not see his son again they would be reunited in eternity.

## **Second**

While the sorrow of death is great God himself promises to be our

comforter.

Paul spoke of *the God of all comfort who comforts us in all of our tribulations*. He speaks of a comfort that is so great that it is able to not only to strengthen us but also give us what we need to aid others who are facing similar difficulties. Jesus added that the role of the Holy Spirit would be to comfort the believer, even calling Him "*The Comforter*." When Paul said we do not sorrow as those who have no hope, it is partly due to the fact that we have the hope of being comforted by God.

### Third

It was wrong for Jacob to refuse comfort because he could not see the overall plan of God.

His case is unique in that his son was not actually dead, **but it serves to illustrate the truth that God is the author of a much bigger plan than what we can see or comprehend**. While Jacob wept the loss of his son, God was raising Joseph to a place of prominence within Egypt in order to save a nation. What seemed to be a loss for Jacob would prove to be the way of salvation for his family. At the end of the story we read,

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."

## Second

### The fate of Joseph

Genesis 37:36

Now the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guard.

This is the first in a series of events that will ultimately reveal the providence of God

What is providence?

## *The care and guidance of God over the creatures of the earth*

Easton's Bible dictionary adds this important element of providence:

“Generally used to denote God’s preserving and governing all things by the means of second causes...”

**In other words, God sovereignly moves natural things in order to work out his supernatural purposes.**

This is clearly seen in the life of Joseph. He has a dream where he sees his brothers and his parents bowing down before his authority. As the youngest son in a patriarchal society that would be next to impossible. However God begins to orchestrate events that will all lead toward his plan. In the story of Joseph we do not read of seas parting, walls falling, or giants being defeated. Instead we read of God moving in the hearts and minds of people in order to get His purposes worked out in Joseph’s life. God will use:

- Difficult Family Dynamics
- Tragedy
- Difficult work place environment (Common to refer to this today as a toxic work environment)
- Dreams
- Natural disaster
- Economic collapse

All this will clearly reveal the providence of God to accomplish His purposes in Joseph and “**To save many people alive.**”

## II. Chapter 38 – An interlude in the story

It seems that the narrative regarding Joseph’s story is interrupted by the events of chapter 38. We leave Joseph sold into slavery and return to follow the story of only 1 of his 10 brothers. Rather than seeing it as “Out of place” I think Moses placed it here purposefully for at least two reasons



## First

It is part of the purpose he introduced in 37:1

Genesis 37:1-2

Now Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. **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.

## Second

It gives insight into the life of Judah who thought his life would be better if he got Joseph out of the picture. We find that the real problem with Judah was not Joseph but Judah himself

Genesis 38:1-2

It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. **2** And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and went in to her

With all the emphasis Genesis puts upon the patriarchs marrying well, Judah seems to give no regard for those things. His decision regarding a spouse sounds a little like that of Samson

Judges 14:1-2

Now Samson went down to Timnah, and **saw a woman in Timnah** of the daughters of the Philistines. So he went up and told his father and mother, saying, "I have seen a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, **get her for me as a wife.**"

The text explains that Judah and his wife have three sons. The eldest marries a woman named **Tamar** but dies because of his wickedness. In accordance with the custom of the day the next son was to raise children for his brother. But the second son also dies because of his wickedness. This leaves only Judah's youngest son Shelah as a possible husband for Tamar. However, instead of

fulfilling his duty, Judah neglects Tamar and she conceives a dastardly plan against him

Pretending to be a harlot. Tamar seduces Judah to lie with her. In return she is given a signet ring and a promise of future payment, but when Judah returns to **pay his debt, the woman gone. His actions would have gone unnoticed by all had Tamar not become pregnant.** When she begins "to show", Judah in self-righteousness wants to have her killed. It is only after the truth is revealed that Judah changes his attitude toward Tamar.

**This seems to be a classic example of our sin looking worse on others**

We do not read of Judah's reaction to his own sin although it is highly likely that he was ashamed and at least somewhat remorseful. However when he got word that Tamar was pregnant he was furious and wanted her to receive the harshest judgment the law would allow.

It seems to me that this is an all too common reaction towards sin. **We take the harshest stand we can against the sin of others and expect the fullest extent of mercy for ourselves.** It might do us well to consider what Jesus said regarding our sin and that of others.

Matthew 7:5

**"Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."**

Jesus declared that while we should not ignore sins committed by others we must take time to look inward **before we go on a campaign their sin. One of the tragedies of the church is when we have people rallying for causes while neglecting their own walk with God.** Paul gave this simple and yet very helpful instruction for dealing with the faults in others;

Galatians 6:1

**"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."**

**Clearly the problems in Judah's life had nothing to do with Joseph**

This passage also implies that **guilt plagued Judah and his brothers** and **perhaps played a role** in his and his families ungodly behavior; 20 years later the 10 brothers of Joseph were over heard saying:

Genesis 42:21

Then they said to one another, **“We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us.”**

**Guilt is powerful and even crippling emotion.**

According to Psychology today

“Its purpose is to let us know when we’ve done something wrong, to help us develop a better sense of our behavior and how it affects ourselves and others. It prompts us to re-examine our behavior so that we don’t end up making the same mistake twice.”

In the same article where guilt is defined the author goes on to suggest ways to “Get rid of guilt”

Some of the things listed are:

- Ignore unhealthy guilt
- Make changes in your behavior
- Accept that you cannot do anything about it and move on
- Use guilt as a teaching time and learn from them

Other common methods for dealing with guilt include:

- Reducing the our standards so that what we did that made us feel guilty we try to pass on as acceptable behavior thereby searing our conscience that was designed to promote healthy living
- Destructive behavior – this is a very common method for dealing with guilt and shows itself especially in the unhealthy use of alcohol and drugs
- Religious practices – in the movie “Mission” the character played by Robert Dinero committed a crime that plagued him with guilt. To compensate for it he began to work for the mission. One priest observing his diligent service said to the priest in

charge, “Don’t you think he has done enough?” to which the priest replied, “It does not matter what I think” implying that religious actions are necessary until we feel as though we have done enough penance to make it go away.

While these suggestions may be helpful in dealing with guilty feelings, Guilt itself cannot be removed with time, or changed behavior. **Guilt is only removed at the cross and through repentance**

### **Acts 3:19**

**19 Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord,**

If you are being plagued by a guilty past, it has no doubt impacted the way you are behaving in the present. The secret to freedom is going to the cross, confessing your sin and allowing the blood of Jesus to wash you and set you free.

I final thought from chapter 38

Tamar is mentioned one other time in Scripture it what may seem like a very unlikely place.

### **Matthew 1:3**

**3 Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez begot Hezron, and Hezron begot Ram.**

Tamar is listed in the genealogy of Christ