

LORD OF THE DREAMS

GENESIS 37:1-36 OCTOBER 19, 2022

Have you ever had a good dream that turned bad? In 1963 Martin Luther King told the world that he had a dream. Four years later, he told NBC News, *"That dream that I had has...turned into a nightmare."* He went on to speak about the hatred and violence permeating American society. The American people were, in his assessment, insensitive and dull of conscience. While he held out hope for the future, he said, "I've come to see that we have many more difficult days ahead."¹ The difficulties would include the loss of his own life.

Genesis 37 centers around two dreams. Those dreams turn into a nightmare period not only for Joseph, but for the whole family of faith. But we know the end of the story. What man meant for evil, God meant for good. It's easy for us to read this tale and dismiss the difficulty Joseph endured. But imagine *you* had to live through these dark days. Which of us wouldn't have prayed to God, "Lord, haven't You promised us land and blessing and protection? Didn't You promise to take care and watch over and guard us?"

The truth is, all of us have had the experience of some life dream turning into a nightmare of difficulty. Maybe we haven't been trafficked into slavery, but we know this life is not always smooth sailing. When we face the troubled waters of life it's not so easy for us to wave the difficulties away and say, "What man means for evil, God means for good." But, isn't it interesting that *we know the end of our story just like we know the end of Joseph's?* We may not know the particulars - the dates and times and locations - but we know how this story ends. It ends in glory. It ends in deliverance. It ends with God restoring all things. It ends in an everlasting dream, where you and I are elevated to status of royalty, surrounded by the family of faith, with every hurt and every fear wiped away.

Our paths may not be as harsh as Joseph's was - or they may be worse. But as we read his story, we can learn about the life of faith, the faithfulness of God, and the foes we face along the way.

Genesis 37:1-2a - Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.

²These are the family records of Jacob...

The chapter starts with God's people in Canaan and ends with Joseph forcibly taken from it. There is a spiritual conflict being waged in our world. We have a powerful enemy whose goal is to derail you, destroy you, and devour you if he can. But our Lord is stronger in every circumstance.

Genesis 37:2b - At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended sheep with his brothers. The young man was working with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought a bad report about them to their father.

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/king-my-dream-has-turned-into-a-nightmare-41107011940>

Other than chapter 38, the rest of Genesis will tell us Joseph's story. That's 26% of the whole book! His experience has so much to teach us about suffering and faithfulness and providence and grace and endurance and God's power and trusting the Lord. Joseph also foreshadows the work of Christ in many ways, particularly how He saves the undeserving and wretched people around Him. While many of Joseph's circumstances are tragic, his saga is really a triumph of grace.

At age 17, he worked with Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, in a sort of apprenticeship.² But Jacob's plan is to put Joseph in charge of the family business and he uses Joseph to keep tabs on his sons.

Some linguists say the term used for "bad report" is always used in the Old Testament as a *false* report.³ Was Joseph being a tattletale in this passage? A lot of commentators think so - they label him spoiled and naive - that he went around boasting proudly. That's possible. On the other hand, Jacob's other sons *weren't* trustworthy. They were often involved in scandals. Maybe Joseph's report was his attempt to distance himself from some shady thing his older brothers were doing.⁴

While we can't clearly grade Joseph yet, we have to question *Jacob's* decision-making. If he wanted Joseph to apprentice, well, his *other* sons aren't good mentors. On top of that, what does he expect will result from having his teenage son acting as informant (and later manager) over this rough and tumble group of killers that make up his family?

Genesis 37:3 - ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than his other sons because Joseph was a son born to him in his old age, and he made a long-sleeved robe for him.

What a sad verse. Favoritism was a problem in this family for many long decades, but here Jacob openly flaunts his preference in front of everyone. It's as if Joseph is the only *true* son and the rest are employees or slaves. As a result, there is an incredible amount of family tension and it's largely because the father is not loving his family properly. God was working in his life, but this is a hold-over that Jacob hasn't let the Lord deal with. And it's so disappointing to see Jacob acting this way. He *knew* what it felt like to have a father love someone else and not him. But here he is doing it to a much larger degree. Not preferring one son to another, but preferring one son to *eleven* others! Favoritism is incredibly destructive and we need to avoid it at home and in the church.

What about this coat? Maybe you noticed my version said it was a "long-sleeved robe." What's up with that? Do we need to get Andrew Lloyd Webber on the phone? Scholars admit the words are obscure. The Greek translation of the Old Testament called this a coat of many colors. The consensus is that it *could* be a multi-colored coat, or it could be a coat that went down to the ankles and had sleeves to the wrists, or it could be a robe with a bunch of embroidery on it. We see a similar coat being given to David's daughters - specifically Tamar wears one in 2 Samuel 13. Whatever it was, it was meant to be a symbol of favor, of preference, and of Jacob's plan to give Joseph authority and inheritance over his brothers.

² Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

³ R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*

⁴ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

Genesis 37:4 - ⁴When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not bring themselves to speak peaceably to him.

Another rendering of this is that they “could not so much as *greet* Joseph.”⁵ They were not just annoyed, they weren’t just a little envious - they had *deep* hatred for Joseph. They hated that their father preferred him. They hated the idea of him ruling over them. They hated being around him.

Genesis 37:5 - ⁵Then Joseph had a dream. When he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.

Many commentators say Joseph was being an arrogant brat, but what do we know about dreams thus far in Genesis? Dreams are very significant, especially to *this* family. Their father would’ve told them many times about the dream of the ladder and the angels that he had in Bethel. Visions like this were one of the ways God spoke to this family. If that is the case, would it have been right for Joseph to *not* share what had been revealed? Do we withhold the word of God?

Genesis 37:6-8 - ⁶He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: ⁷There we were, binding sheaves of grain in the field. Suddenly my sheaf stood up, and your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.” ⁸“Are you really going to reign over us?” his brothers asked him. “Are you really going to rule us?” So they hated him even more because of his dream and what he had said.

The brothers understood that Joseph’s dream was meant to be understood prophetically. Now, they *rejected* the dream, but it was clear that was the message: In the future, Joseph would be a ruler over the brothers.

God speaks prophetically. People can look at the prophecies in the Bible and say, “That’s not going to happen.” But they’re just as wrong as Joseph’s brothers were. They scoff but, in reality, Joseph was *already* in a position of leadership over them - at least in his father’s mind and plan.

For the third time we’re told that their hate grew toward Joseph. Hate is never useful or productive or beneficial in the life of a believer. Hate is a cheap commodity these days being hawked from platforms and pulpits and politicians and publications. But Christians, we are *commanded* by God to walk away from hate. We may *not* hate our brother or our neighbors or our enemies or our leaders. We cannot hate people and claim that we walk in the light.⁶ We are to hate *evil*, but we are to love others. This is what God has done for us. He hates our sin, but loves *us* unreservedly.

Ephesians 4:31-32 (NIV) - Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

⁵ *Walke*

⁶ 1 John 2:9

Don't buy into the hate that infects our culture.

Genesis 37:9-11 - ⁹Then he had another dream and told it to his brothers. "Look," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun, moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰He told his father and brothers, and his father rebuked him. "What kind of dream is this that you have had?" he said. "Am I and your mother and your brothers really going to come and bow down to the ground before you?" ¹¹His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Jacob wanted Joseph to be in charge of his brothers, which was outside the normal order of things, and he realized that God seemed to have a plan for this younger brother, as He had for Jacob, but when he heard the idea of he, *Jacob*, bowing down, he was unwilling to accept it. He rebuked his son, even though it seems they understood that when someone had a dream like this twice it was a clear message from the Lord. Listen to what Joseph will later tell Pharaoh:

Genesis 41:32 - ³²Since the dream was given twice to Pharaoh, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and he will carry it out soon.

Jacob asks Joseph the same thing his brothers did: "You don't *really* think that's going to happen, do you?" We believe the Lord. Even when circumstances seem to make His promises impossible, even when the whole world around us is going in the opposite direction, we cling to the Word of God, which will never pass away. Let God be true and every man a liar.

Genesis 37:12 - ¹²His brothers had gone to pasture their father's flocks at Shechem.

This raises the eyebrows. Shechem was the place they had to high-tail it out of. But now, a few years later, they felt strong and secure enough to bring their flocks back and make themselves at home. But danger was brewing - not from the Canaanites, but from *within* the family. It goes to show us that things may look like they're going well but if the spiritual life is not on track, then disaster isn't far away. Our enemy is waiting to pounce and devour. This family had wealth and felt secure - they had their run of the place, but they were about to crumble into sin.

Genesis 37:13-14 - ¹³Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers, you know, are pasturing the flocks at Shechem. Get ready. I'm sending you to them." "I'm ready," Joseph replied. ¹⁴Then Israel said to him, "Go and see how your brothers and the flocks are doing, and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the Hebron Valley, and he went to Shechem.

Joseph must've been a very capable and responsible young man. This trip would be more than 50 miles - a five day journey from home.⁷ Now, Joseph *may* have been a little naive, but it would've been obvious that his brothers really, really disliked him. He didn't suspect that they were going to

⁷ Gordon Wenham *Genesis*

try to *kill* him, but you can't have this level of animosity without it showing. So we see Joseph ready and willing to step into a very tough job. He's faithful, even when the going gets tough.

In this way, Joseph is a great example to us. Are we ready to be sent on assignment by the Father? Those assignments won't always be pleasure cruises. Sometimes they will be into a hostile environment among people who have no interest in showing us kindness. Hopefully when the Father calls we're able to immediately answer, "I'm ready."

Joseph didn't know it, but at this moment he became a living sacrifice. Through his life, through his suffering and faithfulness, multiplied *thousands* of people would be saved from death. The cost of this heroic feat would be high - it would require that Joseph's life be forfeit to the plan of God.

Genesis 37:15-17 - ¹⁵ A man found him there, wandering in the field, and asked him, "What are you looking for?" ¹⁶ "I'm looking for my brothers," Joseph said. "Can you tell me where they are pasturing their flocks?" ¹⁷ "They've moved on from here," the man said. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.' " So Joseph set out after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

This is a beautiful moment of providence. All of these stories remind us that when God calls us to serve Him, He doesn't expect us to do it on our own. He does the heavy lifting. He provides and prepares and pilots for us. It was God who brought the animals to the ark. It was God who provided the ram in place of the son and God who brought Abraham's servant to the very spot where Rebekah would be. Whether this "man" was a heavenly being or a random individual, it was the Lord who placed him in the right place at the right time *twice*. It's a comforting reminder that you may *feel* lost but God will never lose you. He can find you as you wander in a random field.

There's also a lovely typology of Jesus here. Joseph says, "I'm looking for my brothers." The brothers who hated him. The brothers who were going to hurt him. The brothers who wouldn't speak one peaceful word to him. The brothers who didn't consider *Joseph* much of a brother at all. In fact, later they'll say to Jacob, "Does this coat belong to *your son*," not, "our brother." It reminds us of how Jesus came searching for us and He does not shy away from calling us His own. He identifies with us, even when we are at war with Him. And not only did He go searching, like Joseph we see He goes the *extra* miles to reach us.

Genesis 37:18-20 - ¹⁸ They saw him in the distance, and before he had reached them, they plotted to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another, "Oh, look, here comes that dream expert! ²⁰ So now, come on, let's kill him and throw him into one of the pits. We can say that a vicious animal ate him. Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams!"

There's a hateful sarcasm here. The name they used means "lord of the dreams."⁸ These men cultivated envy and hatred in their hearts and now the fruit is coming off the trees. Earlier they slaughtered a town because someone defiled their sister. Now they plan to slaughter their own

⁸ CSB Study Bible Notes

flesh and blood because they're annoyed with him! And not just kill him, but then throw his corpse in a cistern. One scholar notes that the denial of a proper burial was a horrifying atrocity in this era.⁹

The brothers think they will destroy Joseph's dreams, but they simply prove once again that men can mock God, they can ignore Him and fight against His work, but they cannot overthrow the Lord. Our God is Sovereign and His will *will* be done. God cannot fail.

Genesis 37:21-22 - ²¹**When Reuben heard this, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let's not take his life."** ²²**Reuben also said to them, "Don't shed blood. Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him"—intending to rescue him from them and return him to his father.**

Poor Reuben is the Fredo of the family. He tries to make these moves but they never work out. As the oldest, Reuben would bear the ultimate responsibility for this situation. Perhaps he was hoping to deliver Joseph back safely and get into his father's good graces after his failed takeover bid with Bilhah. He does take charge here, at least in the moment. He's not *suggesting* to his brothers, he's *telling* them, "We are *not* going to kill him."¹⁰ But then he disappears somewhere, giving the brothers the opening they needed to treat Joseph cruelly. Reuben reminds me of Peter in the Garden. He's got plans and ideas, he's very self-assured, but without the work of the Spirit, all the plans come out askew and fall to pieces. We need the Holy Spirit to be directing us and empowering us and shaping our lives so that the *Lord's* plans can be accomplished through us.

Genesis 37:23-24 - ²³**When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped off Joseph's robe, the long-sleeved robe that he had on.** ²⁴**Then they took him and threw him into the pit. The pit was empty, without water.**

Eugene Roop writes, "*Cisterns existed to catch rain so that there would be water for flocks during the dry season. Pasturing flocks where the cisterns are dry seems unusual. But the sterility of the cistern reflects the family situation. There is no life in either place.*"¹¹

On top of that, we see how sin poisons us. Let's think it through: They throw Joseph into this empty well, assuming he'll starve and die. Then, as they graze, they'll eventually come back to this cistern to water their flocks, only now any water inside will be toxic for their animals - poisoned by the body of their brother. But they're blinded by hate, ignoring the consequences of their sin.

Clothing is a big theme in Joseph's story. His father had clothed him in this special robe, God wanted to clothe him with something much better. That first robe was torn off, the way Jesus' purple robe was removed before His sacrifice. Then they are wrapped in humble clothes - one as a slave, the other for His burial - until finally they are brought out, clothed in majesty!

⁹ *Alter*

¹⁰ *Hughes*

¹¹ Eugene F. Roop *Genesis*

Genesis 37:25 - ²⁵ **They sat down to eat a meal, and when they looked up, there was a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were carrying aromatic gum, balsam, and resin, going down to Egypt.**

This is a chilling scene. In chapter 42 we're told that, as they sat eating (probably the fine food sent from Jacob by Joseph's hand),¹² Joseph cried out in anguish, pleading with them for help. This is sociopathic behavior, topped only by their willingness to sell their own brother into slavery.

One interesting side note - Uncle Ishmael was actually still alive at this point.¹³ This caravan was full of the Hebrew's cousins.

Genesis 37:26-28 - ²⁶ **Judah said to his brothers, "What do we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷ Come on, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay a hand on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh," and his brothers agreed. ²⁸ When Midianite traders passed by, his brothers pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold him for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took Joseph to Egypt.**

Jesus is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. Here we have the Weasel of the Tribe of Judah. He reveals himself here and in the next passage to be utterly depraved and he convinces his brothers to sell Joseph for silver amounting to a stick of butter. 8 ounces.¹⁴

Genesis 37:29-30 - ²⁹ **When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. ³⁰ He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone! What am I going to do?"**

Reuben didn't want to do anything wrong, but he still went along with it. Maybe he helped tear Joseph's robe off half-heartedly, but he was wholly guilty of this evil. Now, the 10 brothers work out a conspiracy to trick their father.

Genesis 37:31-33 - ³¹ **So they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the robe in its blood. ³² They sent the long-sleeved robe to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it. Is it your son's robe or not?" ³³ His father recognized it. "It is my son's robe," he said. "A vicious animal has devoured him. Joseph has been torn to pieces!"**

Once again, Genesis drives home the spiritual truth that we reap what we sow. Jacob had deceived his father by killing a goat, now the same thing is happening to him.

Interestingly, he is immediately convinced. He doesn't ask any questions, doesn't investigate. He simply takes their word for it, even though he knew they weren't trustworthy and that they were absolutely capable of the most vicious kind of violence.

¹² Hughes

¹³ Alter

¹⁴ Hughes

Before Jacob was walking with the Lord he was a very *crafty* man. Now he *is* walking with the Lord, albeit imperfectly. But as the Lord works in his heart, we see he's not the crafty schemer anymore. He's a meeker man, a more humble man, a man more willing to trust. Overall, that's a good thing, but in this situation he is deceived.

We're told the brothers *sent* the robe - they didn't *bring* it themselves. Kenneth Mathews writes, "*the text shows them to be cowards as well as liars.*"¹⁵

Genesis 37:34-35 - ³⁴ Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth around his waist, and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ All his sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said. "I will go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." And his father wept for him.

Jacob announces that he will *never* stop mourning. This was a terrible tragedy, but refusing comfort in life is not a good thing. Because of what Christ has done, because of the power of the resurrection, no sorrow is so great that it should swallow up all our hope. The Lord doesn't expect us not to mourn the tragedies of life - Jesus wept even when He knew He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead - but just as love, not hate, is to define our lives, so too hope, not despair should define us. 2 Corinthians says that God comforts us in *all* our affliction then sends us out to comfort others in *any* kind of affliction. Life *is* tragic. Be comforted by the hope God has given.

Genesis 37:36 - ³⁶ Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and the captain of the guards.

It seemed hopeless for Joseph. We know the *opposite* was true. A marvelous feat of grace was just beginning. God is always in charge. He cannot be stopped. We can trust Him, not just for Joseph's story, but for our own.

Do you feel like you're stuck in a bad dream of some sort? Go to the end of the story. Take to heart the hope and the promise that the Lord gives. Don't make the mistake of giving in to hate or hopelessness or resignation. The Lord of the dreams is the Lord of our lives. Be ready and go after Him as a living sacrifice, knowing He will work His astounding grace through you until you are brought to your glorious completion.

¹⁵ Kenneth A. Mathews *Genesis 11:27-50:26 The New American Commentary*