

FROM GOD'S DREAM TO THE PIT

Genesis 37: 12-28 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

The drama of Joseph's life included being hated by his ten older brothers. After Jacob made Joseph, a many-colored coat, his brothers could not speak peacefully to him. Matters became worse after Joseph told his brothers and his father his two dreams, that spoke of them bowing down to him. It was all too much for them, and they wanted to kill Joseph. Many of you in this sanctuary today, may be able to testify of wanting to kill your brother or sister while growing up. It is not as strange as you may think. I run into such confessions often as a pastor. Now the ten brothers of Joseph were gone to Shechem, pasturing their father's large flock of sheep. Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin, was about three years old at this time, and probably Bilpah, Rachel's handmaid, one of Jacob's wives, was helping to raise Benjamin. Picture if you will, the shepherders we have around Sweetwater County, the Basque shepherds. Jacob's life and his sons' lives were lives, similar to those shepherders we often see south and west of Rock Springs. Shepherds lived in tents then and they moved with their sheep, but often the main camp of shepherds was more stable in one place as some of the shepherds migrated with their sheep from pasture to pasture. It was when Joseph was 14 that his mother Rachel died in childbirth, bearing Benjamin. Shortly after Benjamin's birth in Ephrath, or Bethlehem, and Rachel's death, Jacob's oldest son, Reuben committed incest with one of his father's wives. This is reported in Genesis 35: 22 where we read, "While Israel (Jacob) lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine, one of his wives, Rachel's handmaid. And Jacob heard of it." These were not pretty days—as awful sins were committed, by Jacob's sons. The very mention of Shechem, makes our hearts shudder, if we know the story of Shechem in Genesis 34.

What happened in Shechem, when Joseph was only 14 years old? To give you the quick overview, Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob, by his wife, Leah, she met a man named Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite. Shechem saw Dinah, and he seized her, violated her, and humiliated her. Yet after this awful forcing of Jacob's daughter, Shechem loved Dinah and begged his father Hamor to get her for him to be his wife. Dinah's brothers were up in arms over the ordeal, because they said, "Shechem has done an outrageous thing by lying with Dinah. But Hamor apologized for his son and told them Shechem loved her and longed for her to be his wife. But the sons of Jacob were deceitful, and they said it wouldn't be right to give their sister to an uncircumcised man and people. They made one condition for

marriage. All the Hivites, including Hamor and Shechem must be circumcised. It happened, as Shechem agreed. But it was a murderous plan. Simeon and Levi, the next oldest sons of Leah and Jacob, after Reuben, they did a ghastly deed, after the Hivites, including Hamor and Shechem all agreed to accepting the righteous sign of the covenant of Israel—circumcision. The third day after they were circumcised, and all the men were weak and sore, Simeon and Levi took their swords and killed all the males, plundered their houses, captured their wealth, and delivered Dinah, taking her back home. Jacob was shocked and incensed. He told Simeon and Levi, “You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land.” Simeon and Levi retorted, “Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?”

It is remarkable that Jacob would let his ten sons go north 48 miles north of Hebron, to pasture his sheep, to an area, where his own name was mud. To pasture his flocks near Shechem--the site of the slaughter perpetrated on Shechem and all the men of that place by Simeon and Levi, because of the defilement of their sister Dinah--why go back to that site? Was it a sense of ownership and superiority that his sons had, that they owned Shechem and all its inhabitants? Yet, we read, that by the time Joseph willingly obeyed his father to go check on his brothers, they had already moved on further north to Dothan about 12 more miles—60 miles from Hebron. When sheep have eaten grass down, shepherds must move on. Joseph got lost in the Shechem area hunting for his brothers, but moving on to Dothan was bad news for Joseph. It moved him even farther away from Jacob and Hebron. Jacob must not have known how hostile his ten sons were toward Joseph, because Jacob sent Joseph into a hostile situation far away from home.

Joseph happily agreed to obey his father and go check up on his brothers. What was ahead would separate Joseph from his daddy for 23 years, and Jacob thought it was forever. Joseph must have been excited to finally find his brothers. Little did he know his brothers were not happy to see him. As they saw Joseph approaching, they plotted to kill him. Their hatred, jealousy, envy now boiled over into murderous violence. Joseph’s godly outlook on life upset his brothers. The God of their father Jacob, grandfather Isaac, and great grandfather, Abraham, was also with Joseph in a special way. It irked them a lot, leading them to plot his murder. Lest any of us justify ourselves and say, “I would never act as Joseph’s brothers did, may I remind you of I Cor. 10: 12, “There is no temptation that has overtaken you but such as is common to man.” We all are capable of these brothers’ sins. Today, I want us to look at four surprising lessons God has for us as we observe the awful way Joseph’s brothers treated him. What are they?

DON'T BE SURPRIZED IF YOUR FREE WALK WITH GOD MAKES YOU A TARGET FOR PERSECUTION BY FAMILY OR GOD'S FAMILY.

(I.) Notice Genesis 37: 18-20. "They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 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." Joseph that day walked in the freedom of the Lord, a teenager whom God was talking to in his dreams. Joseph was walking the hills also, in loving obedience to his father Jacob. He was roaming the hills, perhaps on a beautiful day, just out to bring back a report on the flocks to his father, Jacob. It wasn't a freedom his brothers had, as the ten older brothers were tied to the sheep. Don't be surprized if some of your family or church family no longer seem as friendly to you, because of the liberty you have in Christ, the way you walk with God, or the way you refuse to walk in the legalism of their ways and attitudes. Be certain, though Joseph's brothers were serving their father, their relationship with their father was that they had no trouble lying to him, if it was necessary. Don't be surprized if your friends and family no longer seem as friendly, and do not welcome you into their inner circle as they once did. Living for Jesus in obedience, but not in legalism, won't make everyone happy. An obedient believer can make other believers feel embarrassed or threatened by their presence. Don't be surprized when those you know and love want to do you harm.

Notice what Jacob sent Joseph to do--to check up on his brothers and to bring back a report on how they were doing. This was the very thing we first learned about Joseph that caused his brothers to hate him. Notice in Genesis 37: 2 that the last time Joseph came back from a report trip from the pasturing of Jacob's flock, he brought a bad report to him. Don't be surprized when those who should respect and love you, want to hijack your dreams and waylay your freedoms. Even fellow-believers may watch you like a hawk, looking for a chance in what you say or do, or in something they think you have done, to enslave your hopes and dreams, which hopes and dreams attack them and embitter them. What is the enemy's answer? His plan is: "Put those wild hopes and dreams to the ultimate test. If those hopes and dreams are from God, they will survive your traps or pits. If they don't survive, you'll prove them frauds and hypocrites for reporting their false dreams."

Beloved, don't think this is just an Old Testament truth. I Peter 4: 12-13 is clear, "Beloved, do not be surprized at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar, as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." Galatians 2: 4 speaks of false brothers secretly brought in, who slip in to

spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring up into slavery.” The hatred of Joseph by his brothers can happen in the family of God. God’s Word to us who pass judgment is strong in Romans 14: 4 and 10: “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able, to make him stand... Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the Judgment Seat of God.” Secondly,

DON’T BE SURPRIZED IF GOD HAS TO OPEN YOUR EYES TO WHOM HE CHOOSES TO USE TO SPARE YOUR LIFE FOR HIS PURPOSE. (II.)

Notice Genesis 37: 21-22. “But when Reuben heard it, he rescued Joseph out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” 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.” Notice the hatred of his brothers was not totally shared by Joseph’s oldest brother Reuben. This hatred had to do with Joseph’s dreams and ultimately, that hatred went on to the brothers anger against God who gave Joseph his dreams. God never chooses perfect people to serve him, first of all, because there are none. We may hide our own sins by pointing out the sins of others, but like Adam and Eve, we cannot hide from God. We know from Genesis 35: 22 that Reuben sinned against God, his father, his mother Rachel who had died, and against Rachel’s handmaid, whom Reuben was sexually intimate with. Clearly, Reuben had a big problem in the area of sexual lust—if he lived today, he would probably have been into pornography. Nevertheless, God hadn’t totally rejected Reuben so He could not use him. His brothers wanted to kill Joseph but Reuben wanted to save his life to fulfil God’s dreams. Lust was Reuben’s besetting sin, but God knew about one of his strengths—Reuben was a compassionate man, as the budding patriarch of his family. The other brothers struggled with hatred, jealousy, envy, and murder.

John Calvin spoke about the nine-brother’s conspiracy to kill Joseph and hide his body, He said, “Before they murdered him, they figured out a way to conceal their crime. Meanwhile, it never entered, into their mind, that what is hidden from men cannot escape the eyes of God. Hypocrisy is so stupid, that while it flees from the disgrace of the world, it is careless about the judgment of God. But it is a disease deeply rooted in the human mind to make up some excuse for every extreme act of iniquity. For although an inner judge convicts the guilty, they still want to hide their disgrace from others.” John Calvin was right.

All of us have different areas of weakness and besetting sins. For some of us, it may be fear, self-pity or doubt. Our besetting sin may be pride, self-righteousness

and judgment, or the desire for control. For others, like them, it may be jealousy and anger. Our besetting sin may be lust, like Reuben. For others of us, our besetting sin may be envy, bitterness, and an unforgiving spirit. Each of us need to quit hiding our own sins by attacking others. We need to be honest with ourselves and with God. We need to admit our weaknesses, and ask God to help us overcome these besetting sins. God will not reject us if we will confess and forsake our sins. He will give grace to all who humbly seek His forgiveness and help. (I John 1: 8-10) God greatly used Reuben to spare Joseph's life. He used a man with a besetting sin, just like He will use you and me, Hebrews 12: 1-2, if we lay it aside. Thirdly,

DON'T BE SURPRIZED IF THOSE YOU LOVE ARE CALLOUS TO COMPASSION IN ATTEMPTING TO STRIP YOU OF YOUR POSITION.

(III.) Notice Genesis 37: 23-25a. "So, when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors, that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat." Joseph's life was spared, by Reuben's suggestion, but throwing him into the dry cistern was what? It was still a very cruel thing to do. How would Joseph ever get out? He could easily die down in there as others did, from thirst and starvation. That's a terrible way to die. Incredibly, v. 25 tells us that after his brothers stripped Joseph of his special coat, they threw him into the cistern and sat down to eat their meal. Look at them and their callousness, as they unpeeled those boiled eggs, ate those dried fish, and shared the cheese in their food pack or ate whatever they had packed. How unfeeling could they be? That is what sin does to us, beloved. Sin hardens our hearts to each other and it justifies our every action.

Now reflect with me. The brothers had spotted Joseph and recognized him before he arrived in their presence. They conspired together, without Reuben, to kill him. Reuben may have been out riding on a horse, checking up on the sheep. The brothers didn't even know the mission Joseph was on, nor did they ask about it. Hatred and jealousy polluted their hearts, and they knew what they would do. They conspired to kill Joseph, a conspiracy and betrayal that is a foreshadowing of Jesus' betrayal in Matthew 21: 33-44. Reuben stepped in and saved Joseph from his brothers with his less violent, alternative plan to murder. He suggested they throw him into a nearby wilderness pit so he could come back later and rescue Joseph from the pit. Was Reuben, like some commentators say, was he out to be a hero with his Dad to make up for his sin against his father's handmaid? It's a possibility, but I don't see it in the text, so I attribute to Reuben good motives.

Just imagine how Joseph felt! He must have been terrified. He cried out to his brothers to show mercy, but they went ahead with their cruel plan anyway. We

know from later in the story (Gen 42:21) that in fact the brothers never ever forgot the cries of Joseph that day. The brothers in trouble in Egypt 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’s why this distress has come upon us.” Their cruel crime imprinted their consciences. Their father’s beloved son didn’t deserve this pit. But as Joseph wept in the pit, his brothers sat down uncaring, cold and they callously ate lunch. They were hoping their brother would die along with his dreams. They wanted Joseph as far away as possible because his dream was their nightmare. Any sight of him reminded them of his dreams. They wanted him out of sight, out of mind, and the pit for Joseph wasn’t quite enough for them, especially if they had known Reuben’s plan to rescue him. Fourthly,

**DON’T BE SURPRIZED IF MEMBERS OF THE BODY OF CHRIST
BECOME GREEDY FOR SOME KIND OF GAIN IN BETRAYING YOU.**

(IV.) Notice the brothers eating and then...then look at Genesis 37: 25-28. “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. Then Judah, also Leah’s son with Jacob—the fourth oldest after Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, said to his brothers, “What profit is it, if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 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. 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 or pieces of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.”! It seemed a good plan to the brothers, and so for a measly, pathetic, twenty shekels of silver, they sold Joseph as a slave. I wonder what they bought with that money? Not much, probably. That’s two shekels each. As an equivalency chart shows a silver shekel, about the weight of 2 quarters, to be worth \$10 today, each brother got \$20.00 for their brother.

As Joseph wept aloud and begged to be spared, his brothers ate their meal of envy, jealousy and malice and they drank their drink of deception. To make their revenge even more tasty for that moment, it just so happened that a caravan of merchants on the road to Egypt came by. Not only could his brothers rid themselves of Joseph once, and for all; they could make a profit from it. So, they sold him into slavery. The dark deed was done. Now nature would take its course and they would not be directly guilty for what happened to their brother as a slave in Egypt. What happened to Jacob’s sons that they would sell their brother into slavery? Whereas it was Reuben’s intention to rescue Joseph from the pit, it was Judah’s intention to make some money out of getting rid of his little brother. It started so small, with seeds of jealousy, anger, and favoritism. It grew into greed and murder and deceit.

Have any of you, like me, been to the headwaters of the Mississippi River? It begins as a little trickle flowing out of Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota. I've been there. From there, the river flows 2,348 miles until it pours into the Gulf of Mexico below New Orleans. The Mississippi River drains 33 states and its watershed covers one-half of our nation. In Iowa, men spend their entire careers building and rebuilding levees to harness the power of the river which so often overflows and is miles across. Near New Orleans, several barges navigate the river simultaneously as they move freight traffic up and down the river. What begins as a gently flowing, narrow stream you can step across, becomes a powerful wide body of water, capable of great destruction, if left unchecked. The seeds of our sins are deadly. If we allow the seeds of sin to remain planted in our hearts and lives, they will germinate and bring about devastating results. Don't be surprised at what sin can do, if it is unconfessed, not repented for. What it can do to a family member or a member of God's family is unspeakably awful. If you are in Joseph's shoes, at the moment, sold into Egypt, as it were, by those you love, don't give up. God's dreams, thrown into the pit, and sold into Egypt, still do come true. Amen.