

Genesis 37 and 45 Joseph and his brothers

Genesis 37

37Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. 2This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. 3Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. 4But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

5Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. 6He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. 7There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." 8His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. 9He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." 10But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" 11So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

12Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." 14So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, 15and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" 16"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." 17The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. 18They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." 21But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 22Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" —that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

23So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 25Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. 28When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt. 29When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. 30He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?"

31Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. 32They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." 33He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has

devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” 34Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father bewailed him. 36Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.

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Genesis 45

45Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, ‘Send everyone away from me.’ So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 3Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come closer to me.’ And they came closer. He said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. 7God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. 10You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. 11I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.” 12And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. 13You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.’ 14Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

SERMON

I'm always amazed by scripture – and even more amazed by people who think that the Bible somehow isn't real...that it's only for people who are a little naive, or hypocritical, or who don't know what real life is about.

Scripture is as real as it gets. I don't know about you, but this story speaks to my guts. Deeper than I'd like, if you want to know the truth.

It's about betrayal. And abuse. It's about feeling rejected by your family, not accepted by your brothers and sisters. About family favourites, and how much pain can be caused when a parent has a favourite. It's about a little kid being treated cruelly by older people in the family – in fact abused by them.

It's about more than anything in your life, wanting the approval of your Dad, and it's about the way a family can deal with, and maybe overcome old hurts that are real and deep.

It doesn't get any more real than this. Bible study is not for wimps. It forces you to look at yourself. Scripture is a mirror, and makes us look at ourselves hard.

Is there part of your heart in this story?

It started when they were kids. Joseph was the 2nd youngest. He and Ben, the youngest, were the only two whose mom was Rachael – their father's favourite wife. Whether that had anything to do with it or not, I'm not sure. It must have been hard, though – their dad Jacob had four women at the same time. It was accepted practice at that time of course, but it must have caused jealousy at some level. Well – read the story of Leah and Rachael – we KNOW it did.

In any case, there were 12 boys and at least one girl in the family – and Joseph was the favourite. He knew it too. And acted like a little brat because he knew he could get away with it. Just for example, he came to breakfast one morning, saying “I had a dream last night”. The older ones rolled their eyes, gritted their teeth, exchanged glances as the servants scurried to bring Joseph's breakfast, leaving the others until later even though they had been there first.

Little Benjamin, who was too young to know better, said “What was your dream, Joey?”

“It was really cool” he said, taking the last piece of toast. “All of you had sheaves of wheat and so did I – but your wheat all bowed down to mine. What do you think it means, Dad?”

They couldn't stand it. They couldn't stand HIM. They'd tease him and beat him up whenever they thought they could get away with it, but more often than not he'd go running to their dad, who wouldn't listen to their side at all, and had them beaten. They always had to give in to him.

The final straw was that coat. It had long sleeves....a coat for someone who didn't have to work. A gift from their Dad to Joseph – none of them had ever received a present from him at all. With 13 kids in the family, things are passed down and there's no money for extravagant gifts – but the day Jacob presented him with the beautiful coat, something snapped.

This went way beyond teasing or beating him up or name calling. They did all that, and more. First, they were going to kill him. Then just leave him to die. But....then they found a way to get some money out of the deal...so they sold him as a slave – took home that coat, ripped and full of goat blood, and let Jacob draw his own conclusions.

Joseph's captors took him to Egypt. He was just a kid, dragged away from his family, taken to a foreign

place, he had to learn a lot of things, including a new language, and fast. The parallels are too obvious to spell out....we know this story very closely, don't we? There were years of hard labour and more beatings, a false accusation and a consequent jail term, but the worst part wasn't all that.

It was the homesickness and the sickening memories of what his brothers had done to him. Sometimes, he'd just block it out of his mind in the daytime, but then he'd wake up screaming, and it would all come back. He couldn't keep it out of his dreams. He got real good at dreams too – and he used that to work his way to the top.

He did it too, - he got to be second in command to the king – to Pharaoh. That was great. It was amazing in fact. Starting out as a slave child and now – head of a foreign country! He was a success – an achiever.

It hadn't been easy, the only foreigner in the Egyptian court - the Pharaoh thought he was wonderful

but there were those in the court, those who had been there before, who were jealous and resentful. It felt – familiar. That happens with abuse. You get yourself right back into the same pattern – the same kind of relationship. He hadn't dealt with it and so he repeated the pattern.

His life depended on being strong, and being one jump ahead of everyone else. No time for thinking, remembering (except for those nightmares, and the beginnings of an ulcer, he was fine. Just fine. He was strong. He was in control. He didn't need anyone. He was fine. Just fine.)

Who knows how long he would have gone on like that – but then – who would have ever thought of it – one day – THERE THEY WERE. His brothers. Something about a famine back home, and did Egypt have any food they could buy....he hardly heard what they were saying – there they were. There was Simeon, Judah, Levi, and could that be little Gad? The last time he had seen them had been years ago – and through two swollen and bloody eyes. He remembered their sneers, their laughter, how they used to say to him “don't tell or it will be worse”

And all of a sudden, feelings came rushing from everywhere. Anger. Blind rage. And then excitement, and then confusion, and then wanting to hug them and then anger again....and for the first time in years, tears. Tears streaming down his face and he couldn't stop them. And they didn't even know who he was! They must have thought this ruler of Egypt was completely mad.

He ordered everyone else out of the room, and then turned to them. There was no easy way – just say it. Just...out with it.

“I'm Joseph. I'm your brother. It's true – Is father still alive?”

They dropped to the ground, terrified – Only Judah managed to raise his head enough to nod yes to the question about their father. And then, a most revealing comment.

“Go back and tell him I'm ruler of Egypt”

Tell Dad I'm somebody. He wanted his father to know he did good.

How many people – achievers, ambitious, driven people, rise to the top and it all means nothing to them if their father or mother hasn't approved.

And how many of us would give a great deal to have our parents simply know and acknowledge that we “did good”.

Again the tears. He was angry – furiously angry – at them, and yet he wanted desperately to be their brother again, to be loved and accepted by them.

And so – he pretended it was all ok.

People who have been abused often do that. It's all ok, he said, - it was God's plan. "It was not you who sent me here, but God" Joseph says. Sometimes people, in trying to cope with horrible things that happen, say to others or to themselves "It was God's plan; someday we'll understand".

God CAN and DOES bring good things out of the worst circumstances. That is without doubt. But that is NOT THE SAME THING AS saying God planned those circumstances, or caused them to happen.

God did not make Jacob choose Joseph as his favourite, thereby making the brothers resentful. God did not make those brothers abuse him and sell him as a slave.

You cannot excuse yourself or someone else by saying it was all part of God's plan. And you don't get rid of years of fear or anger or resentment by saying that. First – it's not true. Second, it doesn't work anyway even if it were true. Here's what I think happened:

It took a lot of mixed up going back and forth (read the whole account – that's true) before the family was truly back together. There were tears, accusations, game playing, and confession. Jacob confessed his mistake in having made Joseph the favourite. And he told his kids for the first time how much he had loved Rachael and how Joseph reminded him of her and how he had been clinging to her memory through her son. They had never heard him talk that way before. They had never hear him talk like that before. It made them...think of him differently somehow.

And Joseph – he confessed how he had loved all the attention, and had played off his brothers against each other and their father, and how he had enjoyed the jealousy. He also told them about how lonely he had been as a kid...how he had wanted so much to be asked to join them in a game, to share a joke, how it felt to be left out....the perfect son, daddy's little man. He told them some of the pain of betrayal at being sold (how could he ever tell it all?) and something of the struggle to put it all behind him in Egypt and to make something of himself.

And each brother confessed the pain of knowing that his father loved someone else more than him, and asked forgiveness for the horrible act of violence against their brother.

One by one they asked forgiveness of one another, and from God. More tears. Some laughter too, finally, as they began to see one another now for what they really were: fragile, lonely, flawed men who needed more than anything the care and love that only they could give each other.

THIS was the will of God. THIS was the hand of God bringing life out of death.

We are not Joseph.

And we are not Jacob.

We are not one of the 11 brothers
or their sister Dinah.

We have not literally been sold by our brothers. At least most of us have not.

But – each of us has parents. Some of us have brothers and sisters. We know what it is to want more than anything the love of a parent or someone else who simply is incapable of or unwilling to give it.

We know what it is to feel betrayed – sold out – by those who are closest to us – people we thought were family, or friends.

Some of us know physical and mental abuse. Some of us are parents who can make or break a child by favouritism, or whose heart has been broken, torn apart by the loss of a child.

This is real, vital, human material.

I mostly let it speak for itself,
except for a call to what is truly God's will in the midst of complicated family relationships.

ABUSE IS WRONG. IT IS NEVER GOD'S WILL.

It is sin. And it needs to be named and confronted.

What Joseph's brothers did to him was wrong. It had to be talked about, confessed, Acknowledged as wrong.

Forgiveness is never easy. It seldom happens quickly. The heart seems to have its own timing about that.

Humanly speaking, a strong route to it seems to be through honesty, through coming to see each other as real human beings, and ultimately children of God

Finally, it is a gift from God, whose will is healthy, life-giving relationships among us.

May God bless you as you pursue them.

Amen. .