

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 21: Joseph's Dreams and Betrayal -- Genesis 37:1-36

The story of Joseph is the longest single narrative in Genesis, and it begins, like so much of this family's history, with a father who loves one child more than the rest. Jacob, who grew up watching his own parents play favorites, repeats the very pattern that wounded him. He loves Joseph, the son of his beloved Rachel, more than all the others, and he makes it visible with a beautiful coat, a walking advertisement of preference. And his other sons see it every day, and the text says plainly, "they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him." Favoritism is a fire, and Jacob keeps feeding it.

Then come the dreams. Joseph dreams that his brothers' sheaves bow to his, and then that the sun and moon and eleven stars bow down to him. Whatever wisdom there might have been in keeping such dreams to himself, the seventeen-year-old tells them, and the family's resentment boils over. Even his father rebukes him. But notice: the dreams are true. God is genuinely showing, however dimly, a future in which Joseph will be exalted and his family will depend on him. God has a plan, though no one in that tent could begin to guess the dark and winding road it will travel.

And the road turns dark fast. Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers, and Joseph goes, obediently, looking for them across the countryside. But when they see him coming, that small figure in the famous coat, the envy that has simmered for years erupts. "Here comes this dreamer," they sneer. "Come, let us kill him." Reuben talks them out of murder; Judah suggests profit instead. And so they strip him of his coat, throw him in a pit, sit down to eat lunch while he pleads, and then sell their own brother to a passing caravan of slave traders for twenty pieces of silver. They dip the coat in goat's blood and let their father believe a wild animal has devoured his favorite son.

The chapter ends in two places at once: an old man refusing to be comforted, tearing his clothes over a son he thinks is dead, and a teenage boy in chains, carried down to Egypt, sold into a stranger's house. It looks like the end of the dreams. It looks like nothing but cruelty and loss. And it is, on the surface. But hidden inside this disaster, invisible to everyone in the story, the hand of God is already at work. The betrayal that looks like the death of God's promise is in fact the first step of God's plan to save the very brothers who sold him. Read this passage and remember it the next time your life seems to be falling apart: God is often most at work in the moments when we can least see Him.

Group Discussion: The brothers' envy of Joseph grew from resentment to hatred to a plot to kill him (37:4, 18-20). How does envy escalate when it is left unchecked, and where do you see the destructive power of envy and jealousy in families, churches, or your own heart?

Personal Reflection: Joseph was betrayed by the very people who should have loved and protected him, his own brothers. Have you ever been wounded or betrayed by someone close to you? How did you respond, and how might God want to meet you in that hurt?

Read Genesis 37:1–36

Study Questions

1. Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons and showed it openly with the special coat, and his brothers “hated him” for it (37:3–4). What does this teach us, once again, about the destructive fruit of favoritism and partiality in a family?
2. Where might favoritism, partiality, or comparison be at work in your own family or relationships? How does being treated as a favorite, or as the overlooked one, shape a person, and how can we guard against this?
3. God gave Joseph dreams that truly revealed his future exaltation, though Joseph seems to have shared them without much wisdom (37:5–11). What does this teach us about God’s sovereign purposes, and about handling God’s gifts, callings, or revelations with humility?
4. When God gives you a gift, an ability, a calling, or a sense of His purpose for your life, how do you carry it? What is the difference between confidence in God’s purpose and prideful self-importance?
5. The brothers’ envy escalated until they said, “Come now, let us kill him” (37:20). What does this reveal about how serious envy and jealousy are, and how they can lead to terrible sins (compare James 3:16; 4:1–2)?
6. Where is envy, jealousy, or resentment taking root in your heart right now? What is it you resent that someone else has, and how can you root it out before it grows?
7. Joseph was betrayed while obediently doing his father’s will, suffering wrongfully at the hands of his own family, a foreshadowing of Christ, the beloved Son rejected and sold by His own (37:12–28; compare Acts 7:9). What does this teach us about the suffering of the righteous, and about following Christ’s example when we suffer unjustly (1 Peter 2:19–23)?
8. How do you tend to respond when you are wronged or betrayed, especially by those close to you? What would it look like to entrust yourself to God, as Joseph and ultimately Christ did, rather than to bitterness or revenge?
9. To everyone in the story, the betrayal and slavery looked like nothing but disaster and the death of Joseph’s dreams, yet it was secretly the first step in God’s plan to save many lives (later revealed in Genesis 50:20). What does this teach us about the hidden hand of God’s providence, and about trusting Him when we cannot see His purpose?
10. Look back over the whole chapter. Name one specific way God is calling you to guard against envy and favoritism, to respond to betrayal in faith, and to trust His hidden providence even when life seems to be falling apart.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 50:20, what the brothers meant for evil, God meant for good; Romans 8:28, God working all things together for good for those who love Him; 1 Peter 2:19–23, suffering unjustly while entrusting ourselves to God, following Christ; James 3:16, where jealousy exists, there is disorder and every vile practice; Acts 7:9–10, the patriarchs selling Joseph, but God was with him.