

Jacob's Descendants

Joseph's Sale into Slavery

Genesis 37:2-36

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Scripture

Today, I am beginning a new series of sermons that I am calling "Jacob's Descendants," based on Genesis 37-50. Most of this section of Genesis, however, deals with Joseph, Jacob's son, and it begins with his sale into slavery.

Let's read about Joseph's sale into slavery in Genesis 37:2-36:

²These are the generations of Jacob.

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. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now 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. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

⁵Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: ⁷Behold, 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." ⁸His 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.

⁹Then 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." ¹⁰But 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.

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. 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.”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.

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.”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.²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore.²⁴ And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵ Then they sat down to eat. 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.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.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.

²⁹When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes³⁰ and returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?”³¹ Then they took Joseph’s robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood.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.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.³⁶ Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. (Genesis 37:2-36)

Introduction

We live in a world in which God’s people frequently suffer at the hands of others. For example, this past week four civilians were killed in Syria when terrorists lobbed a mortar

into the central square of a Christian district during a humanitarian drive. Three weeks ago, Muslim terrorists ambushed and killed a 60-year-old church elder in Nigeria. And on January 1, 2018, also in Nigeria, gunmen yelling “Allah” opened fire on people leaving a Christian worship service, killing seventeen and raping the Christian women.¹ During times like these, when God’s people suffer cruelly at the hands of others, the question is asked: *Where is God? Why does he not protect his people?*

God’s people in biblical times must also have asked these questions on many occasions. And surely Jacob’s son Joseph must have asked: *God, where are you? Why don’t you protect me?*

We have the advantage of knowing “the rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey used to say. We know how the story ends. But, Joseph did not know what God was doing, and why God was allowing suffering to come into his life.

Lesson

Joseph’s sale into slavery in Genesis 37:2-36 teaches us that God used the evil deeds of Joseph’s brothers as part of his plan to save his people.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. Joseph Was Loved by His Father (37:2-3)
2. Joseph Was Hated by His Brothers (37:4-11)
3. Joseph Was Sold by His Brothers (37:12-28)
4. Joseph Was Mourned by His Father (37:29-36)

I. Joseph Was Loved by His Father (37:2-3)

First, notice that Joseph was loved by his father.

¹ <https://www.thereligionofpeace.com/attacks/christian-attacks.aspx>.

Moses writes in verse 2, **“These are the generations of Jacob. 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. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.”** We learn three things about Joseph: he was **seventeen years old**, he was an apprentice shepherd, and he was a tattletale. Joseph was an immature boy who made unwise decisions at this point in his life.

However, Jacob (also known as Israel) also made unwise decisions. Moses writes in verse 3a, **“Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age.”** Joseph was the son of Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel, who died during the birth of Joseph’s younger brother, Benjamin (cf. Genesis 35:16-20). And to show his love—and favoritism—to Joseph, Jacob **made him a robe of many colors** (37:3b). The Hebrew word that is translated **“many colors”** (*passim*) actually means a “tunic reaching to palms and soles.”² The only other place in the Old Testament where this word is used is in reference to the robe of Tamar, one of King David’s daughters. For that reason “many commentators suggest it has something to do with royalty.... By this regal apparel (see 2 Samuel 13:18–19) Jacob publicly designates Joseph as the ruler over the family.”³ Well, that did not sit well with Joseph’s older brothers!

II. Joseph Was Hated by His Brothers (37:4-11)

Second, observe that Joseph was hated by his brothers.

² R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 729.

³ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 348.

Moses writes in verse 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 Hebrew word that is translated as **“peacefully”** (*shalom*) is the word “shalom” that was used as a greeting. In other words, the brothers would not even greet Joseph, such was the level of their animosity towards him. But, it would get even worse!

Verse 5, **“Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more.”** Here again is the immaturity of Joseph. He told the dream to his brothers, who already hated him. He should have perhaps confided in his father, who also had previously had dreams from God. Joseph apparently believed that this was a dream from God, and so he told the dream to his brothers in which their sheaves bowed down to his sheaf (vv. 6-7). His brothers asked if he was going to rule over them. Verse 8b says, **“So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.”**

In the account of Joseph's life, his dreams always came in pairs. Think, for example, of the dreams of Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker, as well as the two dreams of Pharaoh himself. Joseph actually explained to Pharaoh why the dreams came in pairs in Genesis 41:32, “And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.”

Then Joseph had another dream about the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars all bowing down to him. **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?”** (37:10). Not unexpectedly, **his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind** (37:11). Surely, Jacob

thought about his own dream at Bethel, in which God promised to bless all the families of the earth, and to give him the land on which he was lying (28:10-17). So, he may have rebuked Joseph for telling the dream to his brothers, but Jacob also knew that in those days God spoke through dreams.

III. Joseph Was Sold by His Brothers (37:12-28)

Third, observe that Joseph was sold by his brothers.

Joseph's **brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem** (37:12). Jacob's settlement was in the Valley of Hebron, which was twenty miles south of Jerusalem. Shechem was thirty miles north of Jerusalem. So, when Jacob sent Joseph to see how his brothers were doing, he sent him on a fifty-mile journey. When Joseph arrived in Shechem, he learned that his brothers had gone on to Dothan, which was another fourteen miles further north.

The brothers noticed Joseph coming toward them while he was still a long way off. Undoubtedly, they recognized him because of his long-sleeved coat. Their hatred toward him was so strong that they wanted to kill him and say that a fierce animal had killed him. But Reuben, the oldest brother, urged his brothers not to take his life, and to throw him into a nearby pit because he wanted to rescue Joseph later. Fortunately for Joseph, his brothers did not kill him, but stripped him of his coat and threw him into the empty pit. Although this passage doesn't tell us what Joseph said, we know from a later narrative that Joseph begged them to release him (Genesis 42:21).

After they threw Joseph into the pit, the brothers simply sat down to eat, despite Joseph's pleas. While they were eating Reuben left them. Then, the rest of the brothers saw a caravan of Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt, and Judah said that they

should sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. The other brothers agreed, and Joseph was sold for twenty shekels of silver. The route to Egypt most likely took the Ishmaelites—and Joseph—through Hebron. How hard it must have been for Joseph to see familiar landscape, and perhaps even his own father's settlement, and not be able to do anything about it.

IV. Joseph Was Mourned by His Father (37:29-36)

Finally, notice that Joseph was mourned by his father.

Moses writes in verses 29-30, **“When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes and returned to his brothers and said, ‘The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?’”** The rest of the brothers told Reuben what they had done.

But they still had to tell their father Jacob what they had done. So, they decided to deceive their father by killing a goat and dipping the coat in its blood, so as to give the impression that a fierce animal had killed and eaten Joseph. Jacob fell for their deception, and said, **“It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces”** (37:33). The irony is that the brothers deceived their father by dipping Joseph's coat in goat's blood, just as Jacob had done years earlier using his brother's garments and two young goats to deceive his blind father Isaac (Genesis 27:9-27).

Moses notes in verses 34-35, **“Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 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 [i.e., the grave] to my son, mourning.’ Thus his father wept for him.”** Jacob was inconsolable. He believed that his favorite son, Joseph, was dead.

Then, like every great story teller, who ends the chapter with a teaser in order to pique our interest, Moses writes in verse 36, **“Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him [Joseph] in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.”** By the time Jacob had received the report from his sons about Joseph, Joseph had already been sold in Egypt. Though he was a slave, he was in fact sold to one of Pharaoh’s senior officials. Joseph would suffer unjustly there, eventually being falsely accused and imprisoned. Yet, while in prison he would have more dreams, dreams again given to him by God, that would eventually promote him to be Prime Minister of Egypt. And yes, his brothers would eventually bow down to him, not knowing that he was their brother. Joseph’s dreams would come true. God was using the evil deeds of Joseph’s brothers as part of his plan to save his people. Joseph was eventually able to say to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20).

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Joseph’s sale into slavery in Genesis 37:2-36, let us be comforted with the knowledge that God can use even evil human deeds to fulfill his plan to save his people.

In 1956 five young missionaries tried to reach a very primitive people known then as the Auca Indians (and today as the Waodani) with the good news of the gospel. These people were known to kill anyone who entered their area of the jungle. After months of preliminary contact, the five young men landed in a small Piper Cruiser plane on a small beach on

one of the rivers. The pilot of that Piper was Nate Saint, and after several months of exchanging gifts with the natives, Nate and the four other men—Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming and Roger Youderian—were speared multiple times and hacked to death with machetes.

Miles away, a little five-year-old boy named Steve Saint mourned the death of his father. Eventually, his Aunt Rachel Saint, a Bible translator (and sister to Nate Saint), along with Elisabeth Elliot, wife of Jim Elliot, went to live with the Waodani. They won the confidence and respect of the Waodani, and after many years the Gospel of Mark was translated into their language. A number of the Waodani became Christians, included a man named Mincaye, who actually delivered the final spear that ultimately killed Steve's father.

Years later, Steve himself went to live with the Waodani, and continued to see many of them come to faith in Jesus Christ. Steve was able to say, "What the Waodani meant for evil, God used for good. Given the chance to rewrite the story, I would not be willing to change it."

I have in my possession a Bible with the thumbprint of Mincaye. My own call to ministry came as a result of reading about the deaths of these five brave missionaries. What was meant for evil, God meant for good, to call me—and countless others—into gospel ministry.

Of course, the supreme example, of God using even evil human deeds to fulfill his plan to save his people is in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was killed by people who thought that was the end of Jesus. But Jesus' death and resurrection means life—abundant life now as well as everlasting life—for all who trust him and repent of their sin. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
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