

## **The Hidden Hand of God that Fulfills His Plan**

### **Genesis 37**

We've entered the last section of the book of Genesis. Verse 2 says **[v2a]**. Genesis is structured according to "generations," which refers to the life account of key characters. We had the generations of Adam, Noah, then Abraham, then Isaac, and now Jacob.

When a new person's "generation" is signaled, it means we're gonna hear about his kids, and in this case, the "generations" of Jacob is mainly about his son Joseph. And the theme of his life is Genesis 50:20. You may know.

After going through A LOT hardship started by the wickedness of his older brothers, Joseph says to them when they plead for forgiveness: Gen. 50:20, "You meant evil against me, God meant IT (your evil) for good." That's the point of the rest of Genesis...which means, every sermon from here on is gonna be about that!

But that's ok because we can never hear too often the truth that God works all things in your life together for your good—even the *bad* things...even the *confusing* things...even the things that you say, “There's no way good can from this!” By the end of the story of Genesis, you won't be able to say that.

The different hardships of Joseph's story show that God works it all for the good of his people. In Gen. 37, the hardship is familial. His older brothers do not like him. They're envious/murderous. And Joseph's dad (Jacob) shows favoritism that provokes their envy.

So the message of Genesis 37 is this: *God works out his plan to bless all peoples even through the wicked plotting of people.* Don't forget the promise God made to Abraham—through his offspring *all the families* of the earth will be blessed. By the time we get to the end of Genesis, we get a taste of that. Joseph rises to power in Egypt and he saves all the peoples of the earth from dying from a famine!

In this opening chapter, the scenes shift by location, and in each location, something happens to show how God sovereignly works through a messed-up family to bless all families of the earth. It begins in Hebron, moves 50 miles north to Shechem, then another 20 miles north to Dothan, and then the scene shifts back to Hebron, and finally we get a big whiplash that takes us 300 miles south to Egypt. And that's where the chapter closes—Joseph, seemingly hopeless in Egypt.

I'm gonna title each scene in a way that captures the WAY in which God works out to accomplish his plan. Let's take each way/instrument/means in each scene/location shows the unfolding of God's plan.

**Instrument #1: Hateful Jealousy [v2b]** It's important to remember Joseph's age (17) because, by the time we get to the end of the story, we realize how long his hardships lasted. He's assisting his older half-brothers—Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher—who have different moms than him (Bilhah and Zilpah). Joseph's mom (Rachel) already died.

And when he comes home, it says he brings a “bad report” about his brothers to their dad. This is probably an indication of Joseph’s youthfulness at this point in his life. The word “bad report” seems to carry the idea of embellishment. He’s kind of snitching on them, maybe even fabricating stories. WHY?

**[v3]** To say he’s the son of his old age means that he’s the son Jacob had waited and waited to be born to his favorite wife Rachel. So Joseph kind of milks his “favored son” status by bringing bad reports to his dad about his brothers AND he wears around a coat his dad gave him showing he’s the favored child.

What is this “coat of many colors”? The only other place in the Bible where this phrase occurs is in reference to a royal garment (2 Sam. 13:18). So Jacob is treating Joseph like royalty. He seemed to think that the promise of blessing to all peoples of the earth is gonna come through Joseph’s line. Is that true?

In one sense, the promise of blessing all peoples of the earth WILL come through Joseph *at the end of Genesis*. BUT the ultimate promise of blessing of a King who would rule the world would not come through Joseph's line, it would come through Judah's line. Which is very surprising based on what we'll find out about Judah in ch38!

Still Jacob treats Joseph like royalty and treats his other sons like servants. How do you think that makes them feel? **[v4]** That word "hate" is used 3 times in this first scene, and it changes to the word "jealous" at the end of the scene. That's what this scene is about: the *hateful jealousy* of Joseph's brothers towards him.

They couldn't even "speak peacefully to him." A literal translation is, "They could not speak *shalom* to him." *Shalom* is the word for "peace," and it was just a normal greeting in that day. It's like saying, "Hi! How are you?" You'd greet a person by saying, "Shalom." The brothers hated Joseph so much they couldn't even give him a basic greeting.

Now, the hatred intensifies after they hear about the dreams Joseph had. **[v5]** Again, this is probably youthful foolishness on Joseph's part. It's not difficult to discern the point. And telling his brothers about it is only going to add fuel to the fire. **[vv6-7]** In the ANE, people put a lot of weight into dreams, and that was one way the Lord *sometimes* spoke to individuals. (But we have to be careful not to think it's the normal way for God to speak.)

So, naturally, his brothers are ticked. **[v8]** They're mad that he even had the audacity to tell them about his dream. And then, he has the audacity to tell them about a *second* dream! **[v9]** Now this time, he told not just his brothers, but his dad too. **[v10]** Jacob knew what it meant and he thought it was silly, but he didn't get hatefully angry like Joseph's brothers. **[v11]** Like, could it be true?

Now, let's see how the hateful jealousy of Joseph's brothers unfolds, as Joseph, in obedience to his dad, checks on them again. This takes us to the second scene and...

## **Instrument #2: Faithful Obedience**

This is scene in Shechem highlights Joseph's obedience to his dad in contrast the evil of his brothers. **[vv12-14]** Joseph is just obeying his dad. Even the "bad report" he brought before, though perhaps embellished, was still probably a way of doing what his dad told him to do. So if his brothers are gonna be mad at anyone, they should be mad at their dad! But they take out their anger on the favored one.

So Joseph heads to Shechem, the place where Jacob's daughter Dinah was defiled, and where Jacob's sons, Levi and Simeon, slaughtered the men of the city. It makes you wonder why Jacob would be fine with sending his 17-yr-old son back there!

He does, and thankfully he "happens" to run into a guy who can help him. **[vv15-17]** Note this: A random dude "just so happened" to see Joseph wandering and is like, "He looks lost." So he asks him if he needs help. Joseph asks about his brothers, and this man "just so happened" to overhear them say they went to Dothan. It's all coincidence, right?

Dothan is 20miles north of Shechem, and Shechem is at least 50miles north of Hebron, so this wasn't just a little stroll in the park. *Like, I'll tell one of kids, "Go run across the street to make sure your brothers are good playing in the field."* Joseph travelled over 70miles, likely by foot. That's a long journey!

*Think: Austin to San Antonio, which takes an hour and a half to drive. To prep for this sermon, I clicked the "walking man" icon on maps on my phone and it said it would take one day and 16 hours to walk from here to SA.*

That's commitment on Joseph's part. He's a faithful son who obeys his dad. So he heads to Dothan, which, *unlike Shechem*, is on a major caravan route to Egypt. Which takes us to...

### **Instrument #3: Wicked Plotting**

Look what happens when he reaches his brothers. **[vv18-20]** This is wicked plotting. It's premeditated murder. Joseph's off a distance, and they start making plans to kill him. WHY? Sure, he's a little annoying! He talks a lot. He



wears around his fancy coat showing how much more his dad loves *him* than *them*.

(In fact, he wore that coat on this long journey. We know that because they strip him of it in a second. A coat like that was worn at like a fancy party, not to travel 70 miles by foot.) So maybe he's milking his father's favoritism a bit! But why would that incite hatred jealousy in his brothers to such a degree that they plot to murder him? Seems excessive.

But there's more going on here than just normal family dynamics—an annoying little brother and angry older brothers. They're so angry because Joseph's favoritism reveals he's gonna get the all the inheritance from their father! And therefore, killing him will prevent that AND it will kill the fulfillment of his dreams. How could they bow down to him if he's dead?

Here's the irony: their attempt to prevent his dreams *from coming* to fruition actually serves as a means/instrument by which his dreams *come* to fruition. Look what happens.

**[vv21-22]**. Reuben's conscience started bothering him. So he tells them not to kill Joseph by "shedding blood."

That language alludes to Gen. 9:6 that says, "Whoever *sheds the blood* of man, by man shall his blood be shed." Rueben knows his brothers were familiar with that principle, so he appeals to their self-interest of not wanting to risk the threat of punishment from God for shedding Joseph's blood. So he says, "Throw him into a pit instead."

This pit was like large cisterns that held water. So it seems Rueben is saying: "Don't *take his life by shedding his blood*, rather throw him into the pit and let him drown." Of course, Rueben intended to come back and rescue him out of that pit later.

Jospeh's brothers listen. **[vv23-24]** Hmmm... This particular pit "happened" to be dry, something the brothers surely didn't check to see first. They just threw him in, probably wanting him to drown so they could avoid the crime of "shedding blood," which is an overly literalistic interpretation of that verse, which

ironically causes them to disobey that verse!  
(It's still wrong to kill an innocent person even if you don't literally shed their blood!)  
Catch this: If Reuben's conscience had not bothered him (which is surprising because he's the son who committed adultery with one of his father's concubines!)...If he had not intervened AND if the pit had not been dry, Joseph would be dead, and so would his dreams...and so would God's plan. BUT God's plan cannot die. It is as sure as HE is alive!

Notice how his plan keeps unfolding through the wicked plotting of Joseph's brothers.

**[v25a]** Make note of that: They just tried to kill their little brother, and they're like, "Time for a lunch break!" So nonchalant about their evil.

**[v25b]** That phrase "looking up" is the author's subtle way of showing God's hand behind this. They're just eating their food, and they look up, and behold, a caravan of traders from Gilead approaches.

Gilead to Dothan was about 70miles. A day and half's journey. And this caravan "just so

happens” to pass at the exact time the brothers sat down for lunch right after they through Joseph a pit. Coincidence? No. And it’s a bunch of Ishmaelites in the caravan. Remember, Ishmael was Abraham’s older son. So it’s ironic all those who partake of this evil towards Joseph are descendants of Abraham, Joseph’s great-great grandfather.

These traders are carrying “gum, balm, and myrrh,” the same gifts that Joseph’s brothers will offer appease him in ch43 when he is a powerful ruler in Egypt. (But I’m getting ahead in the story!) **[vv26-27]** The word “brother” is used 21 times in this chapter, highlighting how fractured their brotherhood really is.

Judah, in his greed, decides it’s better to make some money off putting an end to Joseph’s dreams. **[v28]** He’s still alive, and he’s alive because Judah was greedy!

But Judah thinks that selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt means there’s NO WAY his dreams could come true! It’s impossible!

Well, get used to the impossible becoming possible in the story of Joseph.

#### **Instrument #4: Overt Deception [vv29-30]**

Rueben was apparently off on an errand and wasn't part of the wicked plotting to sell Joseph as a slave to Egypt. So when he tries to carry out his plan to rescue Joseph but doesn't see him, he cries to his brothers, "What happened??" They tell him, but it seems he joins in on their new plan. **[vv31-32]**

Note the irony! About 25 years earlier, JACOB used a goat to deceive HIS dad (Isaac)! He put on goat fur to pretend to be his brother Esau to steal Esau's blessing from dad. Oh, how the tables have turned! Now Jacob is deceived by his sons with a goat. **[vv33-35]** It looks to Jacob like a totally hopeless situation. But little does he know, Joseph is still alive! Where is he? This takes us to...

#### **Instrument #5: Apparent Hopelessness**

**[v36]** It looks totally hopeless for Joseph. How in the world could he possibly get to a position of power where his older brothers

bow down to him? He's a slave, 300 miles away from them in Egypt! The fulfillment of Joseph's dreams is impossible!...RIGHT? God is the God of making possible the impossible! The *means* through which Joseph becomes the 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful man in the world (that's the end of the story)...was...

- His father's favoritism and a special coat.
- His naïve youthfulness and sharing about dream...twice.
- His brother's intensified hateful jealousy.
- His obedience to travel 70miles, still wearing that coat of favoritism.
- A random dude who just so happened to run into Joseph in the middle of nowhere and just so happened to overhear where his brothers said they were going next.
- His brothers malicious attempt to kill him.
- Rueben's sensitive conscience to stop his death.
- A pit that "happened" to be dry that day.
- A caravan that "happened" to pass at the "right" time.
- Judah's greed to make a few bucks.

The way God fulfills his plan to bless all peoples of the earth through Joseph...is through countless seemingly insignificant details over which God is ultimately in control. God *intended* to get Joseph to Egypt, and Joseph “just so happens” (as it says in v36) to be sold to Potiphar, and officer of Pharaoh. As we’ll see, if he didn’t land in Potiphar’s house, God’s plan would’ve failed. But it didn’t, because every detail leading up to the fulfillment of God’s plan IS part of God’s plan!

## **Conclusion**

Now...Did you notice how many times is God mentioned in Gen. 37?...Zero. Not once. BUT his *hidden hand* is all over the place. None of it is coincidental! None of it is by accident!

Not even one of the most seemingly minor parts of your life, even down to the smallest detail, is an accident! If you are a child of God, *all of it* is designed by God for your good... *including* all the ways people mistreated you.

You gotta get that. If you don’t have a category for the absolute sovereignty of God over

people's sin against you, then you won't be comforted in his ability to bring good out of it. How could he powerfully bring good if he wasn't powerful enough to prevent it? Think of how Gen. 37 affected the original readers—the Israelites who had just come out of *slavery in Egypt* for 400 years. The story of Joseph is *their* story because it tells them, NOT ONLY how they ended up in Egypt in the first place (at the end, all of Joseph's family come to live in Egypt)...But it also reminds them that all of it was part of his sovereign plan to work good for his people.

All of it! Every single detail. It wasn't an accident that Joseph ended up in Egypt. It wasn't an accident that the people of Israel lived there for 400 years. All of it was powerfully orchestrated by the hidden hand of God so that he could later put his power on *full display* when he rescued them from Egypt, which then strengthened their faith for their future—retaking the promised land.

The story of Joseph is Israel's story...and the story of Joseph is yours. Think back on your



life, even the all the hardships...all the ways people mistreated you. None of you wouldn't be a Christian today, had you not gone through what you went through.

The Lord used the divorce of my parents to bring me to himself. And he used that same hardship to make me wanna be a pastor.

God is sovereign even over the sinful hearts and actions of men. That's essential to fully getting the *gospel*! When men plotted to kill Jesus...when they bound him in chains, mocked him, scorned him, spat in his face, whipped him, shredded his back, and nailed him to a cross...were they in sin? You bet they were! But was God in control? You bet he was!

Man meant evil against Jesus, but God meant it for our everlasting good. **[Gospel]**

Ehen you're feeling hopeless...when you think, "There can't be any good that could come from this!" You know that's not true! Look at Christ who endured the worst evil imaginable, and it was part of God's plan to bring about the greatest good imaginable!

*God works out his plan to bless ALL peoples  
even through the wickedness OF his people.*  
Believe that, and face your future with hope.