

Genesis 37:2-36 “The Robe”
Psalm 37/102
Luke 2:1-21

November 29, 2009

After hearing about the machinations of Joseph’s brothers,
it is fitting that we sing Psalm 37,
because Psalm 37 reminds us not to fret about evildoers.

Verse 3 says,
“Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

How can we sing that after hearing about Joseph?
He trusted in the LORD and did good – but he was sold into slavery!

But that is why we need to remember the whole message of Psalm 37.
Psalm 37 does not say that the righteous get good things immediately.
Rather, “wait patiently” for the LORD (v7).
The day of judgment for the wicked is coming (v13).
Verse 19 even says of the blameless, “in the days of famine they have abundance.”

So no, maybe now Joseph does not see
that “those blessed by the LORD will inherit the land” (v22),
but he will.
“Wait for the LORD and keep his way, and he will exalt you to inherit the land.” (v34)

And so let us sing the second half of Psalm 37!
Luke 2:1-21

2 These are the generations of Jacob.

We have finally come to book 10 of Genesis –
the final narrative in this book of beginnings.

The story of Jacob featured rocks.
The story of Joseph features robes.
If you look at what Joseph is wearing,
you can probably figure out what is going on!

But while Joseph remains the subject of the narrative,
we do not get to hear much of what he is thinking.
We hear about how his father loves him.
We hear about how his brothers hate him.
We hear of their scheming and plotting –
we even hear that Reuben wanted to rescue him.
But in all this, we never hear what Joseph thinks.

Some people are convinced that Joseph was a self-centered little prig.
Others disagree.

The text simply doesn't tell us!

What the text tells us is that "the many-colored robe" is the means that God uses
to bring salvation to Israel – and to the nations.

The key to the story of Joseph is to follow the robe!

Introduction: Joseph's Robe (37:2-4)

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers.

He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives.

Joseph appears to be something of an apprentice.
He is only perhaps 6 years younger than his oldest brother,
but at 17 he is still learning the ropes from them.

And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.

From what we can gather from the text,
it would appear likely that the bad report was well-deserved.
People often think that Joseph was foolish for bringing this bad report –
"no one likes a tattle-tale!"
But a son must honor his father –
and so we should be slow to judge where the scripture is silent.

*3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons,
because he was the son of his old age.
And he made him a robe of many colors.*

The robe is connected to the bad report.
Joseph may be a boy – an apprentice to his brothers –
but Jacob trusts him more than his brothers.
And from everything else we know about Joseph,
he is easily the most trustworthy of the brothers.
And so Jacob made him a robe of many colors.
The Hebrew word translated "many colors" is an obscure word.
We don't actually know what it means!

But it plainly has some sort of "royal" significance.

Jacob is saying that Joseph is the one who should lead the family.

And so Joseph receives a royal robe – not for the last time!

The word "robe" is used eight times in the chapter.
It is highlighted here at the beginning of the passage,
again in the middle of the passage (v23) when they strip of his robe,

and then in case you weren't sure *which* robe,
"the robe of many colors that he wore."
And then at the end of the passage the word is used five times (v31-33)
as the brothers present the torn and bloodied robe to their father,
and he grieves over "my son's robe."

The robe identifies Joseph as the chosen Son – the beloved Son –
it is the sign of his office and calling as the heir of his father.

As such, the robe is also the object of his brothers' animosity.

*4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers,
they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.*

The word "brother" occurs 21 times in this chapter (3 x 7).

Notice the progression here:

In verse 4 – they hated him,

in verse 5 – they hated him even more

in verse 8 – they hated him even more

1. Hebron: Joseph's Dreams (37:5-11)

But why did they hate him even more?

Because of his dreams.

You need to understand that in the ancient world, dreams were often taken as prophecies.
In Genesis dreams are important for showing God's sovereignty over human affairs.

And especially in the Joseph narrative,

dreams will play a key role:

first in sending Joseph into slavery in Egypt;

second in getting Joseph out of prison;

and third in seating Joseph at Pharaoh's right hand.

The salvation of Jacob – and of Pharaoh –

will come about through the dreams that God sends.

5 Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more.

6 He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed:

7 Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field,

and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright.

And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf."

8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us?

Or are you indeed to rule over us?"

So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Joseph's first dream requires little effort to interpret!

His brothers immediately understand its meaning.

Some think that Joseph should have kept quiet.

After all, no one likes a whistle blower who then goes around telling dreams
about how he is going to rule over his brothers!
Especially while he is wearing a royal robe
that symbolizes his father's desire that he rule the family!

But of course, if Joseph had never told his brothers the dreams
then they would not have hated him sufficiently to sell him into slavery in Egypt –
and so then his brothers would never have bowed to him!

We have to remember that – as hard as it can be sometimes –
we need to avoid psychologizing!
we need to see that God is working all things together for good for those who love him.

And there is something else that you need to see:
all of this is pointing to the one before whom
the shepherds will bow and the angels will sing;
and indeed, the one before whom
every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

To see this more clearly, look at Joseph's second dream.
Everything in these opening chapters of book 10 of Genesis happens in pairs.
Joseph will explain why when he interprets Pharaoh's twin dreams:
"to show that the matter is firmly decided by God and will come quickly" (41:32)

*9 Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said,
"Behold, I have dreamed another dream.
Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."
10 But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him,
"What is this dream that you have dreamed?
Shall I and your mother and your brothers
indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?"
11 And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.*

Rachel is probably already dead,
but dreams do not require his mother to be alive.
The idea of the sun, moon and 11 stars bowing down
is clearly showing Joseph to be the chosen one –
the heir of the promise.

But here even Jacob finds it disturbing that Joseph's dream includes *him* bowing to his son,
but he is not as bothered as the rest of his sons.
After all, unlike his father, Isaac, Jacob's favoritism is now confirmed by divine approbation!
Isaac had favored Esau – but God chose Jacob.
Now Jacob favors Joseph – and God approves!

But Joseph's dreams are interesting for another reason as well.

Unlike all the previous dreams in Genesis,
God does not speak directly in these dreams.

Bruce Waltke points out that there is a progression in Genesis that mirrors that of the whole OT.
In Genesis 1-11 God ordinarily speaks directly (like God spoke to Moses).
In Genesis 12-35 God generally speaks through dreams and visions (like the Prophets).
In Genesis 36-50 God is silent (like in the Writings),
he generally works through providence.

(These are not absolute rules – but general tendencies)

This is a reminder to us that throughout redemptive history God varies the mode of revelation.
When God is about to establish his covenant, he speaks directly.
When God is interpreting his covenant, he often speaks through dreams and visions.
But in other times God works through providence.

To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God speaks in visions.
But while God is plainly with Joseph –
and his dreams and interpretations plainly have divine warrant –
God never speaks directly to Joseph.

2. Shechem: Joseph's Mission (37:12-17)

12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem.

*13 And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem?
Come, I will send you to them."*

And he said to him, "Here I am."

*14 So he said to him, "Go now,
see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word."*

So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

Jacob likely is concerned that Levi and Simeon are back in the vicinity of their dastardly deed,
when they slaughtered the men of Shechem
after the son of Hamor had violated Dinah their sister.

And so he sends Joseph to see how they are doing.
After all, he trusts Joseph.
Joseph (whatever else you might wish to say about him)
has a proven track record for honesty.

15 And a man found him wandering in the fields.

And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?"

16 "I am seeking my brothers," he said.

"Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock."

There is a certain irony here.

If Joseph is not found wandering the fields,
then he would have gone home – in safety.

But instead, h He seeks out his brothers.
(The parallels with Cain and Abel are striking.
Joseph is the opposite of Cain.
He *is* his brother's keeper.
And yet Joseph will nearly end up like Abel...)

17 And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

Once again, the providence of God is highlighted.
A random stranger has overheard the brothers.

And so Joseph continues another 13 miles northwest to Dothan.

Centuries later Elisha will be in Dothan,
and Elisha's servant will fear for his life –
perhaps remembering what had happened to Joseph –
but Elisha will say, "do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them"
(2 Kings 6:14-17).

But here Joseph has no such promise.

3. Dothan: The Brothers' Scheming (37:18-31)

*18 They saw him from afar,
and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him.
19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer.
20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits.
Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him,
and we will see what will become of his dreams."*

Notice that their focus is on his dreaming.
Joseph's dreams are a threat to their future.
But if Joseph is dead, then his dreams cannot harm them any longer!

We are tempted to say that their scheming is futile:
how can they prevent dreams sent by God from coming true?

But of course, *they* do not know that these dreams are from God.
How many dreams come true?
People have dreams all the time!

Certainly everyone in the story is taking these dreams very seriously –
but that's not the same as saying that they understood that this is the will of God.
*21 But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying,
"Let us not take his life."
22 And Reuben said to them,*

*“Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness,
but do not lay a hand on him”
—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father.*

Reuben tries to save Joseph –
and he succeeds at least in preventing Joseph’s death –
but Reuben’s leadership is ineffectual.
“Dumping Joseph’s body in a pit leaves the problem unresolved.” (Waltke, 502)

*23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe,
the robe of many colors that he wore.*

“They stripped him” of his royal robe.
Jacob had clothed Joseph with the office of the firstborn.

In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve had tried to clothe themselves to escape their nakedness.
But their fig leaves could not cover their sin.
And so God had clothed them in animal skins,
showing that only through the death of the sacrifice
could sin and shame be covered.

Joseph comes to his brothers “clothed” with the royal robe of the Seed of Abraham.
But rather than receive him,
instead his brothers “defrock” him!

*24 And they took him and threw him into a pit.
The pit was empty; there was no water in it.*

Cisterns were designed to hold water from the rainy season.
This one, providentially, is dry.

We are told in 42:21 that Joseph pleaded with his brothers not to do this –
but here in chapter 37 we hear nothing from Joseph –
the silence of Joseph facing his captors is echoed in Isaiah 53,
which we sang earlier –
“he was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.”

We will see tonight that
our Lord Jesus will be stripped of his purple robe and will be silent before his captors,
as the guards beat him and take him to his death.

25 Then they sat down to eat.
Why are we told this?

In one sense you could see this as a case of callous indifference –
but the irony is also important:
the next time we hear about the brothers' eating is during a famine,
when they are eating at Joseph's table!

*And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead,
with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt.*

The Ishmaelites are second cousins.
Reuben and his brothers are the grandsons of Isaac.
So even if the Ishmaelites were somewhat more prolific,
there were probably not more than 200 Ishmaelites at this time.

*26 Then Judah said to his brothers,
"What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?
27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites,
and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh."
And his brothers listened to him.*

The contrast here between Reuben and Judah does not favor Judah!
But while Reuben has the right idea (rescue Joseph from his brothers)
he does not have the ability to put his ideas into practice.
Reuben had slept with Bilhah – his father's concubine –
(and by sleeping with his father's wife,
he seems to have been trying to claim his father's place –
as Absalom would later with his father's concubines)
and by that act Reuben had forfeited his place of leadership in the family.

Now Reuben may be trying to regain his father's favor,
but whatever his intent,
his actions are futile.

Judah also does not want Joseph to die,
but there is no hint of rescuing Joseph here.
He urges the brothers to make a profit off of Joseph
and sell him into slavery in Egypt.

Reuben and Judah will also play the lead roles in chapters 42-43
when Reuben will offer his sons as security for Benjamin –
but Jacob will ignore him;
only when Judah offers himself as security
will Jacob listen.

Judah is a leader – his brothers follow his advice –
and his father trusts his judgment.

Reuben gets a sandwich named after him...

*28 Then Midianite traders passed by.
And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit,
and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver.
They took Joseph to Egypt.*

Most English translations remove the redundancy here:

“they drew Joseph up...
and they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites...
and they took Joseph to Egypt.”

The name of Joseph is used three times.
It only needed to be used once.
There is only one singular noun here!

But this threefold repetition of “Joseph” highlights this crucial moment
in the history of Israel – and indeed in the history of humanity!

But in contrast with this threefold repetition of “Joseph”
we are somewhat confused as to whether he was sold to Midianites or Ishmaelites.

It appears that the Midianites and the Ishmaelites intermarried
(Midian was one of the younger sons of Abraham).
Midianite and Ishmaelite appear interchangeably throughout scripture.
But it is precisely as Joseph is named three times
that this ambiguity of Midianite or Ishmaelite emerges.

*29 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit,
he tore his clothes 30 and returned to his brothers and said,
“The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?”*

You hear the pathetic futility in Reuben’s voice.
He tears his clothes – which is a good sign –
but he doesn’t do anything about it!
Reuben mourns the loss of Joseph, but he will not betray his brothers.
(Perhaps now you see the wisdom of Joseph:
he alone of his brothers will speak the truth to his father.
Reuben knows that Joseph has been sold in slavery,
but he will curse his father before he will betray his brothers!)

Pathetic futility is about as good as it gets for Reuben!

31 Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood.

Watch the robe!
Follow the robe!

Now the robe is dipped in the blood of the goat.
Even as Adam and Eve had been clothed with skins –

even as the shedding of blood was necessary for the clothing of sinful man –
so now the blood of the goat corrupts the royal robe to hide the brothers' sin.

But of course, Jacob knows all about being clothed in the skins of another.
He had come to his father dressed in goat skins and Esau's clothes,
he had been dressed in the clothes of another,
in order to receive the blessing.
Now his sons deceive him with goat's blood and Joseph's clothes!

4. Hebron: Jacob's Mourning (37:32-35)

32 *And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said,
"This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not."*
33 *And he identified it and said,
"It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him.
Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces."*
34 *Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins
and mourned for his son many days.*

Even as our passage began with the clothing of Joseph in a royal robe,
and even as the centerpiece of our passage saw the stripping of Joseph,
so now our passage concludes with Jacob tearing his garments,
putting on sackcloth – a rough garment worn in periods of mourning –
all because he identifies his son's robe.

35 *All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him,
but he refused to be comforted and said,
"No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning."
Thus his father wept for him.*

We only know the name of one daughter (Dinah),
but this suggests that Jacob had other daughters as well.

Think of Reuben – who knows that Joseph is alive –
comforting his father!

Think of Judah – who concocted the scheme –
comforting his father!

But Jacob will not be comforted, because his son has gone down to Sheol.
And that was truer than his brothers realized!
Because Joseph went down to Egypt!

Conclusion: Egypt

36 *Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar,
an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.*

This sounds bad.

Joseph is in Egypt – sold into slavery, without hope of ever seeing his family again.

He has been sold out of the land of life – he is gone from the land of his inheritance.
He has descended into the pit – into the land of death – the land where bad things happen!
But in fact, the humiliation of Joseph is only the beginning of his exaltation.

Note that Joseph – the one who leads Israel to Egypt –
goes down into Egypt through Midianite influence.

The one who brought Israel out of Egypt will be rescued through Midianite influence as well –
as Moses will find safe haven with Jethro, a priest of Midian.

And we are told that some of Jethro’s family came with Moses.
thus fulfilling the promises of God regarding Ishmael –
that Ishmael would dwell in the tents of Isaac.

In so many ways, the story of Joseph is beginning the story of the salvation –
not only of Israel – but of the nations!

Joseph must descend into Egypt –
and as we have many times already,
to leave the promised land is to go into exile (to pass from life to death).

And as Joseph descends into Egypt he is not only entering the land of death,
he is also mourned by his father as though he was dead.

Genesis 37 is thus the “death” of Joseph.
Ironically Joseph will only return to the land of life – the land of blessing –
400 years after his literal death!

Our hymn of response, Psalm 102, is entitled “The prayer of one afflicted,
when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the LORD.”

It is fitting as the song of Joseph in the midst of his exile,
languishing in slavery in Egypt;
it is also fitting as the song of our Lord from the cross –
and for us as we are united to him in his suffering:

David may well have been thinking of Joseph when he said that
“from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die.” (v20)

But in the midst of affliction, we are to remember that God is faithful.
He was faithful to Joseph in Egypt – and raised him up to glory.
He was faithful to Jesus in the grave – and raised him up to his right hand.
And he will be faithful to you who are clothed in Christ,
not having a righteousness of your own,
but the righteousness that comes by faith.