

You might be a little surprised by what I am about to say... but... I kind of feel sorry for Charles Darwin... (who brought the theory of evolution to the attention of the world.) ... Recently I read an article about his life... and there is an component of his story... which reminds me (very much) of a character that we come to in our study of Genesis... this morning.

Charles Darwin was lazy and irresponsible in his youth. He was a college dropout at Shrewsbury in England, and a failure at Edinburgh University, in Scotland. ... His wealthy father put the pressure on... (Charles must do something worthwhile or the funds would be cut off...) ... Young Darwin hastily decided to be a pastor... so off to Cambridge he went... to study for the ministry. ... But there (too)... he wasted his time. He made bad friends... and lived a life wholly inconsistent with the calling of someone to be a pastor. ... Twice he was caught with his scandalous living. (Twice he had failed his father.) But because of his previous failures... he did not dare write home and say he now regretted his choice to prepare for the ministry. ... It was characteristic of his instability and double-mindedness... that he continued his theological training... hoping that **something** would work out.

He graduated from college... but... anxious to postpone the dreaded day when he must begin his profession... he signed on as a naturalist with the British Royal Navy ship (the *HMS Beagle*.) ... He would get to study science... and it was on that voyage... that he decided to collect evidence to prove the theory of evolution. ...Before long... he was convinced of its truth. But now he had another problem.

Evolution had been proposed before... but it was highly unpopular with the masses. ... So Charles seesawed back and forth between a desire to win fame - and a fear of the scorn of the world. ... Then... (as it happened with our character in today's Bible passage)... circumstances took over.

He received a letter from a colleague... asking advice on a manuscript enclosed. ... A horrified Darwin discovered his correspondent had "beaten him to the punch" by writing about it first. The friend's manuscript stole his thunder on evolution.

Darwin immediately stuffed it in his drawer... trying to make up his mind what to do. ... At last... after several agonizing months... he decided to let Wallace have the credit for discovering evolution... ... only to change his mind (again)... the next day. ... Darwin ended up co-authoring a work with Wallace... and then he pushed ahead with his own book *Origin of the Species*.

When it first came out... the academic community was completely against his work... and Darwin began to hope that he had not fallen between two stools — the church on the one side... and the scientific world on the other.

But then circumstances took over - with a vengeance. The well-known Aldous Huxley and Joseph Dalton Hooker... philosophers... **militant** atheists... and materialists (both)... slapped Darwin on the back and began such a thoroughgoing promotion of Darwin's ideas that... before long... all opposition (anyone who disagreed) were bullied and browbeaten into silence. (Not much has changed today... has it...?)

But somehow... with the two forceful men bullying... intimidating... and silencing others... while holding Darwin and his ideas high upon a pedestal... Darwin (himself) became overwhelmed by fresh doubts. ... So he lived torturously with a persistent double-mindedness. He wavered between an inner sense of responsibility... and a sense of needing to go along with what he had been so identified. He was tortured by his own lack of real influence. He had to keep pleasing Huxley and Hooker. ... It effected his health. He was forever sick. ... ill health leaped upon him. ... His disorder...? ... Nothing but guilt! ... His physical symptoms were brought on by chronic anxiety. ... So he paid (dearly) for his vacillation. ... The article that I read said: "*His compromise and indecision had simply made him a tool for more forceful men.*" ... And that is exactly what reminds me of the character we will see in today's study in Genesis. Our intriguing narrative portrays this same kind of indecision... that paralyzes us... between trying to eliminate a guilty conscious (on the one-hand)... and trying to please people (on the other.) ... (But LISTEN!) Indecision... (in the end)... is a decision!

So today... we will deal with indecision... but that's not all. We will also deal with envy... as well as favoritism. We are continuing with the narrative of Joseph. ... Envy is one of the works of the flesh that comes out of the sinful heart of man. ... Because of their envy... Joseph's brothers will sell him to some passing merchants. ... Their growing hatred was the equivalent of murder... and though they didn't actually murder Joseph with their hands... some of them had done the deed many times in their hearts.

Genesis 37:12-17

As we read these verses several questions come to mind. The first is: “Shechem! Why does that place sound familiar...?” Wasn’t there some recent history that Jacob and his family had in that town...? Well... yes! Genesis 34. (One of the most disgusting chapters in the entire Bible.) The prince of Schechem decided that he wanted Jacob’s daughter (Dinah)... but he just couldn’t wait for proper marriage arrangements. ... He had sexual relations with her... and then had his dad ask Jacob if he could marry her. ... Dinah’s brothers were so incensed that they took devious action on their own. They deceived all the men of Shechem... then came and slaughtered every one of them. Then they looted the city and took all the women and children. Jacob was afraid that this great evil would bring out all the neighboring cities to have revenge against Jacob’s entire household. ... So Jacob moved away in shame. He is now in Hebron (50 miles south.)

Why would the brothers of Joseph return to the scene of their (recent) **horrific** crime...? ... They had a very **bad** (and well-deserved) reputation there. The threat of vengeance would still be alive... among the neighboring cities... and Shechem’s new residents.

But another question... perhaps even more puzzling is this: “Why would Jacob send his young son... (who he dearly loved)... to this very toxic environment...?” The people around Shechem hated all of Jacob’s family... and Joseph’s brothers had a very intensified hatred for **Joseph**. ... What I’d like to know is this: Instead of sending **Joseph** in his special coat that infuriated those brothers... why didn’t Jacob send a trusted **servant** to this dangerous place...?” He had plenty who could have performed the

same task with greater efficiency. (In verse 15 we see that “Little Joey” got lost and was wandering around...)

The best answer that I can give to this second set of questions... is that it was the providential hand of God at work... to accomplish His divine purposes. Here is that verse again... that I quoted last week. (It is still in play here.)

Proverbs 16:9 (ESV)

The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

And we also have Psalm 105...

Psalm 105:16-19 (ESV)

¹⁶ When he summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, ¹⁷ he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. ¹⁸ His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron; ¹⁹ until what he had said came to pass, the word of the LORD tested him.

... So God was accomplishing His divine purposes... even through these unwise actions of Jacob.

When Jacob asked Joseph to go... Joseph was submissive to his father's commands. (Verse 13) "*Here am I*"... is the language of a servant... ready to do his master's bidding. Joseph did not complain or procrastinate but obeyed.

The journey was quite a walk. It would have taken Joseph four or five days... and it would take an incredible amount of courage to go on this mission. Joseph went to a people who hated him. Furthermore... he wore his coat... (which was proper... because it indicated his rank as their supervisor) —a rank that rankled his brothers.

Appropriate dress often takes courage to wear. ... (This is a statement about appropriate authority...) Appropriate dress often takes courage to wear.

The greatest authority there is (for humans)... is the Word of God. Even the proper use of it today... (often) takes great courage. ... I have been a pastor for 33 years... and I sometimes have to use the authority of God's Word to confront sin in a person. Let me tell you... it takes courage. They often attack you... in all sorts of astounding ways - even though you try to make sure your heart is right... and you pray fervently for a good outcome. ... (Although it is NOTHING like what Joseph was about to experience.)

It took a lot of courage for Joseph to go on this mission. Here was this well-dressed Hebrew youth (who was about 18 years old at the time)... and he was all alone... roaming around a Canaanite killing ground. (That cannot be good!) ... But God was watchful of His chosen instrument (Joseph.)

To our way of thinking... Joseph may be considered very "lucky"... that... in his roaming about in this very unsettled area... Joseph "just happens" to encounter a man... who has overheard the conversation of his brothers... and can direct Joseph to them... Otherwise... he most certainly would not have found them (fourteen miles further North). Joseph might have (easily) returned home... and (theoretically) he would have saved himself a long tour of duty in Egypt. ... But the Bible knows only of divine providence and leading... not chance (or luck.) ... As a result... our author (Moses) expects us (as his readers)... to infer from this incident... that behind the

scenes - God is at work. ... God made sure that Joseph hooks up with his brothers... despite what his brothers are going to do to him.

Genesis 37:18-20

That coat Joseph wore was like waving a red flag in front of a bull. ... The brothers doubtless recognized the coat of Joseph and suspected he might be on a mission to check on them. Their great hatred of him is seen in the quickness of their beginning to plot against him. ... The combination of hatred and envy is lethal. ... It simmers in the heart and waits for the spark that will set off the explosion. ... The brothers didn't have to be tempted in order to decide to harm Joseph. ... All they needed was the opportunity... and here it was!

What we observe in the brothers of Joseph... gives us an occasion to observe the power of envy. They did not just want what Joseph had (the favor of their father)... they wanted to ruin Joseph. There is a big difference between covetousness and envy. ... Here is how one theologian (C. Plantinga) explains this difference:

*What an envier wants is not, first of all, what another has; what an envier wants is for another **not to have it**... To covet is to want somebody else's good so strongly that one is tempted **to steal it**. To envy is to resent somebody else's good so much that one is tempted **to destroy it**. The coveter has empty hands and wants to fill them with somebody else's goods. The envier has empty hands and therefore wants to empty the hands of the envied. Envy, moreover, carries overtones of personal resentment: an envier resents not only somebody else's blessing but also the one who has been blessed.*

Envy has historically been classified as one of seven deadly sins... but in our culture it has... along with lust... established a certain level of prestige

in recent times. ... (Look for it in today's Superbowl ads.) ... Modern advertising does not teach that envy is good... but that *it is good to **be envied***. ... Advertising encourages this about envy (and lust) by implying that if one is inspiring it in someone else... he or she is achieving an admirable thing. ... If someone tries hard enough to make someone else envious... one is likely eventually to succeed.

And here is another interesting thing about envy: Whenever we find ourselves in envy of someone... we will excuse our sin... and portray ourselves as a victim of another person's excesses. (This is at the heart of socialism... which is gaining in popularity in our country. It is driven by a self-justifying envy. ... Antifa... violent mobs... and destructive rallies all feel perfectly justified. "*Unequal wealth is unfair and wealthy folks have it coming to them.*") Joseph's brothers would undoubtedly have excused their behavior by the claim that Joseph deserved what he got... that he had earned their spite.

Perhaps none of us would allow our envy to take us as far as Joseph's brothers... or even into today's forms of socialism and hate groups... but envy has far more subtle effects with believers... that can be just as damaging. ... Perhaps our envy and resentment of a neighbor... friend... family member... or coworker will not drive us to try to arrange for his or her dismissal... transfer... or removal of their status... but it may lead to a steady onslaught of put-downs... insults... and ridicule. ... We express our resentment by trying to make that person look bad at every opportunity... and in the process we hope to make ourselves look better in comparison. ... We express concern over their poor performance... we pity their naiveté... we chuckle at their blunders... we mock their idiosyncrasies. ...

And while we devalue them as individuals... we tacitly put ourselves forward... as being beyond such foibles. ... ***THIS*** is the more common face of envy... and we need to learn to recognize its pale green infection... in our mirrors... if we hope to overcome it.

Genesis 37:21-22

Reuben exhorted them not to kill Joseph. ... I think that his motivation was to secretly rescue Joseph from the other brothers... and to restore him to his father. It is likely that Reuben was trying to get back into the good graces of Jacob after the incident described in Genesis 35:22 (when he had sexual relations with his father's wife – Bilhah.) ... Reuben was willing to set his own interests above those of his other brothers... so as to make himself look good at their expense. *"They wanted to kill him... Dad... but look! I rescued him!"*

Now... this is why I opened today's message... by talking about Charles Darwin. Darwin acted like Reuben (here.)

Reuben (the oldest son)... a man marked by instability... wavered now between a sense of responsibility... and a sense of his own lack of influence. ... He did not wish Joseph to be killed... but (just like Darwin) he did not dare to stand up for him... in the face of the sneers and hostility of the rest. ... He decided to try compromise... and... as usual... compromise did not work. ... (LISTEN!) ... Active wickedness... is always stronger than halfhearted goodness. ... A bold stand for Joseph was needed... not a wishy-washy suggestion that they put him in the pit... with the vague hope that later he could free him and send him home. ... Reuben could have prevented (what happened next)... by taking a moral stand and showing

the leadership of the eldest brother. ... Instead... he paused and considered a secret plan that would elevate himself in his father's eyes and avoid the need to challenge his brothers.

Genesis 37:23-24

Like a pack of dogs... his nine brothers were upon him... scratching and pulling the hated coat from him... and likely his remaining clothing... finally dumping him (like a dead body) into a pit so deep and vertical... that he could not climb out. ... Joseph lay bruised and bleeding and naked on the rocky floor of an empty water cistern. Their intent was to let him die... in an extremely cruel and torturous manner. They would simply leave him to slowly and painfully die of exposure... starvation... and thirst.

Jump ahead in the story with me for just a minute. (Most of you are familiar with this story. You know that God eventually raises Joseph to be the number TWO man of the most powerful nation on earth - Egypt. ... And his brothers will need to come before him and beg for food. They did not recognize their brother... Joseph. And he tested them.) When all of that happened we read about the brothers remembering the scene of our passage today.

Genesis 42:21 (ESV)

Then they said to one another, "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us."

Joseph's brothers laughed and joked and feasted while they listened to Joseph's piteous cries and pleadings. They acted as if they did not hear during their dreadful communion. Joseph wailed and moaned as he pled

with each by name — "*Simeon!*" ... "*Levi!*" ... "*Dan!*" ... "*Zebulun!*" ... *Please don't do this...!*" — And it apparently had relentlessly echoed in their souls over the years.

The hardness of evil is demonstrated by Joseph's brothers. They were so hard... they could sit down and partake of a meal while Joseph suffered in a pit as a result of their own evil.

Genesis 37:25

It's difficult to understand how the men could sit down and calmly eat a meal while their brother was suffering and begging them to set him free. However... hearts that have been hardened by hatred... and poisoned by thoughts of murder... aren't likely to pay much attention to the cries of their victim.

The brothers' plan was to eat... move on... and leave Joseph to the birds of the air. ... But the hidden hand of God's providence (with its perfect timing) countered... when a caravan unexpectedly appeared... offering a solution.

Genesis 37:26-28

Since anybody taken to Egypt and sold for a slave wasn't likely to win his freedom and come back again, there was no danger that their plot would ever be discovered. They forgot that God was watching and was still in control. Jacob had inherited the covenant blessings and this made him a very special person in the eyes of God. The Lord had His divine purposes to fulfill.

Proverbs 21:30 (ESV)

No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.

The band of Midianites approached and reined in their camels as Judah hailed, *"Shalom! Are you going to Egypt?"*

"Peace be upon you," came the reply. *"Yes, we are heading that way. Can we sell you some balm?"*

"Maybe, maybe. Would you like to buy a slave? a bright, intelligent lad with a real head on his shoulders?"

The Midianites showed interest in making a deal... so Joseph was hauled out of the pit. ... He was made to stand before a merchant who poked and prodded at him... examined his teeth... inspected his feet... and looked him over as though he were a horse. *"How about fifty pieces of silver?"* said Judah.

"You must be crazy!" said the merchant. *"He doesn't seem to have much spirit to me. Look at him sniveling. We'll pay you ten."*

"Ten pieces of silver?!" cried Judah. *"Look how young he is. He's good for fifty years at least, and he's as clever as a fox. How about twenty-five?"*

"Twenty, and that's our final offer," said the Midianite. After a long pause... the Midianite businessman finally spoke. *"Ho, there, Eliphaz, get the camels moving. ... We're outta here!"*

"No! Wait!" cried Judah. *"OK... OK... Very well... my lords. ... Twenty pieces of silver - the boy is yours."*

Thus the cruel deal was closed and Joseph was led away... tethered to a camel... his cries and entreaties falling on the deaf ears of his own brothers... and the foreign businessmen. What did they care about a Hebrew boy's tears?

Joseph faced a 30-day journey walking through the desert. He would be treated like baggage... and... once in Egypt... would be sold as a piece of merchandise. His brothers thought they would never see him again... as they listened to his cries grow fainter and fainter.

It had been their lucky day. They had rid themselves of a terrible nuisance... and lined their pockets besides. It was a *fine bargain in cash* (approximately two years of normal wages.) But was it such a bargain? Each of the ten pocketed two pieces of silver... but each inherited a conscience that would never rest again. ... (You know)... There are some deals that are too expensive for the soul to permit. ... There are some moments of indulgence... (some stolen pleasures) for which it is always better to reject... than to allow.

It was not long before there came the *first bite of conscience*. It came from the anguished cry of Reuben.

Genesis 37:29-30

Reuben returned to the cistern to find Joseph... but his little brother was gone. ... His first response (in effect) was "*What will happen to me?*" rather than "*What will happen to Joseph?*" His response was feeble... cowardly... and very self-focused. ... Rather than confronting his brothers and going after Joseph to rescue him... he showed that he was more

concerned about how he was going to look in their father's eyes. ... In a tough situation... are you usually concerned first about yourself? ... Consider the person most affected by the problem... and you will be more likely to find a solution for it.

Reuben's compromise failed to deliver Joseph... and he goes into great outbursts about the evil done. ... But it is his own fault. He would not stand up against evil when the brothers first talked about killing Joseph. And now... once again... he still refused to do the right thing. ... He goes along with his brother's evil.

Once again... we can almost picture the scene. When Reuben selfishly cried out... the others probably looked Reuben over with cold distaste and alarm.

*"Oh, shut your pie-hole... Reuben. You're as guilty as we are. ... Here... put these coins in your purse and be quiet. ... We only **sold** the boy... and that's better than **killing** him, isn't it? ... Huh...? What's that... you say...? ... What are we going to tell Father...? ... Well... that should be easy... We can't help it if Dad sent 'Little Joey' off on some wild goose chase into such a dangerous place! ... Yeah! Let's just tell him that a wild beast killed him and that we found this coat and thought it looked like his. ... Here... go get a goat... and we'll soak it in blood. That'll make the story sound good."*

Genesis 37:31-32

Pretty clever... isn't it? ... They act as if they had never seen Joseph. They pretend they just found this coat. ... Believe me... they knew that hated coat! ... But they pretend they don't recognize it and ask their father whether he recognizes it. ... Now let me quote J Vernon McGee for a moment or two.

Let's pause and take another look at this. They killed a kid of the goats and used that blood on the coat. Does this matter of deceiving a father with a goat remind us of something we've heard before? Remember that when Rebekah and Jacob were conniving, they used a kid for the savory meat dish, and they took the skin of the goat and put it on the hands and arms of Jacob to deceive his father. Now the brothers of Joseph are using the blood of a goat to deceive their father, who is none other than Jacob himself. They hand the coat to him and say, "Do you recognize it? We just found it up there in the mountains. It looks like a wild beast must have got to him." Old Jacob came to the conclusion that his son Joseph had been killed.

Notice this very carefully. Jacob is deceived in exactly the same way that he had deceived. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7) -- not something else, not something similar, but the same thing. This man Jacob did some bad sowing. He used deception, and now that he is a father, he is deceived in the identical way that he had deceived his own father years before.

When we sow corn, we reap corn. When we sow tares, we reap tares. We get exactly what we sow. This is true in any realm you wish to move in today. It is true in the physical realm, in the moral, and in the spiritual realm. That is true also for the believer. If you think you can get by with sin because you are a child of God, you have another thought coming. In fact, you'd better take that other thought and not commit the sin because God is no respecter of persons. He said this is the way it is going to be, and you are not an exception.

Genesis 37:33-35

Many were the false comforters here (especially the sons). Like false believers... they proclaim the lie then try to comfort those they have deceived.

Jacob accepted the evidence... believed the story... and concluded that Joseph indeed was dead. ... He went into deep mourning... and twenty years later... (according to Genesis 42:36) Jacob was still grieving over the death of Joseph. His family tried to comfort him but to no avail. His favorite son was dead... and Jacob would carry his grief with him to the grave.

It was Jacob's partiality toward Joseph that had created this moment. The brothers of Joseph **hated** him. With the kind of venom in place that would lead to murder... it **must have** manifested itself in front of Jacob on many occasions. ... Why would Jacob send Joseph to his brothers where Joseph would be alone and helpless? ... Could it be that Jacob was so wrapped in his obsessive love for Rachel's son... that he could not **see** what was going on around him? ... No doubt... Jacob prided himself on loving his son... but he lost sight of the larger picture.

It is very common among us to be so involved in our own obsessions... that we cannot imagine that the relationships around us are seeing things very differently. ... It is likely that Jacob didn't even know of the hatred of his sons. ... He may have assumed that they all thought as he did.

Also... when news of Joseph reached Jacob... he responded with total disdain for the family. ...His refusal to be comforted did two things. First... he **validated** the evil that his sons had enacted on his beloved son (Joseph.) ... With a greater submission to the will of God... Jacob might have led his sons to confession and repentance. But instead... his shutting them out of his grief... locked that possibility away. ... He guaranteed what they already believed. His love for Joseph was the sign of hatred for **them**.

Second... Jacob failed to recognize the volatility of his grieving situation. Extreme tears and powerful grief... leave visual images that others (especially those closest to us)... never forget. ... If they are shut out of that grief process without explanation... and without the ability to provide aid... they will likely be shut off from ever knowing how to relate to us in a mutually beneficial fashion.

One commentator wrote:

Emotions are the dessert of life. They give to life its most precious and memorable moments. And, emotions manifest themselves in very difficult moments. But dessert when eaten without other food that nourishes can create great harm to the body. A life based in emotions expended, without the nourishment of clear thinking can destroy us and those around us. Jacob was experiencing an extremely difficult moment. However, he used the emotion to shut others out of his life. His family perceived that Jacob's emotion was the only thing important to him.

Genesis 37:36

The workings of God's providence are indeed awesome, and this ought to be a great source of encouragement to us in the difficult circumstances of life.

Here is reality. Real life is unfair. Real life deals out many inequities. Real life is filled with sin and sinners. Real wounds are everywhere. But the transcending eternal reality... is that God is all-powerful... and that His massive providence is at work in his children's behalf. Life brims with hope and optimism.

We all carry wounds... some of which go all the way back to when we were young. ... For some that is recent history... for others it is in our ancient past! ... Nevertheless... for many of us... all it would take to reopen those wounds... is a high-school (or family) reunion — and wa-la (!)... the re-run of old insecurities and hurts... are freshly felt. ... Most can name those old wounds... with a vividness like it was yesterday. ... And some of the wounds are gaping — from irrational parenting... physical abuse... rejection or abandonment... and multiple violations.

Joseph's life teaches us that life is full of inequities and unfairness and tragedies. ... But it also teaches us that we have a great God... Who works amidst the rich **compost** of human life... to do His will.

We must understand that as God's children... we are called to give everything to Him... even the bitter things of the past. ... As believers... we have been set free from the bondage of sin and death.

We must rest everything on the awesome God of the Bible. ... We must believe His word — that God will work **good** out of past **evils** — and that trusting Him... we will one day say with Joseph to past evils we have experienced in our own lives...

Genesis 50:20 (ESV)

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...