

# Genesis 37

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're going to turn to that chapter. We perhaps read from chapter 39 of Genesis, but we'll go back to look at the chapter that we read. I just want to read the first, the opening verses of chapter 39 to get a text, because I think that this verse encapsulates everything about the 37th chapter, even though we can't see it at the time. In fact, it encapsulates everything about the life of Joseph.

This is the all-important fact that I hope comes out and that does come out in this well-known story, chapter 39 and verse 1. Now, Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The Lord was with Joseph. That's it. The Lord was with Joseph. The whole point about the story of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Israel is about how God fulfilled the promise that He had made to Abraham at first. Decades before, God had chosen Abraham from the place where He lived, and He had spoken to him and promised that He would give him a particular land, the land of Canaan, to be His own, to belong to His family. He had promised him more than that, that he would belong to God and that God would belong to him. God would be His God, and He and His children would belong to God. And this is the unfolding of that promise. And it shows us how as God unfolds that promise, it doesn't necessarily mean that things don't go wrong and that we don't have lots to learn. Being a child of God or a follower of God involves continuously discovering about ourselves, and sometimes that that can only happen through the most painful of experiences. And such was the case of Joseph. Joseph is not just a nice story of how someone in unfortunate circumstances at first, how through the most painful experiences can result in a happy ending, because there are millions of people whose lives don't result in a happy ending.

This is not primarily about Joseph. It's about God and God's relationship to Joseph, his relationship to all of his people, his faithfulness, his kindness and his love, and God's mysterious ability to work through the most complicated of situations. And these stories are given to us to demonstrate and to prove to us how faithful God is to his people. If you're a child of God today, God is faithful. The love of God is extraordinary towards you. It's the one thing that we cannot and will not change and that cannot increase and cannot decrease. It's the love of God that has been demonstrated supremely in the person of Jesus Christ in giving his son and giving himself on the cross.

[ 3 : 56 ] That's what the Bible is about. Whether it's Old Testament or New Testament, it's about the faithfulness and the marvelous love of God as it works through through the ordinary experiences of ordinary people.

These experiences I'd like to just touch on this evening. There's no time to go into them in any great detail, but I just hope that tonight we're able to, by following through the events that take place in this family, a large family, 12 sons, a family that was promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They are a family that have been chosen out of every other tribe and nation of the world to belong to God, to be chosen by God, and for him to work through his own plan and his own purpose. It's about family life, and it doesn't spare us any of the detail, the conflict, and the tension that very often takes place. I would hasten, I would even go as far as to say, that always takes place in some form or another, in every family. Even the families that belong to God experience tension and conflict, and within them we have to face ourselves and our own jealousies and our own pride, and the way in which our characters, they conflict with one another, and there's friction from time to time, sometimes more than others, sometimes depending on the kind of personalities that we have. And God has his work cut out for him, dare I say, for many of us, as he works his own way, and he teaches us, and he leads us as to how to live obedient lives. And living obedient lives is not just taking boxes, it's being the kind of people that God wants us to be, and that God is working within

us. It's a transformation from the inside, not just on the outside. Too many of us concentrate on our behavior on the outside only, and we neglect what takes place in our heart. But this chapter, it shows us, and if it doesn't, I don't know what else, what does. It shows us how our behavior begins on the inside. This chapter begins with favoritism. Favoritism which was wrong, it was foolish.

[ 6 : 31 ] Favoritism in which Jacob, the father of all of the sons, he quite evidently favored Joseph more than anyone else, and made a coat for him that made him stand out in front of, as opposed to the rest of his family. And if anything was going to inevitably arouse jealousy and bad feeling within the family, surely it was something like this, in which they saw their own father, who they respected, because that was the culture of those days, placing attention upon him. Favoritism in any family is foolish, to say the least. I would even venture to say that it's wrong, because every child that God has given us, if we are in the privileged position tonight of having children, every child is a gift from God, a precious gift from God, and whatever their abilities, and whatever their personalities, and however much their personality may accord with our own, we have no right to show one favoritism over and against another. Every one of them is a gift from God, and it's important for us to see them that way, and to see ourselves as accountable to God in the way in which we lovingly and humbly and caringly bring our children up. But whatever care and love Joseph had for the rest of his brothers, it's clear, I should have said Jacob had for the rest of his brothers, it is very clear that Joseph stood out. And in actual fact, what Jacob was doing was harming Joseph. I'm quite sure he thought he was doing him good, showing him love as a father, but in actual fact, he was harming him in terms of his relationship with his other brothers. And it's perhaps an opportune moment for us, particularly if we're in that position, to stop and to think and reflect as to how we are bringing up our children. There's so much wisdom in the Bible as to how parents bring up their children.

It's an important feature of the covenant community, and we are reminded of this every time we have a baptism service in the church here, and when we remind ourselves of how God has covenanted himself towards his people and how he places the sign of the covenant in baptism. And thereafter, we are required as parents to keep those important promises that we make and to bring up our children in the nurture, the care, the love, the affection, the knowledge of the gospel. That's the promise that we make whenever we stand here at the front of our church, a very serious occasion.

It's a promise that requires the most practical outworking, one of which is certainly not to show favoritism. Sometimes I feel that there are two extremes in parenting. Sometimes we can go to one extreme where we say, well, this is the way I was brought up, and I'm going to bring up my children in the opposite way. Perhaps some of our experiences were not so happy when we were brought up, and so we decide, right, that's it. I'm going to bring up my children in exactly the opposite way from what I was brought up. And that's equally wrong. There's got to be a balance somewhere. Of course, for some people, it's a convenient excuse to blame the parents for the wrong that they themselves have done, and I would ask you not to do that. Whatever your past is, what's important is what God is saying to us, and the way that God is showing us how to live. And whilst our past is very important, the way we were brought up is very important, we are responsible for how and when and if we listen to God, to the voice of God, and we are all responsible for whether we take seriously and put into practice what He says to us and come to faith in Jesus. The other extreme, of course, is when we just bring up our children exactly the way that we were brought up, regardless of the fact that there were certain aspects of our upbringing which we know were wrong, and that's what happened here. Jacob himself was favored by his mother. His mother preferred Jacob to his twin brother Esau, and so therefore he went on to favor one of his children. The Bible commands us to look objectively at the way in which we bring up our children and behave in our families, and to conduct ourselves in fairness and in the sight of God and in equity, because God is the God of truth and justice. And so that's the first thing I see anyway in this chapter, the folly of favoritism in any family. Now, you could say, of course, that this was all part of God's plan. Most of us, if not everyone, knows the story of Joseph and how Joseph, what happened to him, how he was sold to Potiphar, and how he eventually ended up in jail, and how he interpreted the dreams of the butler and the jailer, and how he was brought up, brought into the palace of Pharaoh, and how he became the prime minister, and how God brought the whole thing together and worked it out for good.

[ 12 : 19 ] And you may say, well, why are you finding fault? Was this not all God's plan? Well, if you're going to live like that, if you're going to apply that logic, then nothing matters, does it? It

doesn't matter how I behave. Because I could use the excuse, well, it doesn't matter whether I'm obedient or non-obedient. It doesn't matter how I live, or what I say, or what I think, how I conduct myself. It's all part of God's plan anyway.

Just because God has a plan does not give us the excuse to do whatever we want to do. We have no right to live as we want to and to give in to our own impulses. When we know that they're wrong, God requires us to live lives that are obedient to him, the way in which he has shown us how to live. And these things are given in the Bible to show that even those who were called by God, they have faults and deficiencies and failures. And that ought to be a huge encouragement to us, because despite those faults, God still brought about his own plan to pass. And his love for Jacob and Joseph and his children never waned in the slightest. God was committed to them. And isn't it a great thing tonight? That we know that despite the ways in which we fail, we'll see this even more in a moment, that we can still lay hold upon God tonight. And I would ask us tonight that all of us, as we're conscious of our many, many weaknesses, and Joseph had his weaknesses as well, but as we are made conscious of our many weaknesses, that we come back to the Lord and that we confess our weaknesses and that we recognize his sovereignty over us and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

But then on Joseph's part, there was the folly of his immaturity. I have no doubt whatsoever that Joseph had the dreams he told his brothers about. I have big questions about the wisdom of telling his dreams to his brothers. And his action in telling his dreams to his brothers, it smacks to me not so much of a person who is doing what is right, but a person who is tripping up and acting in a foolish and a not very circumspect manner. Well, one of these dreams, he was in the field and his sheaf stood up while the others gathered round and bowed down to his. He told his dream to his brothers and they were raging at him.

To make matters worse, when he had the second dream in which the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to him, the sun and the moon being his father and his mother and the eleven stars being the rest of his brothers bowing down to him, they knew perfectly well. So did he. He knew perfectly well what those, what dream meant, that it was the same message, that he was being elevated above his brothers.

But I really have a huge problem with whether or not it was right for him or wise for him to tell his brothers that dream because it aggravated an already tense situation in which his brothers were already conscious of the favoritism that the father was showing to him. This added fuel to the fire and added to an already tense situation. But Joseph was a young man.

[ 16 : 36 ] And he was a foolish young man sometimes. Youth, the foolishness of youth gets us into trouble from time to time. If I look back tonight over the events in my life when I was 17 years old, I would want to run a mile. I would want nobody to ever, ever find out the kind of things that I did and said. Things that were impulsive and foolish, particularly things that I said.

I'm sure that many of us in here tonight can look back to when we were young with embarrassment and shame. And I was a young Christian at the time. I was converted. And even then, I have to say that my life was far, so far from perfect that sometimes I'm almost tempted to wish I could live it over again.

I don't, that's a silly thing to ever wish. But yet, the additional measure of wisdom in older age, it certainly throws light on the foolishness that very many of us are guilty of in younger age.

But what I want you to notice tonight is how God overcomes and works through that foolishness. God still was working his plan and his purpose out in Joseph. And it involved. Now again, this does not give us an excuse to say what we want, when we want, how we want. There is a way of saying things. And no doubt, there would have been an opportunity at some point in time for Joseph to share his dream with his brothers, but for him to do it at this particular moment, when the situation was already tense and already hostile, made the matter ten times worse. Now, we know that God, that was too, part of God's mysterious providential plan, which would work out in his own way. But that did not give him an excuse to be foolish. And neither does it give us an excuse either. We have to ask God for wisdom.

Christians, whatever age they are, and I'm still, and you are too, we're still learning what wisdom means. Wisdom means the wisdom of the wisdom that the Bible talks about is where we, where the fear of God, the fear of the Lord begins, is the beginning of wisdom in which the Lord takes the central place in my heart and in my will and in my decision-making and in my choices and in my behavior. So, I'm not simply concerned about what I do, the choice of right over wrong. That is

certainly the primary concern.

[ 19 : 51 ] But there's also the way in which I do things, the way in which I speak, the kindness, the humility that I must show as a child of God. The number one attribute for any Christian, young or old, is his or her humility. And we must ask God not only for the wisdom to know when to say something and when not to say something, not just to speak the truth, but to speak the truth in love. And love, remember, is regarding other people as better than ourselves, but also the wisdom to know the time or the place.

We're all challenged by our own deficiencies. And we are all, we come to church this evening to rediscover our own deficiencies. And it's by that that the Lord shows us his own determined faithfulness towards us to change us, to work within us through the person of the Holy Spirit. Whatever there was lacking in Joseph, nothing could justify the hatred that his brothers showed towards him. It's clear that they harbored a grudge, a long-standing grudge against their brother. It began with their jealousy, a jealousy that Joseph was somehow favored by their father. And like I say, that jealousy grew worse and worse with the actions of Joseph.

In the minds of many people, jealousy is a smaller sin. And I guess the way, the reason they think that is because it's a sin that takes place on the inside. Something that is a matter of my thinking. And sometimes we are inclined to think that the sin that takes place without other people seeing it is less serious than the kind of sin that we show to others by the things that we do or say.

[ 22 : 12 ] But the Bible is concerned that we should check what is on the inside, in our hearts, in our minds, the thoughts that we allow to fester and grow and develop within our hearts, which if left unchecked, will develop into the outward deeds that the Bible also talks about.

And if anything, if any chapter proves that very thing, it's this one. If you want to see a proof of how jealousy manifests itself, then look at this chapter and look at the consequences of the hatred that his brothers had for Joseph. They eventually would have killed him, their own brother.

Now, this is not some heathen family for whom life is cheap. This is a family who have been chosen by God, who have been chosen by God, and who have been chosen by God, and who have been brought up to serve and to follow the living and the true God. And if this can happen to them, it can happen to anyone.

This is what happens when our natural sinful inclinations are given a free reign. And when we find ourselves allowing these feelings that start off in such a tiny way, the seeds of jealousy or covetousness, if you allow them to take place, and if you don't stop it, and if you don't ask the Lord to intervene and to prevent worse things happening, that's what we're capable of. All of us are capable of the most the most awful deeds. Imagine these men had killed their brother, which could so easily have happened.

They were going to do it. If it hadn't been for Reuben, they would have done it. That's the frightening thing about this chapter. They would have killed him. Imagine that had happened. Imagine what they would never have forgiven themselves. I find it hard to imagine how they forgave themselves in any case. It was only afterwards when they saw how God somehow was involved in this whole sordid scenario. They came to terms with the fact that God was in even their evil deed. That's not to say that he caused it, but God was working through even just in the same way as he worked through the hatred that was meted out against the Lord Jesus by Pilate and the scribes and the Pharisees and the crowd who cried, crucify him, crucify him, and they put him to death, the cruel death of the cross. God was reconciling the world to himself. That's what we're told in the deeds of evil men. And yet, even there, that does not make their deeds right. There, the brothers were just as guilty of their hatred, even although God was somehow providentially using this whole incident for his own purpose.

[ 25 : 57 ] It's a frightening thought, discovering what we are ourselves, and only the Bible can show us what we really are. Don't ever think that somehow or other that you are above the actions of other people. You read about people in the newspaper and you hear about people in the news committing the most horrendous things. These are ordinary people, just like you. They may have had different background. They may have, their deeds may have been the result of different events and occasions happening in their lives, but they are ordinary people. Every one of us, the Bible tells us, our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked. And it's only when we come to terms with that fact that we then come to realize how much we need a savior and how much the Bible has to say to us about Jesus coming into the world to rescue us from sin. And we would be wise this evening to recognize ourselves. Every one of us, you and I know what it's like to be jealous. But tonight, I hope

that we never underestimate what jealousy can do or what covetousness can do or what hatred can do. And remember that hatred is simply when we wish that someone else wasn't there. You may be appalled at any suggestion that you might actually kill someone, but remember that hatred is when we wish that someone wasn't there. And I think if we were innocent, if we were honest with ourselves this evening, we would have to say that the seeds of hatred lie in each one of us. So then let's come to the Lord and ask him to prevent us going any further.

And if you haven't experienced the new life that God can give you in Jesus Christ, as he comes and washes our sin away. And that's the great thing about being a Christian, that God takes our past and all that we have given ourselves to in the past, the ways in which we have allowed ourselves to sink deeper and deeper into our own quagmire of sin and deceit and cheating. God can take all that tonight through Jesus Christ and he can wash it and make it whiter than the snow.

And that's why the gospel is so thorough and so complete. That's why the world tonight needs the gospel, because it's only by coming to know Jesus that the world can be changed and that the corruption of this world, the kind of corruption that we see here in chapter 37. Look at what you see in this chapter. And you see it in greater or less form all over the world. As we look at the news channel and as we read our papers, we see a world that is full of darkness and hopelessness and hatred and murder.

God can change that. He can change that through the Lord Jesus Christ. The fact was that these brothers, they thought that they could get away with what they did, but they didn't because the wages, because the Bible tells us that, be sure your sin will find you out. It is absolutely impossible to hide ourselves from God. They were able to cheat their father. They were able to pretend to him that an animal had attacked Joseph. And they were successful in that.

Were they, I wonder, did Jacob ever suspect through the actions of his sons that they might have been lying? I just wonder sometimes.

[ 30 : 09 ] Obviously, he took them at their word when they showed him the coat of many colors with the blood on it. That's what it looked like. That was the evidence that was in front of him.

And so, of course, his life collapsed. And he spent the next year, year on year, in misery and sadness and desolation. You know what? So did they.

They had to live with the guilt of what they had done. A guilt that preyed on their mind, I believe, every single day and that never let them go. And I believe that every one of these sons of Jacob, that they lived to regret what they had done so much. But they couldn't. They got themselves, they fell into their own trap. And they got themselves into a situation. That's what happens when we allow ourselves to take over. And when we give ourselves to our own impulses and temptations and things that we know are sinful. What God has done, he's implanted in every single one of us what we call a conscience. I'm not quite sure how to define our conscience. Sometimes people call it a voice. It's like a voice because it's an alarm. And we know what the alarm is about just the same way as a smoke alarm. I hope we've all got smoke alarms in our homes because many a life has been saved by the installation of a smoke alarm. And an alarm, if you hear a smoke alarm going off, you only, it can only be one thing. Well, it's usually the toast that's being burned. But even then, that's okay because you know that it's working. And you know that if it ever goes off at three o'clock in the morning, that the house is on fire or there's something's on fire. And so you have to get up and you have to get out of the house. It's the way in which we know that something is wrong and that our lives are in danger. Well, God has given us a smoke alarm that testifies within us when we do wrong. There's just somehow we know. Somehow we know. It's part of our humanity that we know that we're accountable to God. Oh, there's so many people tonight that refuse to admit it.

They will never admit that they're accountable to God. And yet they cannot escape this testimony that God has placed in the hearts of every single one of us that tells us that there is right and there is wrong. You can't explain it. It's just there. It's the Bible that explains it. It's only when we take it seriously and we open the pages of the Bible and that we discover that God has given certain rules and regulations for our good, out of love for the human race. He's shown us how to live. And so that means that when we refuse to follow the manufacturer's instructions, either towards ourselves or towards other people, but mostly towards God, then things will go wrong and we will know that we are going wrong. The problem is, of course, that once you have become accustomed to searing your conscience and to dulling your conscience, then you don't hear it anymore. It's hard to think of a smoke alarm, isn't it, that you can't hear because there's a piercing sound that goes off and can't, you can't get away from it, it wakes you up, but you can take the battery out. And I wonder if there's

anyone here tonight and that's what you've done, you've taken the battery out. Because God's sound troubles you so much and it annoys you so much because it's a constant reminder that you're on the wrong road.

And I would ask you tonight that instead of taking the battery out, that you listen to the voice of God. Because it's as we listen to his message that we discover there's another way in which instead of running away from him, you actually run towards him. And instead of refusing to listen to Jesus, to have anything to do with him, that you want everything to do with him.

And you accept him as your savior and as your Lord and his death at Calvary and what it did for us and how it can wash you from all the guilt and the sin and the slime and the ugliness and the shame that you and I are guilty of. There's only one way to be set free from that sin. At the end of the day, Joseph's brothers, they thought that they were satisfying their own determination to get rid of their brother. And they thought, I fully believe that they thought that if they could only get rid of him, their lives would be so much happier. Well, they weren't. And neither will yours be if you think that by achieving your own ends that you're going to find fulfillment. You won't because you've been made for God. And it's only by finding the Lord that you will discover what real fulfillment and real peace with God means through the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

[ 36 : 09 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.