

Genesis 37

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[0 : 00] stories. Reading a good story, one written by a skilled storyteller, one filled with captivating characters of all sorts, personages on the pages of a book that are filled with the full range of both good and evil can be quite an experience, a powerful experience.

Done well, reading the stories can help inform you and me on our story. That's where the summer's really going.

My aim for the series is simply that the Bible story that we read this summer, namely that of Joseph and his brothers, would give you a sense of your own story.

When you read a story, the challenges of the characters can inform the challenges that you need to overcome.

The persistence, the resilience that you see in a story can serve to animate your own resolve. The failings of those in the story, well, they serve to have you and me come face to face with our own failings.

[1 : 27] Let's be honest, with our own fallenness. I actually find when I'm reading stories, it's the deep, grievous, tragic sins of the characters that also serve to quicken my heart in sympathy for when we see them, we see ourselves for who we are.

What a story we have before us in Joseph and his brothers. And I pray that God will use it to inform you of your story, your family, and ours.

The first thing the writer of the story wants you to take notice of in Joseph's story, much like our own, is that his story was set within a larger story.

For Joseph, while he appears as the central figure for our summer in chapters 37 through 50, he's actually embedded within a larger story concerning his father, Jacob.

You can see it right there, the opening verse. As we're introduced to Joseph, we are done so by a reference to Jacob. Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.

[2 : 46] By the time we arrive at chapter 49, we'll return to the central patriarch, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all of the blessings that he gives.

What I'm trying to say is, the first thing the writer wants you to know about Joseph and his brothers is that they are embedded in a larger story concerning Jacob and the promises that came down through his grandfather, Abraham.

The second thing you're going to need to know as we get underway this summer is that even the story of Jacob is set within a larger family story. Concerns Abraham and Isaac and a promise.

In fact, the opening line here that he's finding himself in Canaan is an indication of this temporal promise that was fulfilled to Abraham.

Oh, yet he's not owning it, he's just sojourning in it. Later we're going to see in the text that Jacob is dwelling in an area that actually is the place of burial of some of his ancestors.

[3 : 50] Verses 15 or 14, the valley of Hebron. Hebron was this place of promise. I got no land. We're only renters in the promised land.

Never owned anything. Never bought anything. Never had the capital to get anything. And yet this land of promise was for Abraham at any rate significantly made by down payment on a place where he could bury his wife and then eventually himself, his son.

This story of Joseph and his brothers is within the larger story of Jacob and his family, which is a larger story of Abraham who was going to do wonderful things for all the families of the earth.

Indeed, even the Abraham story is set within an expansive global story. It extends back to Adam and the fall. In other words, the whole book of Genesis is just rippling out like circles from a water.

The stone dropped in. Adam, one man who sins. And yet Abraham, who God promises to restore. And then we've arrived at Jacob.

[5 : 02] And now this summer we see even Joseph. Joseph, what you need to know is that your story is like this story within the context of a larger story, is it not?

Don't we say you have to know your history? We don't know who we are if we don't know where we came from. We don't know where we're going if we don't know who we are. So as we enter into the story of Joseph and his brothers, you find yourself then in this outer rippling ring on the waters of God's promises for us all.

You're entering the waters in Genesis 37 on a still and quiet summer morning in ways that God will help you make sense of your life, your family, your story.

The setting then of that story really is there in verses 2 through 4. I hope you have a Bible and keep it open with you or find a Bible on an app and put it in for yourself. Verses 2 to 4, we see that these are the generations of Jacob.

What can we say about this family in verses 2 to 4? Let me just say you're going to meet a complicated family. This is a complicated family. I don't know about your family, but this is a complicated family.

[6 : 21] One in which every character that you're going to meet all summer long is compromised in serious ways. They are flawed, each and every one. In other words, God's family of choice, Abraham to Isaac to Jacob, Jacob among which Joseph is one of 12 sons, is what we would call a dysfunctional family.

Am I talking to anybody yet? That we've got here this summer the activity of God in a dysfunctional family.

Let me just show you a few of the dysfunctions that are present. We meet Jacob. It says there in verses 2 that Joseph is present with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives.

What you really need to understand is that that Jacob himself had 12 sons by four different women that we're aware of. That's the one to whom the promises of God were given, through whom blessing would come to the ends of the earth, this complicated figure in the text, 12 sons by four women.

You can glance back into the backside of chapter 35 to see these 12 sons, beginning in verse 22. The sons of Bilhah.

[7 : 58] There were four in number originally, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah. And those four provoked great jealousy in the heart of Rachel, who was also Jacob's wife.

And so she gives Jacob her handmaiden, who then has two sons, only to then find that those two sons are now in competition with the handmaiden of Leah, who gives her handmaiden to him and two more sons, only to be further complicated by the fact that Leah herself would have two more sons before finally Rachel, the one that had no sons, finally gives birth to the final two sons, Joseph and Benjamin.

Can you imagine this family? A complicated thing. What a dinner table. We meet Joseph here at the age of 17.

Okay, those four, no, those six are my half-brothers from my aunt. These two are half-brothers from another wife who was the servant of my aunt.

These two are the half-brothers that are there of the servant of my own mother and now my own mother, well, she bore me and I have my little brother.

[9 : 32] That's the dinner table. I told you it was a complicated family. Okay. Can you imagine the complication of pain amongst the wives?

The pain of women who had unrequited love, a love that wasn't returned, a love that was asked to be consummated and actually bear fruit and yet never returned by Jacob.

to be involved in the act of love but to be left unloved. This is a complicated home.

To make matters worse or more complex, Jacob, as a father, evidently played favorites with his sons.

You can see it there in verse 3. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of the other sons because he was the son of his old age which I take to mean he was the son of Rachel in his old age.

[10 : 44] And he made him a robe of many colors. So now you've got a father who's got 12 sons, not to mention Dinah and other sisters most likely, who actually plays favorites and it's the 11th born son who actually is his treasured possession because he was the fruit of the one he loved originally.

Joseph is here called a boy, a boy among the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. He's actually young enough to still kind of be learning the ropes.

He's 17, it says. Just got his driver's license. He could take his mule out for a little run. Maybe he got his first job.

Beginning to find his way. No life experience really though. Just a boy and a foolish one at that. To complicate matters, you can see it there.

Joseph, verse 2, brought a bad report about his brothers to their father just like the younger siblings do. Mom and dad leave for a while.

[12:01] Things happen while they're away. Mom and dad come back. Grandma's coming home. Now when she walks in the door or they walk in the door, nothing's to be said about what took place.

The older siblings bear down on the younger ones, threatening all kinds of things. that they'll hold all over them for 18 years should they say anything. But of course, Joseph in all of his, well, at best case, naivete decides to be the tattletale and to bring a bad report on his brothers.

Not only did Jacob have a favored son, Israel's favored son, Joseph, but Joseph was foolish in regard to the way he acted with his brothers.

the complications of the family actually are summarized there in verse 4. They hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. These are sons who knew that they could never really gain the love of their father.

am I talking to anybody yet? That the 11 sons knew deep down that they never were going to measure up into the mind and heart of the father.

[13:27] And they lived with that for years. They lived with it for years before Joseph was ever born. and now they're living with it still.

And now the favored son of Israel in all of his foolishness only exasperates the home and his brothers hate him and cannot speak peacefully to him.

You know this happens in families today, does it not? I mean, I hear it, you know it. When's the last time you spoke to a brother or sister? Some of us would say not for years.

And I have no intention to. Because it's not really a peaceable thing. We're better off in two different worlds. All these things just resonate with life as we know it.

It's actually one of the things I love about the Bible. I know that sounds strange to you. I love that the Bible presents life as we know it.

[14:30] That if God was going to get something done in the world, he had to be willing to run in the muck. He chose Abraham not because Abraham was upright and righteous and family looked good.

No. He chose him for any other reason that he was just he was just he was just well he was just God's choice. God wanted to get something done in a fallen world.

He had to take a fallen man. He had to take a fallen family. He had to take a dysfunctional home.

He said okay that's my starting point let's see what I can do. So when you actually get down to it all of that sets the stage for the chapter.

That little opening in one through four provides by way of setting all you're going to need today for the boy's dreams the rising tensions in the family which will be evidenced by the brother's schemes which all lead really to a father's nightmare.

That's the movement of the text. That's the movement of the chapter. A boy's dreams the brother's schemes the father's nightmare. What a complicated thing.

[15:46] Notice in verses five through eleven Jacob's favoritism coupled with Joseph's foolishness gave way to an irreparable falling out in the family.

That's what I take of the dreams. Joseph had a dream verse five and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said hear this the dream that I've dreamed then he speaks about binding sheaves and his sheaf rising up and their sheaves bowing down.

They know the implication of it. Are you indeed going to rule over us? Verse eight so they hated him even more for his dreams and his words.

At worst Joseph as a seventeen year old here was arrogant knowingly so at best he was not the sharpest tool in the shed.

Joseph was not very self aware. Never should have told him the dream. But he doubles down on it doesn't he?

[17:04] Hey he says in verse nine I got another dream. As if he can't read the bubbling hatred within the home the disdain they have for him.

this dream doesn't go to the agrarian concept of sheaves rising up and wheat being gathered or barley being bundled. This goes all the way to the heavens.

The sun and the moon and the stars they all bow down. And this time he makes sure he tells the dream when his dad is there too. His father rebukes him I think in some sense to try to cover for him.

Hey careful with that are you trying to say that your mother and myself and all your brothers are going to bow down to you? See it's the same dream but it comes in a different form.

And yet the second dream does make a unique and additional contribution to the first. By bringing the stars and the sun and the moon in it reveals something almost universal about Joseph's dreams.

[18:16] Perhaps not only did Joseph think that he would rise to a place of prominence in his own family who farmed but he actually might have thought that his elevation would extend under the stars.

Nothing will be impossible for him. The heavenly entities that govern the universal order will even they are spoken of as bowing down to me. In other words his dreams are saying I'm going to be number one in this family and let it be known I think I'm number one in the whole way the world works.

Got a brother like that? Got a sister like that? I pray you're not the one like that. He's saying I think I'm going to rule over Israel and I'm going to rule over everything as only a 17 year old can say. Notice what the writer then does verse 11 his brothers were jealous of him yeah I bet so to their hatred we now add jealousy we now add in a sense envy let me just jump ahead just for a moment to the bigger story the Bible is telling you remember I told you that you're going to find meaning for your story as we read the Bible story and the Bible story actually has these massive almost meta like narratives that it's trying to communicate to us in the bigger story what the situation is here is much like a situation you'll read about later if you're not familiar with the Bible with another favored son Jesus and Jesus is also coming into the world under the promise that he will be the head of the family and indeed he will be the head of all things he will rule the universe like a rod of iron and Jesus is hated and they deliver him up because of envy in some strange quiet way what we're reading here about Joseph will later find its fruition in Jesus who God fulfills a promise to do something wonderful through this very dysfunctional home but back back to this story Jacob it says kept the saying in mind do you see that there in verse 11 I bet he did Jacob was a dreamer himself Jacob believed that God communicated great things concerning himself earlier on just a couple of chapters before Jacob has a dream and that God is going to give him all this land and he's going to give him all these descendants he's going to he's going to he promises something massive to Jacob through a dream and so when his son his favorite son is dreaming well everyone else can ridicule him he himself might feign a rebuke of him but deep down in his mind he began to wonder what is [21:29] God doing is God fulfilling a greater plan that was first promised to Abraham a promise which I now hold a promise which I've lived my life out under now even in the place of promise Hebron but I have seen so little of God accomplishing it I mean you think about Jacob at this point he believed clearly that God was going to do something so wonderful to him and through him that God was going to rescue and do something great for all the families of the earth through his family but at this point he still had fewer than 70 people in his own home how does God change the world with a core group of one family less than 70 in number and dysfunctional on every area yet he kept this in his mind the brother's dreams his brother's schemes take a look at verses 12 and following really through 28 you're going to see their conspiracy and then their cover up this is their scheme the conspiracy notice verse 12 the narrator breaks in to let us know that the brothers decide to put some distance between themselves and

Joseph now his brothers went to pasture their flocks near Shechem sure they did why would you want to hang around with a younger brother like that fortunately they knew that Joseph would be tucked under the wing of his dotting father and have to stay in camp and we can go get something done elsewhere I don't have to live with him anymore and so they move the flocks north some 40 miles into Shechem a place which had a horrid remembrance for the family for their sister was raped in Shechem and two of the brothers had actually slaughtered all the men in the village in Shechem so when they're getting out of town they're getting out of town they're leaving they've picked up roots they've left they don't pay taxes anymore in Hebron they move the flocks north separating themselves from Joseph but then here's Jacob coming along and says he wants to send

Joseph to him so Joseph on his way will eventually find them in Dothan and in verse 18 they saw him from afar and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him that's the conspiracy they conspired to kill him I don't really need to go into all the detail in the terrain of Reuben's attempt to rescue him for when they were tearing Joseph apart and ripping the robe that arrogant multicolored robe off his personages and putting him in the pit Reuben the oldest brother intends to somehow come back and rescue him yes there's an attempt at rescue an attempt to stop fratricide an attempt to stop one group that hates another group from taking a gun in their hands and killing them there's an attempt Reuben's attempt to say maybe there's another way around this where death and murder does not come from this no I don't need to have to go into all of that I don't even have to go into all of Judah's endeavor to remove him if Reuben tried to rescue him Judah said well there is another way we don't have to take up arms we don't have to get rid of the one we hate we don't have to kill anymore we can just sell him and so his his endeavor is to remove once and forever Israel's favored son from their presence don't we do this ourselves at times don't we just remove from our day to day lives those that cause us the most angst what what's happening though is they're not aware that their actions against Joseph are only serving God's purposes and God's purposes were that one day through Joseph they themselves would be saved this is extraordinary this is what I've been preaching to get to the last line in verse 28 they took Joseph to Egypt I take that to be the climactic center of the entire chapter let me break every good rule of storytelling let me tread right over all the remaining terrain of the text let me just say to you that at the end of verse 28 you've arrived at the main point of the chapter Joseph is taken to Egypt that's easily proven to be the main idea at this point in the story I mean just trace the plot verse 1 you open with Jacob living in Canaan and by verse 36 you will close with Joseph living in [27 : 02] Egypt and so the story the plot of the narrative given all of the conflicts in the home reaches a climax where he's now in Egypt let me stop long enough to answer what I think we should make of this what does Joseph's descent into Egypt mean for Jacob's family I wrote a paragraph here I like it you might not but let me give it a run the downward pull on the life trajectory of Israel's favored son was a sign a veiled sign an unseen expression of God's goodness to Israel's fallen sons who were sinners all and in need of what they knew not

I know that's too long too much too many so let me just slow it Joseph getting to Egypt this downward pull on the trajectory of his life was a sign strangely of God's goodness to preserve and protect God's favored son who would in time save the entire family God put Joseph in Egypt by design with the goal of accomplishing his plan to do something extraordinary for us all through this dysfunctional family and so what might that mean for the larger story later in time there's going to be another

Joseph that appears on the pages of scripture and this Joseph is also going to have a son his beloved son his only son the one that's named Jesus at this point and that Joseph is going to have a dream and that Joseph is going to have a dream that he's got to get his son into Egypt so that he would be protected from all of those who hate him and would kill him for God had a need and a plan to preserve that son so that he could do something great for the world now what I'm trying to say to you is simply this that we always look at Matthew and the coming of Jesus and the quotation of the Old Testament that he went into Egypt so that God might bring his son out of Egypt but what we neglect to see is that God sent him in to protect him before he'd get him out in fulfillment of a promise what has God set you into could you be on the early end the early end vividly through the downward trajectory of your own life that might in a hidden veiled way be the beginnings of God preserving something in you and through you that might have great wonderful effect yet for others down the road can I put it that way are you the first in a family that will rescue families are you the first in a line that returns and reverses the trajectory of a lineage is the pit into which you have been thrown been under the hand of God a cocoon through which you will emerge not only for your good but for the good of your family I'm trying to get us to reorient our take on your own story let me get it as clearly as I can in the form of the chapter somebody's got to go down before others can come up somebody's got to go in before others can come out somebody has to go through the suffering before the salvation can be had somebody has to give themselves in faith to a mysterious hidden hard hand of

God in order that he might be preserving something for someone else if that's the case then that just reorients your outlook on your own family on your own circumstances on your own life the

things which you want to get out of might be the very things that God is using to protect you that others might benefit from you just as Joseph went into the pit so too my Lord found himself behind a stone for three days just as my Savior gave his own life and died in like manner

[32 : 52] Joseph himself died to self died to the very plans of God believing somehow that God was going to work good out of it there's a wonderful story my favorite book that's about 1200 pages so you're probably not going to go after it by Thomas Mann called Joseph and his brothers and he envisions Joseph now on his way down to Egypt along the Mediterranean coming to a point at night when he knows that within just about eight miles back off to the side if he could escape if he could get out of the hand of God if he could get out of the hand of the Ishmaelites just an eight mile walk he would be back at home with Jacob his father and he resists the temptation to flee the very bonds in which he believed God's purposes were being worked out in his life that's what you need that's what I need that's what we need that

God works out his purposes his plans for you for your family not always through an upward trajectory but through the downward trajectory of a life that is constrained under the hidden hard hand of God Joseph goes to Egypt the cover up the conspiracy to kill which really resulted in the descent to Egypt now needs a cover up at the home I'm not talking about the kind of cover up you're going to bring when you go to the beach this summer no this is not the 57th street beach this not rainbow beach this not 63rd street beach this not 39th nor 31st this is the cover up of brothers who say how do we get out of this the guilty ones verse 29 he's gone what do we do they take the robe verse 31 they slaughter a goat they dip the blood

I love this phrase and they sent the robe of many colors probably found someone else to bring it for them and that individual that traveler brings the robe to Jacob and Jacob is under the illusion and the impression that his son is dead been torn by a wild beast the cover up brings some resolution for the brothers but interestingly when they arrive it is only a father's nightmare that they see verse 33 it is my son's robe a fierce animal has devoured him Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces then Jacob tore his garments and put sack clapped on his loins and mourned for his son many days and all his sons and 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 in mourning thus his father wept for him the loss of a 17 year old son some of you know it unimaginable grief inconsolable and rightly so he weeps he mourns am I talking to anybody yet in times of tragic death words fail loved ones fail he's not consoled by 11 sons multiple daughters although people and their concern for you fail their presence cannot restore words fail nevertheless you need to know this morning if you're in this condition

God's promises do not fail words fail but God's promises do not fail it's just that Jacob can't make sense of that in this Thomas Mann puts it this way crimson and swollen was his countenance from weeping yeah we've been there you've been there crimson and swollen is our countenance from weeping eyes puffy tragic ending a lifelong wound made worse with each passing day until that is time itself does what only time can do time does not heal all wounds let us be clear time does not make things right time will not bring loved ones back all time does is in some small measure deaden the violence of an early grief and put in its place a sorrow and sadness that will ever be just beneath the surface of your life and at a moment like that you're going to have to rest on a promise and I'm telling you that this story of

Joseph and his brothers is wedded to a promise that God will do something from the ashes that through death he can yet bring life but this is not the place today to linger there for Joseph is living the nightmare for those of us who know Jesus those of us who know the more of the story your own griefs and sorrows have a strange hope in the resurrection of his son thus far God's word a story for the summer a story that will help you make sense of your story but only if you understand your story in light of his larger story but be encouraged church family

[40 : 34] God has seen fit to take a complicated and dysfunctional family with schemes and conspiracies and cover ups to preserve a son who would later bring blessing to many may may you know the comfort of my Jesus who does the same for you our heavenly father we give ourselves this summer to you as we read this story help us to make sense of our lives help us to know what your plans might be for our life help us to be able to endure in light of what we see through the lives of these people in Jesus name we pray amen