

## **“The Gospel According to Joseph, part 1”**

Genesis 37:1-36

There is something about a good story that draws us in. In recent years, the movie industry has realized this. There are many movies being made nowadays that come in various installments. They are more epic than they are movie. I have always appreciated the value of a good story. More than any other genre, I find myself being drawn to biographies of great men and women who lived in history. The stories of people who lived significant lives inspire me.

The lives of characters from Scripture stand out to me as well. Who is not profoundly impacted by the story of Abraham, the man of faith? Who is not encouraged by the determination of Nehemiah, or the faithfulness of Moses to lead God’s people?

God constantly uses the lives of men and women in Scripture to teach us, to encourage us, and to warn us.

**Romans 15:4 - “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”**

The storyline in Genesis takes us from Abraham to Isaac, from Isaac to Jacob, and from Jacob to his sons. The patriarchs of the Old Testament were men of faith, but also of weakness.

Each of these men were living testimonies of the grace of God and the strength of God that is made perfect through human weakness and limitation. God made Abraham a promise that he would become the father of many nations, and the world would be blessed through his descendants. God affirmed this promise with Abraham’s son, Isaac. He then affirmed it with Isaac’s son, Jacob.

The scarlet thread of redemption would pass through their families. In each generation, there would be a child born who would pass this same promise down to his children,

until eventually, the Messiah Himself would enter the world. What is amazing to me is that fact that God establishes His covenant with imperfect people.

As Jacob's sons begin to multiply and have families of their own, we begin to see God honoring the promise He made with Abraham to make him into a great nation. Joseph was second from the youngest of all Jacob's sons. And though he was not in the Messianic line, he was a son of Jacob and a member of Abraham's family of faith. Abraham was his great grandfather.

I find it remarkable that nearly 25% of the book of Genesis is devoted to telling Joseph's life story. There is more said about Joseph in Genesis than any other character—more than Adam, more than Noah, more than his great grandfather Abraham, more than his grandfather Isaac, and also more than Jacob.

His story is one of both tragedy and triumph. His life is characterized by rejection and suffering, and also by success and exaltation.

Perhaps an appropriate question to ask is, "Why does the Holy Spirit give so much attention to Joseph in the book of Genesis?" After all, it was Jacob's son Judah who would carry on the Messianic line, not Joseph.

Of all the people who come and go on the crowded pages of the Bible, nowhere can we find a life that more beautifully portrays the life of Jesus than the life of Joseph. Judah may have been the brother who carried on the Messianic line, but Joseph was the brother whose life most closely foreshadowed the life of the Messiah who would come.

When we examine the life of Joseph at any point, we instantly find some aspect of the person and work of Christ revealed. I believe this is why the life of Joseph takes up so much space in the biblical record.

For the next three weeks, I want to examine the life of Joseph from three angles—his early life until he was sold into slavery by his brothers at 17, his young adult life in Egypt up until his promotion at age 30, and his fame and fortune in Egypt until his death at

110. Joseph's life story is developed around these three stages, each of which powerfully reflect an aspect of the person and work of Jesus:

- Beloved son
- Rejected slave
- Exalted savior

Truly, Jesus said that what was written in the Law and in the Prophets was written about Him!

I want to spend the next couple of weeks studying the life of Joseph as he points to the life of Jesus in a such a remarkable way. To begin with, we will consider what is recorded in this passage about the early years of Joseph's life.

### **1. Joseph was given his father's special LOVE (37:1-4)**

*"Jacob lived in <sup>g</sup>the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup> These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought <sup>h</sup>a bad report of them to their father. <sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was <sup>i</sup>the son of his old age. And he made him <sup>j</sup>a robe of many colors.<sup>1</sup> <sup>4</sup> But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him."*

The way that this chapter begins is very significant, for it shows how God had been faithful to honor his covenant promise with Jacob, even in spite of his failures and multiplied weaknesses. The hand of providence had guided his steps, protecting him from the threats of Esau and the schemes of Laban. From what we have already seen, we are well aware that Jacob's family was far from perfect.

The context into which he was born

By the time Joseph was a young teen, his father Jacob was already an old man. Joseph is described as the son of his father's old age. Joseph's birth was very special to Jacob because he was the first son born to Rachel.

**Genesis 30:22-24 - "Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, 'God has taken away my reproach.' And she called his name Joseph, saying, 'May the Lord add to me another son!'"**

Until Joseph was born, the Scripture says that Rachel had been barren. The greatest stigma for a woman who lived in her culture was the inability to have children. For a woman to be married and to live out her life without children was a disgrace to her and often to her husband as well.

Rachel's sister, Leah, had no problem bearing children...

When Joseph was an infant, Jacob and his dysfunctional family left Laban's household. It was in Jacob's heart to return to the land that God had promised his father and grandfather, and now him also. By chapter 33, Jacob is once again dwelling in the land of Canaan, but not without tragedy and heartache.

- Jacob's daughter is raped in Genesis 34 by a young man named Shechem; Jacob's sons kill them
- Jacob's wife Rachel dies in Genesis 35; Joseph's mother

And so by the time we make it to Genesis 37, the context that surrounds Joseph's life is one of dysfunction, pain, and heartbreak. He is deprived of his mother, and he is despised by his much older brothers. He must have felt like the loneliest boy in the world.

### The coat he was given

When you understand the context of his life a little bit better, then maybe you can understand why Jacob showered a special kind of affection upon Joseph. He was the

son of his beloved wife Rachel. He was the son of Jacob's old age. He was also unlike his brothers in his nature and character.

Jacob displayed his love for Joseph by giving him something that he didn't give his other sons—a coat of many colors. The NIV refers to it as 'a richly ornamented robe.' It was a special robe that would have been sleeved and extended down to the ankles, woven together from many different and colorful pieces of dyed fabrics.

**Charles Swindoll** - *"You can't work very well in a garment that has sleeves and extends all the way down to the ankles, especially if it's a costly, richly ornamented robe. It would be like sending a welder to a construction site wearing a full-length mink coat. In Joseph's day, the working garb was a short, sleeveless tunic. This left the arms and legs free so that workers could easily maneuver and move about. As you can imagine, by giving Joseph this elaborate full-length coat, which was also a sign of nobility in that day, his father was boldly implying, 'You can wear this beautiful garment because you don't have to work like those brothers of yours.'"*

The contempt with which he was held

Jacob's other sons resented Joseph because of the fact that he held a special place in Jacob's heart that they themselves didn't. Verse 4 says that they 'hated' him and could not find it within themselves to speak peaceably to him.

**"Hated"** - *speaks of an intense hatred; no love whatsoever*

Notice that the word is used at least four times in these verses to describe the animosity that Joseph's brothers had for him.

## **2. Joseph was despised for his special DREAMS (37:5-11)**

*"<sup>5</sup> Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: <sup>7</sup> Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, <sup>k</sup>my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and <sup>l</sup>bowed down to my sheaf." <sup>8</sup> His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So*

*they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. <sup>9</sup> Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." <sup>10</sup> But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and <sup>m</sup>your mother and your brothers indeed come <sup>n</sup>to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" <sup>11</sup> And <sup>o</sup>his brothers were jealous of him, <sup>p</sup>but his father kept the saying in mind."*

Joseph was a dreamer. For whatever reason, he felt compelled to tell his brothers about his dreams. Perhaps this was youthful ignorance on his part, maybe even youthful arrogance. And if his coat wasn't enough for his brothers to detest him, the dreams that he shared with them most certainly would be. Joseph dreamed two dreams:

- eleven sheaves bowing down to his sheaf
- sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him

His dreams involved his exaltation and their bowing in submission at his feet. (You can see how this would be taboo!) Younger sons certainly did not rule over older ones.

Notice that when Joseph shares his dreams, the result is that his brothers hate him even more and envy him in their hearts. He was the pampered son who was no doubt to be their father's heir, and now he was telling them about dreams in which he was lord over them. It was all too much for them.

### **3. Joseph was sent out with a special MISSION (37:12-24)**

*"<sup>12</sup> Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near <sup>a</sup>Shechem. <sup>13</sup> And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." <sup>14</sup> So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of <sup>r</sup>Hebron, and he came to Shechem. <sup>15</sup> And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup> "I am*

*seeking my brothers,” he said. “Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.”*  
*<sup>17</sup> And the man said, “They have gone away, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to*  
*<sup>s</sup>Dothan.”” So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at <sup>s</sup>Dothan. <sup>18</sup> They saw*  
*him from afar, and before he came near to them <sup>t</sup>they conspired against him to kill him.*  
*<sup>19</sup> They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup> Come now, <sup>u</sup>let us kill him*  
*and throw him into one of the pits.<sup>2</sup> Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured*  
*him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.” <sup>21</sup> But when <sup>v</sup>Reuben heard it, he*  
*rescued him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” <sup>22</sup> And Reuben said to*  
*them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a*  
*hand on him”—<sup>w</sup>that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father.*  
*<sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, <sup>x</sup>the robe of*  
*many colors that he wore. <sup>24</sup> And they took him and <sup>y</sup>threw him into a pit. The pit was*  
*empty; there was no water in it.”*

He was sent to his own

Verses 12-13 say that the sons of Jacob were pasturing the flock at Shechem, and Jacob sends Joseph on a special assignment to check in on them. Of importance is the emphasis that the text places on his willingness to go on behalf of his father.

**37:13 - “Come, I will send you to them. And he said to him, Here I am.”**

Wiersbe points out the fact that this section brings several questions to mind:

Why were the sons of Jacob pasturing their flock in Shechem, some 50 miles from home, when there was good grassland available closer to Hebron? They didn’t want anybody from the family spying on them and reporting their behavior.

Why did they return to the dangerous area near Shechem when Jacob’s sons already had a bad reputation among the citizens there? (34:30)

The brothers were involved with the people of the land in ways they didn’t want Jacob to know about.

Why did Jacob send Joseph out to visit them alone wearing the hated coat of many colors, knowing that his brothers hated Joseph?

Answer—The providential hand of God was working behind the scenes to accomplish His divine purposes for Jacob and his family, and ultimately for the whole world.

**Psalm 105:17 - “He sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold as a slave.”**

Joseph was sent on a mission to his brothers by his father, but was even more so being sent on an eventual rescue mission that would involve his own painful betrayal, rejection, and suffering in Egypt. But it was so that the very ones who rejected him could one day be saved from hunger.

His own received him not

When they see Joseph coming toward them, the sons of Jacob begin to devise a murderous plan. Their hatred and jealousy for Joseph had reached its boiling point.

**Matthew 5:21-22 - “You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.”**

Though they had murdered Joseph many times before in their hearts, now his brothers actually suggest the physical act itself. As they see him approaching, they conspire against him.

We are not told which brother led the charge to kill Joseph, but we are told that Reuben, the oldest, spoke up for his life. He suggested to throw him into a pit, but intended to come back and restore him to his father.

The wording of the text in verses 23-24 reveals that they were almost animal-like in their vicious treatment of him:

- they stripped him of his robe

- they took him by force
- they threw him into a pit

**“Stripped”** - *word used to describe the skinning of an animal; it means to flay*

**Leviticus 1:6** - **“He shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces.”**

**“Threw”** - *word used means to abandon*

I think maybe that it is appropriate to consider just how lethal hatred and jealousy are. It simmers in a person’s heart and waits for just the right spark to ignite a raging inferno. There is no telling how many relationships have been destroyed by this kind of thing—jealousy, envy, and bitterness.

I imagine that most of you are familiar with the play by Arthur Miller called *The Crucible*. It is a dramatized and partially fictionalized story of the Salem witch trials that took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony during 1692/93. The plot is built around several young girls in the town who claim to be afflicted by witchcraft, starting with Reverend Paris's daughter Betty. The afflicted girls accuse various people in the town of witchcraft, often choosing victims who they or their families dislike or are jealous of.

The irony of the play is that very little attention is devoted to the subject of envy by any of the characters, even though it is the hidden force driving most of the conflict in town. It is like a cancer that eats at the collective soul of Salem.

This seems to be the common experience of humanity since Cain murdered Abel in a fit of jealous rage. It is what the poet Robert Burns first called ‘man’s inhumanity to man.’ It is the strange truth that we are made in the image of God, we belong in the same human family, and yet we can’t seem to get along with each other. It shows us the ravages of sin in our lives.

Think about how this often shows up in our lives from an early age!

Everything from children who get jealous over to their toys to family feuds over inheritance money to thieves robbing banks to wars and acts of terror—it all serves as

evidence that our world desperately needs a Savior who can make our wicked hearts new.

The book of James says that envy is often at the heart of much conflict within the church.

**James 4:1-2 - “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”**

Greed and jealousy are ugly first cousins. Greed is idolatrous desire for things, while jealousy is idolatrous desire for attention.

Both of these sins characterize our lives as sinful human beings. We often want things to such a degree that it robs us of joy that should be sought from a relationship with Christ. And, we often want attention to such a degree that we mistreat and slander and murder those who receive it instead of us.

Arthur Miller’s “Crucible” often plays itself out regularly in our relationships, just like it did in Jacob’s family. Jealousy leads us to act out in crazy ways. When it is allowed to fester, it will eventually lead to devastating consequences.

How many relationships have been ruined by jealousy?

#### **4. Joseph was chosen for a special PURPOSE (37:25-36)**

*“<sup>25</sup> Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a <sup>z</sup>caravan of <sup>a</sup>Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing <sup>b</sup>gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it <sup>c</sup>if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and <sup>d</sup>let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. <sup>28</sup> Then <sup>e</sup>Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and <sup>f</sup>sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels<sup>3</sup> of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt. <sup>29</sup> When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he <sup>g</sup>tore his clothes <sup>30</sup> and returned to his brothers and said, “The boy <sup>h</sup>is gone, and I,*

*where shall I go?”* <sup>31</sup> Then they took <sup>i</sup>Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup> And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not.” <sup>33</sup> And he identified it and said, “It is my son's robe. <sup>j</sup>A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” <sup>34</sup> Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup> All his sons and all his daughters <sup>k</sup>rose up 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 wept for him. <sup>36</sup> Meanwhile <sup>m</sup>the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, <sup>n</sup>the captain of the guard.”

The sons of Jacob sell Joseph to a caravan of Ishmaelites for a mere 20 pieces of silver, the price of a slave. They take his coat of many colors, shred it and dip it in the blood of a goat, and then deceive their father into believing a wild animal had killed him.

Jacob had deceived his father, now his sons had deceived him.

Even though Joseph's brothers were entirely responsible for selling him into slavery, God was at work behind the scenes and would use Joseph to save them from famine. There was a hand of Providence involved and orchestrating it all.

Much like his little coat of many colors, God takes the good, the bad, and the ugly of our lives and weaves it all together into a tapestry of grace.

**F.B. Meyer** - *“How eager his desire to send just one last message to his father! And with all these thoughts, there would mingle a wondering thought of the great God whom he had learned to worship. What would He say to this? Little did he think then that hereafter he should look back on that day as one of the most gracious links in a chain of loving providences; or that he should ever say, Be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves: God did send me here before you. It is very sweet, as life passes by, to be able to look back on the dark and mysterious events, and to trace the hand of God where we once saw only the malice and cruelty of man.”*

Though he certainly doesn't understand this while in the pit, one day Joseph will understand it all when he is in the palace.

**Genesis 50:20 - "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."**

**1 Corinthians 13:12 - "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."**

Application:

- Details matter in the story of redemption

The story of Joseph points us to another son who was loved by His Father with a special love. The gospel of John says that He too, was sent on a special mission. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. He was rejected and betrayed by the very ones He came to save.

**Matthew 27:18 - "For he knew it was out of envy that they had delivered Him up."**

He was cast into a pit of suffering, despised and forsaken, and condemned to die. What man meant for evil, God meant for good.

- Regardless of what happens, God is in charge

Unlike Joseph, the Lord Jesus knew what the cross would mean, and He chose to endure it anyway in order to bring many sons and daughters to glory. It seemed that sin and death would win, but it was through death and through weakness that Christ defeated it. It is upside down truth.

- No place is too remote that Jesus can't find you

Joseph's brothers were in a remote place, and he found them. No sinner is too far gone that Jesus cannot find him. He came to seek and to save those who are lost.