

The Saga of Joseph: Act One

Genesis 37:1-36

What is it that makes for a good Church?

What is the ideal that we hope to see God do in our midst?

There are many good answers that could be given to these questions. But after studying today's passage, I am convinced that they can be answered with only two words: Submission and Love.

With these two words, we can also answer the question, "What makes for a bad church?"

A bad church is a church that refuses to submit to Jesus Christ's rule, mediated to us through the Bible and through sound doctrine, and through good leadership.

A bad church is a church that is full of division and strife, jealousy and hatred.

The truth of the matter is that every congregation is a mixture of the two.

Every Christian in some way wants to be their own ruler. We resist God's rule over us. And we seek to rule over others around us.

It is also true that Christians struggle to love their brothers and sisters in Christ. Mutual animosity is too often the norm. Past hurts inflicted upon one another often seem insurmountable.

The story of Joseph has much to teach us about submission and love.

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Read Genesis 37:1-2a.

Jacob lived
in the land of his father's sojournings,
in the land of Canaan.

² These are the generations of Jacob.

Jacob is living in the Promised Land.

He is living there with his family.

The rest of the book of Genesis is an account of Jacob's family. I am calling it the Saga of Joseph because he is the foremost among Jacob's children. But Genesis calls the rest of Genesis, the generations of Jacob. And in Jacob's family, we also see the beginnings of the Church, the community of God's people.

We know Jacob's family life has not been ideal. But in chapter 37, the division and strife of the brothers becomes the primary focus.

This family strife is directly related to God's promise to Abraham.

Genesis 12:2-3 ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you,

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and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

How is it possible for all of the families of the earth to be blessed "in Abraham", if the family of Abraham hates one another?

For Israel to become a blessing to all the families of the earth, there must be true love existing within the family.

And, as we will see, the hatred among the brothers is related to their desire to rule. Lack of humble submission leads to jealousy, and jealousy leads to hate.

For Israel to become a blessing she must willingly submit to God's appointed ruler.

In today's story, God's appointed ruler is Joseph. It did not have to be Joseph. God could have chosen another. God does not choose Joseph because Joseph is better. We learned that from when God chose Jacob over Esau.

But, given that God has chosen Joseph, it is the duty of the other brothers to submit to God's appointed ruler.

Only as the brothers are humbled will they learn to submit to God's rule. And only in their humble submission will they begin to pursue true love towards one another.

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There is no true love without humble submission.
Pride is the enemy of love.
And submission alone deals the death blow to pride.
God knows this. Otherwise, He would not be so intentional in appointing one brother over the others.

The relationships between the brothers is central to Genesis 37. There are 21 uses of the word “brother” in this chapter. And the brothers’ hatred of Joseph for being appointed over them is also central to the story.

Read Genesis 37:2b-4.

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 a bad report
 of them
 to their father.

3 Now
Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons,

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because he was the son of his old age.

And he made him a robe of many colors.

4 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.

These verses are preparatory. They set the stage.

They give us multiple human reasons for the brothers' animosity towards Joseph.

Humanly speaking, no one likes a tattler.

Joseph is the younger brother who tattles on his older brothers. I grew up as a younger brother. And the unwritten code among brothers is that you do not tattle on one another. This is not really an issue of whether tattling was right or wrong. It was a matter of how much retribution I would receive from my brother if I did tattle.

If you want to suffer the wrath of your older brother, by all means, tattle.

It did not take me long to learn this lesson. And once learned I can only remember one instance where I tattled on my brother. My brother and his friend had gotten his mom to buy a large

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quantity of gun powder. The reason was to load their own ammo.

But as the younger brother, I knew the real reason they wanted the gun powder. They were planning to build a bomb. I knew that they only wanted to see a big explosion, not really blow up anything important. Still, the idea of building a bomb did not sound smart. So, I tattled.

Turns out that my brother and his friend did not get into much trouble. But they were not able to build the bomb.

I talked with my brother about this the other day, and neither of us can remember his reaction to me.

Younger brothers are not supposed to tattle, unless it is to save them from serious harm.

Joseph has not learned this lesson. He feels the need to point out the faults of his brothers to Dad.

Naturally, his brothers do not have any affection for Joseph.

Add to this the fact that Jacob has not learned an important lesson of parenting. Parents are not supposed to play favorites. Jacob not only plays favorites with Joseph. He also makes his favoritism open and formal.

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Jacob even gives Joseph a special robe designed to set him apart. It is very likely that this robe is a symbolic way of showing that Joseph is given a position of authority among his brothers.

I have to pause for a moment and go down a bit of a side trail. How are we to think about Jacob giving special love towards Joseph?

As a father, I think it is awful. Parents are not to play favorites among their kids.

As a pastor and fellow Christian, I think it is awful too. Within the Church, we are not to show favoritism. James makes this very clear.

But, as a reader of the book of Genesis, and Scripture as a whole, it is hard not to see that God does make distinctions among His children. Jacob is doing what God did with him. God favored Jacob over Esau.

I still get confused when I think about this. I bring it up because it is easy to place all the blame upon Jacob for the animosity of the brothers towards Joseph. When in fact, Jacob is not portrayed as the problem, or the primary problem.

It is important to note that whenever we harbor animosity towards our fellow brothers and sisters in the Church, we always think we have good reasons.

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At this point, if one of the brothers were to share their side of the story with us, we would probably feel empathy for them. We would be upset at Jacob's unfair favoritism and Joseph's bratty arrogance.

We would maybe even counsel that when Jacob and Joseph change their ways, then and only then, might there be reconciliation and love between the brothers.

True enough, as the larger story unfolds, God will work upon Jacob and Joseph, dealing with the sin of their hearts.

But, we need to see that fixing Jacob and Joseph is not the real issue.

The brothers need to learn submission.

Whatever the faults of Jacob and Joseph, the brothers must deal with their own attitudes.

Read Genesis 37:5-11.

5 Now
 Joseph had a dream,
 and
 when he told it to his brothers
 they hated him even more.
6 He said to them,
 "Hear this dream
 that I have dreamed:
7 Behold,

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we were binding sheaves in the field,
and behold,
my sheaf arose
and stood upright.

And behold,
your sheaves gathered around it
and bowed down to my sheaf."

8 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.

9 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."

10 But
when he told it

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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
your mother
and
your brothers
indeed come to bow ourselves to
the ground
before you?"

11 And
his brothers were jealous of him,
but
his father kept the saying in mind.

If we are to understand this story correctly, we need to see that God is the source of these dreams.

God does not give direct revelation through dreams today. Since the completion of the NT, we look to God to speak to us through the Bible.

But in Joseph's Day, God made use of dreams to communicate His will.

And, when God communicates His will, He has a distinct purpose in mind.

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God wants Jacob and the other brothers to hear His voice. And God is very purposeful in giving the dream to Joseph. God is elevating Joseph by speaking to him over the brothers, or even over Jacob.

God expects Joseph to share the contents of the dream. And God knows that when Joseph does it will not go over well. In a sense, God feeds into the already brewing animosity.

Even though there are no words spoken in the dream, the message is clear: Joseph is God's appointed ruler over his family.

This message is not unlike the message that God gave to Rebekah.

Genesis 25:23 ²³ And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger."

Only here, the brother that is ruling is within the one nation of Israel. Instead of each brother being their own nation, all the brothers belong to the one nation of Israel. Joseph would be elevated among his brothers.

God declares, "Joseph will rule over his other brothers."

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When his brothers hear of this, they immediately mock Joseph. If Joseph is lifting himself up above his brothers, then I would applaud their mocking.

But it is not Joseph, or even Jacob, who is doing the exalting. It is none other than God himself.

The brothers are resisting God's rule over them.

The brothers ought to have recognized God's lifting up of their younger brother.

They ought to have submitted their personal feelings to God's divine will.

Instead, they ignore God's will entirely and treat the dream as if it is the making of Joseph's imagination and arrogance.

Joseph's second dream has the same basic message. Only this time, mom and dad are also included. The sun, the moon, and the eleven stars all bow down to Joseph.

Jacob's response is very helpful and serves as a contrast with the brothers.

Remember, he has great affection for Joseph.

He does not have a problem with Joseph ruling over his brothers. He wanted as much when he gave Joseph the robe.

That being said, Jacob has great difficulty believing that Joseph's rule would also include him.

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So, Jacob rebukes Joseph. But instead of mocking, we are told that Jacob “kept the saying in his mind.”

This language is very similar to Jesus’ mother Mary, “treasuring things up in her heart.”

When it comes to the gospel, there are always difficult things to accept that require a good amount of pondering.

Unlike the brothers, Jacob is willing to ponder these things.

The Christian life requires reflection. This requires quietness and focus, two disciplines our modern world does not encourage. God may not be revealing Himself through dreams, but He does call us to regularly meditate upon His Word. And He does want us to ponder how we can better learn submission to His will.

Throughout Israel’s history, God will appoint different types of rulers. And He will expect His people to submit to those rulers.

Moses comes to mind, and his giving of the Law.

Aaron and the Aaronic priesthood...

King David...

The Prophets...

God establishes His rule over His people through appointed men.

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Of course, all these point us to the perfect and eternal rule of Jesus Christ as our Prophet, Priest, and King.

Jesus Christ is Lord over us. He is God's appointed Ruler. And if we desire God's blessing, we must learn to submit our hearts to His rule over us.

The story of Joseph is a story about brothers hating one another.

But it is also a story about submission to God's appointed ruler.

And it is by submission to God's appointed ruler that we also begin to love one another.

Once you understand this, you begin to see how the story of Joseph connects to the very heart of the Gospel and the work of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus' rule over us that conquers our pride and jealousy and enables us to serve and love one another.

We love one another because Jesus our Lord commands us to love one another.

1 John 3:23 ²³ And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

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Jesus commands us to love our brothers and sisters in the same way that He has already loved them, and us.

John 13:34-35 ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The Father loves His children. And it is only in receiving that love do we have the capacity to love one another.

1 John 4:10-12 ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Can you begin to see the relationship between submission to Christ and love of our brothers.

Is this not one reason why Jesus is not only presented to us as Savior and Lord, but also as our brother.

Jesus is our brother. But he is also God's appointed ruler over us.

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Many people resisted Jesus because they grew up around him. They knew him as a boy. They knew his parents. How could He be the One that God had appointed to rule over them?

In saving you, Jesus becomes a brother to you.

In Jesus we see the connection between brotherly love and submission clearly.

So, it makes sense that in Genesis 37, God will appoint one brother over the other brothers.

And in appointing Joseph as ruler, God knows that he is also appointing Joseph to save the brothers.

It is important for us to see that God is accomplishing all of this “in spite” of the brothers hatred of Joseph.

Is it not true that Jesus goes to the cross while His brothers are hating him?

Is it not true that while He hangs on the cross, His brothers are mocking Him?

Is it not true that He prays to His Father, “Forgive them for they know not what they do?”

We are only in the opening act of the Saga of Joseph. But it is not only a good story that we like to tell our kids. It is God’s beginning to help His people understand the important themes of the Gospel.

Hatred among brothers is one reason Jesus gave His life.

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And destroying in us our stubborn determination to rule ourselves goes hand in hand with this great work.

Joseph's brothers act like normal selfish people striving to lift up themselves in one way or another.

God cannot have this attitude among His people, not if all the families of the earth are to be blessed through His people.

The story of Joseph does not merely identify the problem. Nor does it merely give commands to us to live differently.

No, the story of Joseph is a story about the wonderful grace of God to providentially accomplish what His children could never accomplish on their own.

You see, Joseph's dreams are not fulfilled by the perfect obedience of anyone in the story.

They will only be fulfilled by God's sovereign hand.

The story of Joseph reveals God's sovereign hand of providence working to bring about God's promised blessing. God will not be thwarted by jealousy or hatred or unwillingness to submit to His appointed ruler. God alone will accomplish his purposes.

As we walk through the rest of this story, we must be focused on seeing God's hand of providence.

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Read Genesis 37:12-14.

12 Now
his brothers went to pasture their father's flock
near Shechem.

13 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."

14 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 Hebron,
and
he came to Shechem.

Jacob must know that Joseph's brothers hate him. And yet, he still sends Joseph to them.

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Shechem is a long way away – 50 miles.

And, as a reader, we are leery of Shechem. This is where the idols were buried. And it is where Dinah was defiled. Creepy place. Not to mention, Israel had made many enemies in this region.

From a human perspective, Jacob is sending his beloved son into a firestorm.

But under God's hand of providence, it is precisely where he wants Joseph.

Read Genesis 37:15-17.

15 And
 a man found him wandering in the fields.
 And
 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."
17 And
 the man said,
 "They have gone away,
 for I heard them say,
 'Let us go to Dothan.'"

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When you are fixed on seeing God's hand of providence, the introduction of this unknown man makes more sense.

Humanly speaking, would you expect to find a helpful man in this region?

Absolutely not!

It would be like a Russian soldier walking into a Ukrainian village and asking for directions!

And yet, under the hand of God's providence, this is exactly what happens!

And, what is more, the one man that Joseph meets, also had met the brothers, and had a conversation with them so that he knows precisely where the brothers now are.

Humanly speaking, this makes no sense. But under the hand of God's providence? Not a problem.

Imagine trying to meet someone in Gastonia. Only, you do not know where they are in Gastonia. You travel down to Gastonia. And the first person you come across has met the person you are looking for. And even though your friend is no longer in Gastonia, the person you meet knows precisely where they are in Charlotte.

Really strange, right?

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Not under the hand of God's perfect providence.

Read Genesis 37:17b-20.

So
Joseph went after his brothers
and
found them at Dothan.
18 They saw him from afar,
and
before he came near to them
they conspired against him to kill him.
19 They said to one another,
"Here comes this dreamer.
20 Come now,
let us kill him
and
throw him into one of the pits.
Then
we will say that a fierce animal has devoured
him,
and
we will see what will become of his dreams."

Is it coincidence that the brothers see Joseph before he sees them?

I don't think so. The story hinges upon them having time to craft their evil plans.

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God intends for the brothers to make their schemes. It is important for us to learn what is in their hearts. Otherwise, we might think that the change in their attitudes was not a big deal, something of their own making.

No, it is God alone who will overcome the hatred and jealousy in the hearts of these men.

At the same time, God must not allow their schemes to come to fruition. God must keep Joseph alive, if he is going to become God's appointed ruler.

Reuben, the firstborn, must not have been included in the initial scheming. He does not want to personally kill Joseph.

21 But when Reuben heard it,
 he rescued him out of their hands, saying,
 "Let us not take his life."
22 And
 Reuben said to them,
 "Shed no blood;
 cast him into this pit here in the wilderness,
 but
 do not lay a hand on him"-
 that he might rescue him out of their
 hand
 to restore him to his father.

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How do you read Reuben's reaction here - is he the good guy, hero?

He doesn't want Joseph dead. That's good.

But he is not willing to stand up to the brothers.

It is more likely that his desire to save Joseph is to regain favor with his dad.

But whatever his motivation, Reuben is powerless to bring it to pass.

Read Genesis 37:23-25.

23 So
 when Joseph came to his brothers,
 they stripped him of his robe,
 the robe of many colors that he wore.

24 And
 they took him and cast him into a pit.
 The pit was empty;
 there was no water in it.

25 Then
 they sat down to eat.
 And
 looking up
 they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites
 coming from Gilead,
 with their camels bearing
 gum, balm, and myrrh,
 on their way to carry it down to Egypt.

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Joseph being stripped of his robe very likely foreshadows Christ being stripped of his robe.

The fact that they sat down to eat is both appalling and providential.

It is appalling in that they have no problem partaking in an act that is designed to promote fellowship and unity among brothers, while planning the murder of their brother.

The next time that we see these brothers eating a meal, it will be at Joseph's table.

As appalling as the meal is, it provides the time for God's plan to unfold.

As they are eating, they see a caravan passing by.

How crazy is it that at that time and in that place, there is a caravan passing by?

And, they are heading to Egypt, the very place that we know that God wants Joseph to be sent.

This establishes the beginning point of the fact that God's Redeemer will go down to Egypt and then come up out of Egypt.

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Remember, how Jesus is rescued from the hand of Herod as a boy and taken down to Egypt! The same hand of providence is working here with Joseph.

But just providing the caravan is not enough. The brothers must see that the caravan provides a greater opportunity for them.

Enter Judah into the story.

Read Genesis 37:26-27.

26 Then
 Judah said to his brothers,
 "What profit is it
 if we kill our brother
 and
 conceal his blood?
27 Come,
 let us sell him to the Ishmaelites,
 and
 let not our hand be upon him,
 for he is our brother,
 our own flesh."
 And
 his brothers listened to him.

As readers, we are to see the irony that God is using Ishmaelites to save Joseph.

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Why are the brothers so willing to adopt Judah's plan to sell Joseph?

They do not want to be responsible for his death.

They are trying to remove themselves from the guilt of their actions.

It reminds me of the Jewish leaders trying to maintain their own ceremonial cleanliness while orchestrating the death of Christ.

Is Judah's plan better or worse than Reuben's?

It is worse in that his motivation was not to save Joseph.

But it is better in that he actually stood up to the brothers and proposed a plan not to kill Joseph. Reuben's plan was not one of open strength. The brothers all thought Reuben still intended to have Joseph killed.

But neither Reuben nor Judah are the heroes. God alone is the hero.

The exchange happens.

Read Genesis 37:28-34.

28 Then
 Midianite traders passed by.
 And
 they drew Joseph up

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and
lifted him out of the pit,
and
sold him to the Ishmaelites
for twenty shekels of silver.
They took Joseph to Egypt.

29 When Reuben returned to the pit
and
saw that Joseph was not in the pit,
he tore his clothes
30 and
returned to his brothers
and
said,
"The boy is gone,
and
I, where shall I go?"

31 Then
they took Joseph's robe
and
slaughtered a goat
and
dipped the robe in the blood.
32 And
they sent the robe of many colors
and
brought it to their father
and

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said,

"This we have found;

please identify whether it is your son's robe

or not."

33

And

he identified it

and

said,

"It is my son's robe.

A fierce animal has devoured him.

Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces."

34

Then

Jacob tore his garments

and

put sackcloth on his loins

and

mourned for his son many days.

Jacob won his brother's birthright through deception.

Now, in God's providence, Jacob is deceived by his sons into believing Joseph has been killed by a wild animal.

As terrible as are the actions of the brothers, God graciously uses this to work in Jacob's heart.

God intends to bless Jacob. God does not hate Jacob. And yet, God allows Jacob to be deceived and to experience terrible sorrow for a season.

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Read Genesis 37:35.

35 All his sons
and
all his daughters
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.

The brothers' attempt at comfort is true hypocrisy.

They are the true wild animals.

If love within the family were dependent upon them, there would be no hope of its coming to pass.

Likewise, if true submission and love were dependent upon us, it would never happen.

But it is not dependent upon us. Our hope is in God's sovereign hand, working through His appointed Ruler.

Read Genesis 37:36.

36 Meanwhile

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the Midianites had sold him in Egypt
to Potiphar,
an officer of Pharaoh,
the captain of the guard.

The closing of Act One has Joseph traveling as a slave of Potiphar, an officer to Pharaoh.

How will God's people ever become a blessing to all the families of the earth?

That promise seems laughable.

Except that God is good, and God is faithful to keep His promises.

Lessons:

1. Submission to Christ and love of our brothers and sisters are connected.
2. The Church's ability to be a blessing to all the families of the earth rests in her learning brotherly love within her ranks.
3. As we learn to submit to Jesus Christ, we will increasingly obey His command to love one another.
4. Your inability to truly love your brothers and sisters in the Church is not a problem for God.
 - a. He shed His blood for this very sin.
5. Believe that He is sovereignly working in you that which is pleasing in His sight: Humble submission and true love.