

# The Dreamer Sold into Slavery

*The Life of Joseph*

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**Bible Text:** Genesis 37:12-36

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Our Scripture reading this afternoon is found in Genesis 37. We begin reading at verse 12 and we will read to the end of the chapter. That also will be our text.

12 And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. 13 And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem? come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here am I. 14 And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

15 And a certain man found him, and, behold, he was wandering in the field: and the man asked him, saying, What seekest thou? 16 And he said, I seek my brethren: tell me, I pray thee, where they feed their flocks. 17 And the man said, They are departed hence; for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan. 18 And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. 19 And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh. 20 Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams. 21 And Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands; and said, Let us not kill him. 22 And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again.

23 And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him; 24 And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. 25 And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt. 26 And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit is

it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? 27 Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content. 28 Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

29 And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph was not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. 30 And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child is not; and I, whither shall I go? 31 And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; 32 And they sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no. 33 And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. 34 And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him. 36 And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, and captain of the guard.

That far we read in God's holy, inspired word. May God bless that word to our hearts.

The text that we consider this afternoon is Genesis 37, the verses we read, verses 12 through 36. I'm not going to read all those again at this time but by way of introduction simply to read verses 18 through 20, "And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

Beloved congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ, as we think of the trials that Joseph experienced in his life, the question that we may ask ourselves is: what trials do we experience even as we hear God's word brought to us this afternoon? Is it something minor like a lost key? Is it not being able to find work? Is it an accident that has altered our lives? Is it difficulties at work or difficulties in the family? Is it marital strife? Is it the loss of loved ones? Or maybe even something darker than that that no one else knows about. All of us, beloved, experience trials and difficulties of one sort or another.

Now I want to ask: how often in the midst of those trials do we say this, that God is sovereign over this trial? How often do we say that God not only decreed that this would come to pass but actually he's working it for my good? That's a difficult confession to make. That's difficult. In fact, it's impossible. In our own wisdom we will deny it but by faith in Jesus Christ, knowing that we belong to Jesus Christ, knowing that he redeemed us with his precious blood, each of us ought to come to this conclusion: God is favorable toward me. We need to believe that, beloved, when God sends trials and difficulties,

when the devil says to us, "If you were a child of God, you would never sin so grievously. If you were really a child of God, you would not do that." Then we need to know that God is a Savior of sinners, also sinners such as Joseph's brothers. And when the devil says, "You would never face this kind of trial if God truly loved you. God wouldn't send you through those difficulties if he loved you," and then you remember: God sends trials to his dearest children, also those like he sent to Joseph. God does that. One thing we will see as we go through the history of Joseph is that through life's ups and downs, despite our sins and failures, indeed, even using those sins and failures, God is always there accomplishing his perfect will. He is always there and he is always rich in mercy. He is.

As we read through the history of Joseph, we are all familiar with that history. Most of us are familiar with that history and as readers, we can read it and we can see God's sovereignty as clear as day. "Of course, God was sovereign in that circumstance. Of course, God arranged this exactly like he did because he was working out his plan." But we have to realize, beloved, that Joseph was not a reader who could look back; who could look back at the whole history of his life and see how everything was working out. It may be that he did not understand that clearly until the end of his life, until he became ruler in Egypt. So too in our own lives, we don't have the luxury of seeing how God is going to use this circumstance and how he's going to bring about that because of this. We can't look back and see that because we are in the midst of our lives but the truth remains: God is there in every circumstance working out our good.

The history of Joseph gives us really a realistic view of the life of faith. It shows that the life of faith is not just a life of smooth sailing, that everything for Joseph as a child of God, everything just worked out fine and he had no struggles or trials. Life is not smooth sailing and still in the midst of whatever storms God sends, God besets us behind and before. God is there. We learn that in the text also that we consider this afternoon. Genesis is a record of God working out his glorious plan. God not only created the heavens and the earth, he not only established his covenant with Abraham, God is working out a glorious plan that he already promised he would in Genesis 3:15. He would send forth the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. He would send Jesus Christ into the world. But before he did that, he must bring Israel into Egypt, cause them to become a great nation. How would God get them there? Through Joseph. Joseph was the means that God would use to carry out his glorious plan.

Now we mustn't just look at the big plan and say, "Well, that's God's plan. That's the big picture," and then say he's not part of the small picture. No, God is part of the small circumstances as well and that's what we see in the life of Joseph's family. God is there in families. God is with individuals. God is in all of the circumstances that you and I face. Last time we saw how Joseph's dreams caused him to be hated by his brothers. That was part of God's plan and, Lord willing, today we will see God continuing to work out his plan in Joseph's life. Before Joseph could see his dreams come to fruition, you must first see the cruelty of his brothers. Before he would become the master over his brothers, he must first become a slave in Egypt.

So let's consider this passage of Scripture under the theme "The Dreamer Sold into Slavery." Let's note in the first place God's work in Joseph's life that caused Joseph to search for his brothers lovingly, that's a contrast to the cruel envy that his brothers displayed. Then let's see the weak response referring to Reuben in protecting Joseph. And also Jacob's response to Joseph's disappearance. The dreamer sold into slavery.

The first thing that we ought to note, beloved, is God's work not only in the circumstances but also in the heart of Joseph. Joseph illustrates the wonderful truth of God that even through those outward circumstances, God is also using them to work in Joseph's heart. How do we know that God was working in Joseph's heart? Because of the love that Joseph displayed toward his brothers. He cared about his brothers. He cared about them. Do we care about our brothers? Do we care about the circumstances that others face?

You can see Joseph's love for his brothers in the text in the first place because he was willing to go and check on them. Shechem was where his brothers had gone. Shechem was some 50 miles north of the vale of Hebron, probably 5 day's journey for Joseph to travel. That was no small journey but what's significant is that his brothers had gone to Shechem. Children, do you remember what happened in Shechem? Do you remember what Levi and Simeon did to Hamor and his family in Shechem? Levi and Simeon had murdered the dwellers in Shechem. They had murdered Hamor and Shechem his son and their brethren because Shechem had defiled Dinah. Now, that's where the brothers had gone. They were in this particular place where probably they were in greater danger than anywhere else.

Jacob worried for his sons in Shechem and so he decided to send Joseph to check on them and perhaps to bring them some provisions. How does Joseph answer Jacob when Jacob says, "I want you to go and check on your brothers in Shechem"? How does he answer? Does he say, "Well, they don't care about my welfare. They won't even speak peaceably to me. You want me to check on their welfare? You want me to seek their peace?" He might have been tempted to answer that way considering the hatred of his brothers toward him recorded in the first part of Genesis 37. But that's not how Joseph answers. He says to his father, "Here am I." Here am I, as if to say, "I'm at your disposal. I'm ready to go and check on my brothers, to listen and to obey." Why would Joseph react that way? Why wouldn't he just say, "They will be fine. Let them take care of themselves"? Because God had worked in Joseph's heart. God had done a work in his heart so that he truly cared for his brothers even though they themselves hated Joseph.

Maybe that hatred was not so evident to Jacob but Joseph would have known how they refused to speak peaceably to him and yet he goes. Beloved, that's the kind of love God wants us to show to others. The most natural thing in the world when somebody hates us, the most natural thing is to hate them back. Somebody who has treated us with contempt, the most natural thing is to treat them with contempt in return. That's the default mode of our old man but when God reveals his love towards us, when God shows to us his love in Jesus Christ, when he shows us how undeserving we are of his love towards us and of his favor, then he also works in us so that we, from the heart, also want to show love to

others even when they don't deserve it. "Pastor, you don't know what he did to me or what she did to me." What does Jesus say? "Love those who love you"? No, Jesus says, "Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Do good to them that hate you. Pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you." That's the calling that God gives us and that is only possible if God is working in our hearts. I will never love my enemy unless God works in my heart to form that love.

Joseph goes to see his brethren in obedience to his father, goes to check on their welfare. But not only does he show his love in that way, when he gets to Shechem, his brothers are not there. Joseph could now have said, "Father, I went to Shechem. I obeyed what you said. They weren't there." He could have gone back home. He would have had an excuse, "I went to Shechem. I was there on this day. They weren't there." But Joseph goes and he looks for his brothers yet. He kept looking. He was wandering in the field. At the very least it shows Joseph's diligence to go and seek for them in obedience to his father but it's also consistent with Joseph actually caring for his brothers.

Joseph wandered until finally somebody found him and asked him, "What are you looking for?" Amazingly, the man that Joseph met had been with his brothers, heard them say where they were going and told the man that they were going to Dothan, some 14 miles further to the north. Now think about this, beloved: all of the things that had to happen. If Joseph had not wandered as long as he had in that field, if that man had not happened to come along when he came along, all of these things that follow in Genesis would never have happened. The whole history of Joseph from a human perspective. Obviously, God is able to work whatever he wants to work but all of these things came together. That was not just chance. God worked it. We could talk about the butterfly effect, about some small event here on this side of the world changing the course of history and even affecting the events on the other side of the world but let's not call it the butterfly effect, let's call it the providence effect. God saw to it that Joseph would be there right at the right time; that he would not leave too soon; that that man would know and would direct him to Dothan. God saw to it.

What a wonderful example then that we see in Joseph that he chose to love his brothers even though they refused to speak peaceably to him. That's a work of grace in Joseph's heart. That's the only explanation. Now we can ask: do we have that love in our hearts? Am I willing to speak peaceably? Am I willing to speak peaceably to those who seem not to want anything to do with me? Are you? Are we willing to love those who have perhaps sinned against us? What a beautiful mark of God's grace when in families, between husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, when in the church, we are willing to love even those who don't, in our minds, deserve it. That's a work of God's grace. Joseph made a loving search for his brothers. He's an example of the work that God does in the hearts of his people.

Fourteen miles after Shechem, Joseph may have rejoiced when he could see his brothers in the distance. Finally there they are, but little did Joseph know how quickly things could change in his life. Little did he know the hatred that his brothers were capable of. Little did he know that his world was about to be turned upside down. Is that not our

experience at times, beloved? Life is full of uncertainties. We don't know what tomorrow will bring forth. We don't know: sidetracked careers; accidents; sickness; trials; disappointments; sometimes the dark valley of the shadow of death. Our lives can change in a moment. But then how precious knowing that God is there in that moment. How precious knowing that God's fatherly hand as we know is the case with Joseph, that God's fatherly hand was right there with him and that God meant it for good. So it is with all of our circumstances. God means it for good and when we know that, then we will be kept from drowning in despair or bitterness. "God means this for good."

As Joseph approached his brothers, maybe with a smile, his brothers made plans to kill him. Maybe they recognized Joseph's coat in the distance. "That's Joseph. That's the way Joseph walks." And then they remembered Joseph's dreams and one of them calls out, "Look here, here comes the dreamer." And then perhaps another one says, "Let's kill him. Let's kill him and throw him into some pit." And in a moment all the brothers together and that's often the way it works, one stirs up another who stirs up another, in a moment, they had stirred up their hearts into a killing hatred of Joseph. Imagine that. These were children of the covenant. These were members of Jacob's family plotting to murder their brother.

But before we point our fingers, beloved, we have to come to this same conclusion about ourselves: I could do the very same thing. Just put me in the right circumstance. Let me find out some weakness and sin in a brother or sister that seems to justify my hatred and then let that hatred grow stronger and stronger until it masters me, until I can't think anything good about that brother. Let my hateful thoughts be reinforced by somebody else and then let me imagine that I can get away with it. That I can get away with murder. And the fact of the matter is, apart from God's grace, we all would be right at home with Joseph's brothers. If we had been in their shoes, if we had seen how Jacob favored Joseph, if we had been the hearers of his dreams, apart from God's grace, we would be right at home. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." If that kind of sinful hatred can exist in covenant families as it did in Jacob's family, if that can exist in covenant families, it can exist in any relationship.

Such was the brothers' hatred. You would hardly know that they were children of God and yet we often show hatred in our relationships too. Children can make fun of others on the playground to such a degree that other children aren't even able to go to that same school anymore. For what? That's hatred. Brothers and sisters can envy one another, "Why do they always get this or that? Why don't you ever do that for me?" Parents can think of our children as a burden, "Why did we have to have you in our family?" Husbands and wives can be so critical of each other that we refuse at times even to see any positive qualities. All we see is negative. Workers can hate their bosses and bosses can hate their workers. God warns us, beloved, "Whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." If we let sin in our hearts, if we provide a safe harbor for sin in our hearts, it's not going to stand still. It doesn't. It doesn't stand still. That applies if we say, "I'm going to let this sinful anger stay in my heart." It's not going to stand still. It will grow. If we let the roots go down, it will grow and bear fruit. That applies to resentment and jealousy. That applies to lust and rebellion and covetousness. If we let them go, they will bear

bitter fruit. Are there thoughts, beloved, in our hearts that need to be put to death? God's grace teaches us to say no to sin. When the Spirit works in us, we will want to put to death the deeds of the body.

Joseph's brothers saw the effect of that hatred that they allowed to go on and on, to grow in their hearts. But not only does Joseph's history point to that development of sinful patterns, that's a lesson to us, it also shows a gracious and merciful God, a God who forgives iniquity and transgression and sin even the evil sin of Joseph's brothers. We will see that God, by his grace, brings them to repentance. There is forgiveness also for great sinners.

What's so ironic about this history is that the sin that the brothers committed in their hatred, God used that very thing to bring about their salvation; the very actions that the brothers committed in order to destroy Joseph's dreams. They wanted to get rid of Joseph so that his dreams would never come to pass. "We'll see now what happens to his dreams." And yet the very actions they took were the means that God used to bring about his dreams. Amazing. God works that way. God works that way in our lives and the very hatred that the brothers showed to Joseph, God was using that as a means, yes, to bring Joseph into Egypt; yes, to bring Israel into Egypt, but to form Israel into a nation. Ultimately God was using that very sin to bring forth Jesus Christ because Christ would come out of the nation of Israel. God was using the very sin of those brothers to bring forth him who would make the payment for sins of hatred and envy and every other sin that we have committed. God was using these circumstances for the salvation of his people.

Even though Joseph's brothers wanted to kill him, we find that Reuben protected Joseph. Verse 22, we read, "And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him." Then it gives the reason why Reuben did this, "that he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again." But even though Reuben wanted to rescue Joseph, his response was not what it should have been. Yes, we can look in back of that and say God was sovereign also over that but now we look at Reuben's response. It was not what it should have been. Reuben, the oldest, should have immediately said, "What kind of wickedness is this? Talking about murdering your brother?" Reuben should have said, "If you're going to murder him, you're going to have to murder me too." He should have rebuked them and they might have listened.

But what does Reuben try to do? He sat on the fence is what he did. He didn't want to kill Joseph but neither did he want to rebuke his brothers, to rebuke them for their wickedness. Maybe he was thinking, "If I rebuke them, they are going to turn on me too. They're going to hate me too," and so he compromised. Reuben took the middle course, "Let's just throw him into the pit. Let's not shed any blood, after all, he is our brother. Let's let him die in the pit." Then of course, Reuben was hoping to go back and get him out of the pit later.

But that raises the question, beloved: how do we respond when we face situations like that? Do we choose a middle course, young people? If you're so called friends are getting drunk at a party, there's really 3 options: 1. you could join them and say, "I'll get drunk with you." 2. you could rebuke them and leave and say, "I'm not having any part of this." Or you could try the middle course and that would be wrong to do that, to say, "Well, I'm not going to rebuke them but I'm not going to join them either. I'll stay at the party but I won't get drunk." That's the middle course. When a brother or sister is walking in sin harming another brother or sister, do we join them? Do we stand up for what's right and rebuke them? Or do we take the middle course and sit by passively?

Is it not the case that we are like Reuben? We often choose the middle course. It's hard. It's hard to stand up for God's truth. It's hard to stand up for what is right, for God's way. It may cost us. That's perhaps what Reuben was thinking. "If I stand up for Joseph, if I rebuke my brothers, that may cost me. After all, they're talking about killing Joseph, they're not going to take too kindly to it if I rebuke them."

The result of Reuben's weak response is that when Joseph came, they stripped him of his coat. They threw him into the pit. Then while they ate lunch, maybe even the food that Joseph himself had brought if he brought them provisions, as if there was nothing wrong, they are eating lunch and then they see in the distance a caravan of merchants. Reuben was away. The caravan comes near and Judah suddenly has the idea, "We can sell Joseph into slavery then we're killing 2 birds with one stone. Number 1, we'll get the benefit of the money that we obtained for selling him and we will be rid of Joseph. We won't have to deal with his dreams anymore." The brothers later we read in Genesis 42, the brothers saw Joseph's tears. They heard him begging for mercy and yet they refused to listen to him and they sold him for 20 pieces of silver and then Joseph was out of their sight. How did that all happen? Joseph's dreams, the brothers unmortified sin grew and grew. Their hatred and jealousy almost led to Joseph's murder. Then it finally bore the fruit of selling him into slavery. Sin, unrepented of, always grows.

Now Joseph was gone and the brothers had to add one more sin on top of that sin. When they got back to Jacob, they had to cover up their sin so they took Joseph's coat. They killed a kid. They dipped the coat in blood and brought it to Jacob to deceive Jacob. One more evil fruit arising from the brothers' sinful hatred.

What about Jacob's response? Jacob immediately concluded that Joseph must have been killed by a wild animal and he was so overwhelmed by the loss of his favorite son that he refused to be comforted. He said, "I'm going to go to my grave mourning for Joseph." Is that not the case also with us sometimes, beloved? We can become so filled with sorrow that we refuse to be comforted but ought we not to look in back of those dark providences? Should we not see behind those difficulties that we face? That God's fatherly hand is there too?

Jacob later in Genesis when Benjamin was supposed to go with his brothers again back to Egypt, Jacobs says, "All of these things are against me. Joseph is gone and now you're going to take Benjamin too. All these things are against me." Jacob is not considering



God's providence. Jacob is not considering that God's fatherly hand is in this circumstance too. God wants us to remember when we face dark providences, God's hand is there. It's there and he is bringing our good and our salvation through those circumstances even when he takes a loved one away in death as Jacob believed had happened to Joseph at this time.

Beloved, how will you and I respond to our trials? That's the question. That's the lesson. We can look at the history of Joseph and say, "What an amazing plot. What a wonderful story," but if we miss God's providence and we miss how we ought to react to God's providences, then we have missed what we ought to see there; we have missed the main part. How we ought to remember that God is rich in mercy. How God is rich in mercy we will see: rich in mercy towards his brothers; rich in mercy towards Joseph. He does not give us what our sins deserve. In fact, Joseph if you just looked at his earthly circumstance, even what he experienced was less than his sin deserved in himself.

Wonderfully, all the evil fruits of the sin of Joseph's brothers, God was turning for good. Was it because they themselves had some worthiness? Is that why God turned it for good? No, the answer is: God gave them the good that Christ would earn for them and that's the basis when we consider our circumstances, when we consider our trials and difficulties. Why is God going to bring this to a good end? Because Christ earned that good. Because Christ is for us, all things are for us. May God grant us to know that and confess it. Amen.

*Father which art in heaven, we thank thee for thy grace towards us. We thank thee for the comfort that is ours knowing that thou art for us and if thou art for us in Jesus Christ, who can be against us? May we know that no matter what circumstances we face and may we rejoice in thy goodness to us. Forgive us where we have doubted and lead us by thy grace day by day through all of life's trials. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*