

“Providence in the Midst of Evil”
Genesis 37
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READ Genesis 37

What an almost unbelievably dysfunctional family!

Jacob was a fool,
Joseph was a jerk,
And his brothers were worse.

Favoritism, envy, arrogance, hatred, deceit, murder – shall I go on?
Two of the brothers had slaughtered all the men of an entire town and the other brothers joined in plundering the dead.
One of the brothers, Reuben, slept with one of his father’s concubines.

And another brother, Judah, we will see next week is of less than sterling character.

This is a quite a group to be the foundation of the chosen people of God!

When I look at the beginning of chapter 37 where it says, “Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan”, and I look at the beginning of chapter 39 where it says, “Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt”, I think I would have left out all of the rest of chapter 37 and 38 if I were telling the story.

Why does Moses need to air all this family’s dirty linen?

I believe he does it for his own contemporaries and the Holy Spirit of God does it for us.

The whole book of Genesis and maybe especially these final 12 chapters emphasize over and over again the Providence of God.

Providence – the superintending work of God in all things and particularly in our lives to bring about his gracious purposes.

Later chapters will show the providence of God even through the great adversity that Joseph faces during temptation, injustice and being long forgotten in prison.

But in this chapter we see the providence of God even in the midst of the failings and sinfulness of God's own people.

Walter Brueggemann wrote: "The theme of the Joseph narrative concerns God's hidden and decisive power which works in and through but also against human forms of power. A 'soft' word for that reality is providence. A harder word for the same reality is 'predestination'. Either way God is working out his purpose through and in spite of Egypt, through and in spite of Joseph and his brothers." (in Wenham 358)

I. How many people live life assuming that God will never use them in any way that is important for the kingdom of God?

How many assume that since they have made so many bad choices in life there is no way that God can use them?

How many look at the hard luck they've had in life – lousy family, poor schools, unfair bosses, sicknesses and accidents – and think the very best they can hope for is to somehow cope with life until the end?

Chapter 37 says that no matter how shady the past and no matter how difficult the present, God is not done!

For the importance of this story to be understood and for it to have the greatest impact, we have to know what came before and what follows this story.

Moses' readers certainly would have known both – these stories were passed down orally from generation to generation, they were the stories of the family.

What is important to remember **before** this story is that God had promised Abraham, and his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob that God was going to bless them and make them into a great nation which would in turn bless the whole world.

This promise was the reason for this family's existence, it gave them their purpose in life, it held before them a great future.

What is important to remember **after** our story in Genesis 37 is that, 430 years later in the time of Moses, who wrote this book, this family had grown to over a million people and was returning to the Promised Land – the land promised to Abraham’s family, so many years before.

In between the time of this great promise (to one man and his barren wife) and this great nation re-entering the promised land are many, many years of great reason to doubt it would ever happen.

Even in the book of Genesis, for 25 chapters (from Chapter 12 to this present chapter) through three generations of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob we have watched as God’s plan for the world is apparently derailed by the foolish sin of his chosen people.

But we have also time and time again seen God resurrect his plan from the ashes of his peoples’ failings.

From the barrenness of Sarah, to the foolish faithlessness of Abraham and Sarah in gaining a son through Hagar, through both Abraham and Isaac attempting to palm off their wives as sisters,

to the fratricidal relationship of Jacob and Esau, and the near miss with the slaughter of the Shechemites,

we have watched this family time and time again nearly self-destruct.

It seems they keep trying to fail.

Finally chapter 37 verse 1 tells us Jacob is back in the land of promise and he has his large family of sons to further the promise of God to his grandfather Abraham and father Isaac.

Everything’s back on track – now we can see this promise for the future unfold. Right? Wrong!

This family continues to fail – it seems they insist on “blowing” the whole thing.

How can God use people like this?

People like us?

A. Let’s look first at Jacob.

(1). God had clearly been working on Jacob and growing him, but some habits die hard.

Genesis 37:3 “Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him.”

Favoritism by parents is a killer, almost literally in Jacob’s case.

But this was Jacob’s pattern.

He had loved Rachel more than Leah and undoubtedly his sons knew it well.

The oldest son Reuben had even been involved in trying to curry favor with Jacob for his mother back when they lived in Haran.

That favoritism for Rachel persisted throughout Jacob’s life.

(2). A second evidence of Jacob’s foolishness, is that Jacob also apparently had a poor relationship with his other children.

When Dinah was raped by the Shechemites back in chapter 34 it was her brothers who bothered to do anything about it, not Jacob.

Don’t think that wasn’t noticed by everyone.

And when the brothers did act, Jacob’s only response was self-serving criticism.

(3). And a third evidence of his foolishness is that Jacob even went so far as to give a gift to Joseph that would remind everyone daily how favored Joseph was.

He gave him a special coat.

Nothing in the Hebrew says it was colorful – we get that from the Greek translation of the Hebrew – but that it was special we are told.

It was special because it denoted that Joseph was now the appointed “firstborn”.

The “firstborn” son was the heir to the family wealth and future. Reuben was literally the firstborn and the firstborn son of Leah.

But Joseph was the firstborn of the more greatly loved Rachel.

In I Chronicles 5:1 we are told, “Reuben, the firstborn of Israel (he was the firstborn, but when he defiled his father's marriage bed, his rights as firstborn were given to... Joseph, son of Israel...”

And back in chapter 35 we are told in almost a side note, Genesis 35:22 While Israel (Jacob) was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father's concubine Bilhah, and Israel (Jacob) heard of it.

This special coat would be a constant reminder to the other brothers of Joseph's preferred treatment and from their point of view, his usurping the birthright.

Years of favoritism felt and displayed by Jacob would wreak havoc on this family.

B. What about Joseph's role in all this?

There is nothing in the text to suggest that Joseph was born full grown either physically **or spiritually**.

He is not the perfect child who never does wrong.

I have often heard and read that Joseph is one of those rare individuals in the Bible about whom nothing negative is ever said. I dispute that.

(1). The first thing we learn about Joseph in this chapter is that he brings a “bad report” to his father about his brothers.

Genesis 37:2 “Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers...and he brought their father a bad report about them.”

The “bad report” is an “evil tale” and is always used elsewhere in the OT as a lie about someone or something.

For example: Numbers 14:36-37 “So the men Moses had sent to explore the land, who returned and made the whole community grumble against him by spreading a bad report about it - these men responsible for spreading the bad report about the land were struck down and died of a plague before the LORD.

The evidence would suggest that Joseph not only tattled on his brothers but he made it up or made it worse than it was.

And being the favored child, just like your brother or sister, he would be believed and they (and you) would get in trouble with dad.

But this was apparently no insignificant matter, for these were by now mostly grown men.

(2). Another evidence of Joseph's culpability in all this is the telling of his dreams to his brothers.

From the historical vantage point of Moses' readers and us, we know that these dreams predict a future that does indeed come true.

And so it is impressive, as we will discuss in a minute when we speak of the providence of God.

But what possible good could come from Joseph telling his brothers?

When the brothers reacted to Joseph in verse 8 they indicate they not only take offense at the dream but at his telling it.

And not only does he tell them of one dream but when he has another whose point is the same, namely that the brothers will one day bow to him, Joseph insists on telling it also. Why?

(3). The third evidence of Joseph's immaturity and state of mind is given in a later commentary on the incident.

When Joseph was thrown into the pit, the empty cistern, that hole in the ground out of which it would be impossible to climb without assistance, what did he do?

Like Paul and Silas in prison did he sing?

Like Daniel in the lions' den or his three friends in the fiery furnace did he calmly place his faith in God?

Genesis 42:21 "We saw how distressed he (Joseph) was when he pleaded with us for his life..."

Doesn't sound like a spiritual giant to me!

In fact there is reason to see that, like us, even though Joseph matured over time he doesn't begin there.

To begin with, he is a spoiled, arrogant brat who provokes his brothers unnecessarily and winds up in deep trouble.

BUT God uses it for good not only in Joseph's life but in the life of the whole family.

Madeline L'Engle writes, "The story of Joseph is the journey of a spoiled selfish young man finally becoming, through betrayal, anger, abandonment, unfairness and pain, a full and complex human being." (p15)

But at this point in the story he's hardly faultless.

C. And having spoken of Jacob and Joseph, what can I say of the brothers?

We haven't time to uncover their deceitful, cunning, murderous, callused hearts.

Let me give you one insight into their depraved natures.

No, I don't take you to their plan to kill and then finally sell their brother into slavery – as pitiless as that is.

I take you instead to the scene after which they had implied to their father that a wild animal killed Joseph, and Jacob believed them.

It says in Genesis 37:34 Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him..."

Do you see that last phrase?

Who came to comfort Jacob?

The very sons who sold their brother into slavery and broke their father's heart, cold-heartedly offered their condolences to their father – what indifference, what despicable behavior.

What a family! These are God's chosen people?

These are the people through whom God would bless the world?

Who are you? Jacob, Joseph, or one of the brothers?

Doesn't it sound like us?

Failing over and over again until we doubt we can ever be used of God?

But is that all Moses wants us to see – a bunch of people who fail over and over again just as we do?

Absolutely not!

The failures and sins of Jacob, Joseph and the rest of the family form the perfect foil for the providential work of God.

It is against the backdrop of this darkness, this utter mess into which they've gotten themselves, that the grace of God shines more brightly in making good come out of all this.

II. Again, Moses readers and **we can see God's hand all over this situation.**

A. We see it first in the dreams.

In spite of how badly Joseph and the brothers behaved with the information, we know that Joseph would indeed come to have the dominant position in the family.

A day would come when the brothers would bow down to Joseph, just as the dreams indicated.

We can almost laugh when we hear the brothers say, "Will this dreamer actually rule over us?" "Will this daddy's pet, little brother, ever amount to anything?"

But while they and maybe even Joseph thought the dreams meant that Joseph would lord it over his brothers, we know the dreams really meant that Joseph would be in a powerful position to serve them and save the family from famine in the years to come when Joseph was second in power in Egypt.

God was working his plan.

B. We see the providence of God secondly in what Joseph could not see but should have known by faith.

While Joseph was distressed and pleading for his life, the book of Acts tells us in Acts 7:9 “Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. **But God was with him.**”

While I will not criticize Joseph faithlessness for fear of criticizing myself, I know from the Bible what Joseph and I should always know – God is in it and God is with us.

C. I see God’s providence again when I see **the man Joseph became** in contrast to the sniveling coward he was when he was thrown into the pit.

It was in facing just this kind of adversity and seeing God miraculously rescue him time and time again, that grew Joseph into the man of courage and integrity that he later became.

His later ability to face adversity was shaped by this experience.

Last weekend I was in Ecuador speaking at a conference of missionaries.

One woman told me of their night of terror when armed drug cartel mercenaries broke into their Columbia home with the stated intention of killing the husband.

They bound the entire family and then put the husband on a bed in full view of the rest of the family and put the gun to his head to shoot him.

At that moment the leader of the invaders walked into the room and demanded that his followers leave immediately.

The gunmen protested claiming their goal of killing the husband yet needed to be done.

The leader however denied them and insisted they leave at once.

They left and the family was unharmed.

As I focused on the fear and anxiety that certainly accompanied such an ordeal, she however quickly moved to the point of her telling me the story.

She said that their high school aged son who was present was so profoundly moved by the providence of God, that he has committed himself to missionary service in the Muslim world – a place of greatest danger for those who would tell of Jesus.

His fearlessness, his faith, was shaped by his experience.

God was in it. And **so he was with Joseph**,
shaping him for the events to come.

D. I see the providence of God in this situation as well by looking at the last verse of the text:

Genesis 37:36 “Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.”

Again from a much later historical perspective we see what God was doing.

To ensure that Jacob’s descendants wouldn’t be assimilated into the culture around them (which they were prone to do),

to ensure that they became a people strong in number and committed to God,

God had to separate them from the culture for a season - 430 years to be exact.

By placing them in Egypt and especially by segregating them as an underclass he ensured their growth and their lack of corruption by the majority.

When they came out of Egypt 430 years later they were a couple of million strong and united as a people serving one God.

When Jacob was considering whether to go to Egypt at Joseph’s invitation God said to him, Genesis 46:3,4 “I am God, the God of your father,” he said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. **I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again.**

God was in it!

Genesis 37 and the rest of the Joseph narrative urge us to see life from a wider perspective than just our immediate circumstances. In fact the Bible urges us to see life, even our lives, in the perspective of hundreds of years of history, even eternity.

You don't judge a life, even your own, based only on what happens this month or this year, nor even on what happens over our lifetime – but we are to think of the impact of our lives in the generations to come.

The results of the Providence of God are not necessarily revealed in the present but may be and usually are most significantly revealed in the years to come.

Hebrews 11:12 After listing so many who lived by faith, the author writes, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.”

I know men and women who have prayed for the salvation of their children for over 70 years and still their children walk away from the Lord. Are their prayers fruitless? Has God failed? Or is the last chapter yet to be written?

2Peter 3:8 “But do not forget this one thing dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”

“God sees time with a **perspective** we lack; even the delay of a thousand years may well seem like a day against the backdrop of eternity. Furthermore God sees time with an **intensity** we lack; one day with the Lord is like a thousand years.” (Michael Green p134 in Tyndale NT Commentary on 2Peter and Jude)

Both aspects are important. We often think of the first but we must also think of the second (“intensity”) and realize that today counts and may in fact be as important as a thousand years.

Maybe you came from a very difficult family.
 Maybe you've made a mess of your life.
 Do the circumstances of your life make it look impossible for God?
 Remember God is still in it.

Jeremiah 32:40-41 “I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them... I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.”

In Luke 15 Jesus tells the story we know as the prodigal son.

In the story the father is clearly a representation of God.

John Piper commenting on this story said “Well-to-do, dignified, aristocratic, aging men don’t run.”

He said they would probably stand and wait or possibly they would walk to meet their returning son but they wouldn’t run.

But God wants us to know that his love for us is so great that he can’t contain himself – he runs.

I am that son and I see the Father running toward me – he is glad with **all his heart and soul** that I am in his family and he delights in doing good for

me. (from Piper The Pleasures of God p196)

God in the midst of it, even in the midst of my evil.