



## Betrayal

### God Meant It for Good, Part 1

Genesis 37     David Sunday     April 30, 2017

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We are coming now to the last section of the book of Genesis, each section being marked out by the words we read in Genesis 37:2, *“These are the generations of...”* In the last section we saw the generations of Isaac as seen through his sons Jacob and Esau. Now the generations of Jacob are seen through his sons—and especially through Joseph.

The story of Joseph is one of the most masterful literary works in the entire world. It’s full of betrayal, intrigue and temptation, the reversal of fortune—all of the things that make for spellbinding literature. But what is this story all about? If we ask Andrew Lloyd Webber, who wrote *“Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat,”* it’s the story of the boy whose dream came true...and he could be you! Anyone from anywhere can make it if they get a lucky break. Maybe that’s why the musical was so popular. One review of it said this: *“It’s really great. It barely mentions God.”*

But did you notice, neither does Genesis 37? Where is God in this chapter? Where is God when you experience rejection, betrayal, treachery and opposition? Some of you are going through treacherous betrayal right now. Through the years I’ve spoken to men whose wives have left them for someone else, and I’ve seen the stinging tears of betrayal flow from their eyes. I’ve talked to women who have told me, *“I wish my husband would just hit me, because the bruises would heal. But the words, the callous indifference, the harshness of his cold heart leave me with wounds that no one can see and a plight that few can understand.”*

I’ve met children whose parents have never been satisfied with them, who always demanded more, and who could never see anything worth praising. I’ve talked to people who work for bosses who are constant tyrants and are never pleased, but are always saying, *“Make bricks out of straw,”* so to speak. I’ve met lonely believers who are the only Christians in their family and who know what it’s like to be the object of scorn and ridicule.

If you’re going through anything like this, you know you need more than a lucky break. You need the assurance that God is with you, that God is present—even when He seems most

absent. Could that be? Could it be that God is present, even when He seems most absent?

Frederick William Faber wrote a hymn that says:

He hides himself so wondrously,  
As though there were no God;  
He is least seen when all the powers  
Of ill are most abroad.

Thrice bless'd is he to whom is given  
The instinct that can tell  
That God is on the field when he  
Is most invisible.

[From "The Right Must Win" by Frederick William Faber]

The story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 is written to help believers develop the instinct that can tell that God is on the field, that God is at work, that God is still working out all things in your lives, even when He is most invisible. Joseph's story can help you hone that instinct. It's a great Old Testament illustration of Romans 8:28, "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*"

So as we dive into this story, let's start by meeting Joseph's family. It begins with Jacob, who is also known as Israel. You remember that God changed his name and is calling the nation of Israel after their forefather Jacob. Jacob has 12 sons by four wives. In Genesis 37:3 we are told that Joseph—"the son of his old age" who was born to Rachel, his favorite wife, who had been unable to conceive for a long time—is Jacob's favorite. He loves Joseph more than any other of his sons.

Now, hasn't Jacob already seen the damage that is caused by favoritism in a family? Why would Jacob subject his own sons to the torment that he himself went through as a young child because of the favoritism of his parents, Isaac and Rebekah, as well as between him and his brother Esau? But Jacob doesn't hide his favoritism either. He signifies that Joseph is his favorite by making him a regal robe of many colors. And when Joseph wears that colorful robe, everyone knows Daddy loves him the most. Ironically, this favoring of Joseph over all his other sons is going to set in motion a series of events that means Jacob will not see his son for most of the rest of his life. That's Jacob.

Now let's look at Joseph. We meet him in Genesis 37:2, at 17 years of age—that tender age full of idealism. You've got the whole world ahead of you. If anyone is 17 in this room, you're at a great time in life when you can think about all the things in your future that you're excited

about. It's pretty carefree. You're thinking about cars and motorcycles, maybe college, maybe marriage down the road—all kinds of things that you're excited about.

Here is Joseph. He's a shepherd at 17 years of age, working with his half-brothers, the ones who were born to the maidservant Bilhah and Zilpah. They're working together, and it says ominously in verse two that "*Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.*" People see this and say, "Oh, what a tattle-tale." No one likes a younger brother who tells on his siblings. But Genesis does not call Joseph a tattle-tale. There's no indication that the bad report was untrue. We know his brothers have already been involved in very sordid behavior—just remember the massacre of the Shechemites a couple chapters earlier. So we should be careful not to speculate as to the morality of what Joseph is doing here. This is not necessarily a blight on his character.

What we do know is that by bringing this bad report, Joseph is alienating himself from the rest of his brothers and is standing out as more righteous than they—which is going to be proven true in the rest of the story. We need to pay attention especially to the significance of Joseph's dreams, because they show us that Joseph is not merely his father's favorite son, but that God Himself is setting Joseph apart. God has chosen and elected Joseph to play a special role in the carrying out of His purposes. His hand is on Joseph—and we see that through these two dreams.

The first, in verse seven, is an agricultural type of dream. Joseph is out with his brothers binding sheaves in the field, and his sheaf rises and stands upright, while their sheaves gather around and bow down to his. Clearly the message is that Joseph is going to be the ruler among his brothers. The second dream, in verse nine, has a similar message, this time an astrophysical dream of the sun, moon and 11 stars bowing down to him. Even Joseph's father is troubled by this dream that seems to signify that his mother, his brothers and his father would bow down to the ground before Joseph. His brothers become jealous, but his father keeps the dream in his mind—just like Mary in later times would treasure up and ponder in her heart the words of the angel (Luke 2:19).

Lots of people accuse Joseph of being a self-important braggart for sharing these dreams with his brothers and father. But I think that too is unfair and misses the point altogether. These dreams are the revelation of God to Joseph and to his brothers. The dreams are showing God's sovereignty and are a witness to His presence and providence in the events that are now going to unfold before our eyes. When dreams came in pairs, it was an indication of the certainty of their fulfillment. It would have been unthinkable in the mind of an ancient Near Eastern person like Joseph to get dreams like this and not want to share them with those around them. It's probably

why Joseph felt compelled to tell his family what God was revealing to him. God was showing what was lying in the future for their family.

I think Liam Goligher is helpful in the guidance he gives us in thinking about this. Here's what he says:

The point is that we don't know why Joseph told everyone about his dream. But the Bible gives us no reason to think ill of him, and we can be glad that Joseph did tell. Why? Because it meant that all his family knew at the same time the story of these dreams which were to be fulfilled exactly as revealed. This perfect fulfillment of Joseph's dreams demonstrated to them many years later that they had heard the word of God from their brother. If Joseph had not told them the dreams, they would not have learned about the surety of God's word. So there was a sense in which Joseph had to tell, because he was the voice of God to his family in that generation. He was unconscious of it, and they were annoyed by it, but it was part of God's plan.

Likewise, God has given us a message we have to tell to the nations, and it's a message that speaks about our place in the plan of God, that we are His children, chosen by Him from before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless through faith in Jesus. It's a message that says God is bringing a people out of darkness into His marvelous light, and if you put your trust in Jesus, you can be a part of that redeemed people. It's a message that says we are among the redeemed. We are among those whom God has chosen. We have the hope of eternal life. And you can have it too—if you put your trust in Jesus. And when we tell that story that God has revealed to us, many people become angry. They say, "Who are you to think you're so special in God's eyes? Who are you to think that just because you trust in Jesus, you're going to be saved—and everyone who doesn't, won't?"

So should we be silent because the story of what God has revealed to us evokes anger, hostility and jealousy from the world? Sadly, sometimes we are silent and we don't tell what God has revealed. But I think we should be chastened in any snap judgments about Joseph's character for revealing what God had revealed to him. Again, there is a sense in which he had to tell, because he was the voice of God to his family in that generation. And there would come a time when his brothers would look back and remember what God had revealed, and they would see how God was faithful in carrying it out just as He had said.

What was the plan of God? In order to understand Joseph's place in God's plan, you've got to go back in Genesis and remember what happened way back at the beginning in chapter

one. After God created mankind in His image, male and female, what did He do? He blessed them, and He said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it,” with God’s blessing on their lives.

Then what happened in Genesis 3? Sin. We didn’t trust in God. We turned from Him, and a curse came, and sickness, death, hatred and animosity. The story from Genesis 3 on became evil spreading, to the point that there was a flood that covered the whole earth. But what happened after the flood? God renewed His covenant, and He again stated His blessing upon humanity—God promised blessings.

Then in Genesis 12, God chose a man—Abram. He said, “Go from the land of your father to the land that I will show you. I will plant you in this land and make you a blessing. You and your descendants shall be mighty and many. In you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” That’s God’s plan. And part of that plan is that God is going to send His people out of the Promised Land into a foreign country for a while, in order that the blessing to the nations might increase as the people multiply.

I want you to keep your finger in Genesis 37 for a minute. Turn back to a really important verse in Genesis 15, just to remind yourself of something God said to Abraham way back then. God knew what was coming here with Joseph. Genesis 15:13: *“Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.”* That’s a prophecy from God about the Israelites’ bondage in Egypt. They’re going to be servants. They’re going to be afflicted there for 400 year. *“But,”* God says, *“I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.”* Then a little later this phrase: *“And they shall come back here,”* to the Promised Land, *“in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”*

So God is saying, “I’m going to send My people out of the Promised Land into Egypt. They’re going to go through a hard time there, but they’re going to come out of there multiplied and with great possessions.” This is part of God’s plan for making them into a great nation that’s going to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth.

So back into Genesis 37, what is the point of the dreams to Joseph? The dreams are there to show Joseph that he is the man whom God has chosen to bring about His promises to bless the nations, to rescue God’s people, and to be the one before whom the nations would bow down. He’s going to be the instrument of getting the children of Israel into Egypt, and there in Egypt God is going to use Joseph to preserve the children of Israel from destruction. A famine is going to come into their land, he’s going to be the rescuer of God’s people, and his brothers are all going to bow down before him. Even Egypt and all the nations are going to bow down before Joseph.

This is important. God is going to be faithful to make Jacob and Israel a great nation and He is going to do it through Joseph, His favorite son. Joseph is God's man.

So let's look in Genesis 37 at how Joseph's brothers respond to God's man, because here you're going to see a really important aspect of what it means to be a follower of God in this world. Verse four: *"They hated [Joseph] and could not speak peacefully to him."* Have you ever met anyone like that? Every time they look at you, there's a snide look in their eyes. Every time they speak—even if they're trying to be nice—there's something cutting. There's a barb, an arrow, an inability to speak peaceably, because they hate you so much. Have you ever had anyone like that in your life? That's how Joseph's brothers were toward him.

Then in verse eight, Joseph tells them these dreams and *"they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words."* God's word is coming through Joseph, but they hate him for it. In verse 11, after the second dream, his brothers were jealous of him. And this jealousy grows into an envy that isn't just out to get what Joseph has—it's out to destroy him in the process.

So Joseph is obedient to his father, in verses 12-17, and goes out looking for his brothers. Notice in verse 13 how he simply responds in obedience to Jacob's will: *"Here I am."* "Here I am. I've come to do your will, Father." His father sends him far away to Shechem, where his brothers were tending their herds. Remember, Shechem is a dangerous place for them to be, because it wasn't too long before this that they had massacred the Shechemites.

Joseph gets there, but they're not there. There "just happens" to be a man wandering in the field who had overheard Joseph's brothers talking about where they're going to go next—to Dothan. So Joseph is on a journey of 50-plus miles, making his way toward his brothers. And what are they doing as Joseph is coming toward them? They're plotting how to kill him. Verse 18: *"They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him."* Verse 19: *"They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer.'" They can't stand him. I'm sure that what they were really saying is too graphic to repeat from a pulpit. They hate this brother. "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."* They're trying to squash God's plan to bring salvation...to them. They're trying to destroy God's purposes to bring blessing to all the nations. "We'll see what becomes of his dreams." They're trying to abort the plans of God from being fulfilled.

Reuben shows pathetic weakness in verse 21. He realizes this is bad, so he says, *"Let us not take his life."* How about this? *"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."* So Reuben's thinking, "I'm going to come back and get him out of here. I wish my

brothers weren't doing this." But the brothers continue in callous indifference in verses 23-24. When Joseph gets close to them, they rise up like a pack of wild wolves. They pounce on him, they strip him of his robe—that robe of many colors, the reminder of their jealous hatred—and they throw him into a pit that had a narrow opening but was wider toward the bottom. And once you were down in one of those pits, there was no way you could climb out alive.

Then shockingly, they sat down to eat—probably the very food he had brought them from their father. There have been times in my life when I've been so sick to my stomach over something troubling—maybe the shame of realizing I had done wrong—that I just couldn't even eat. I had no appetite left. Not these brothers. They're having a great meal in callous indifference to the cries of their brother Joseph from the pit into which they had thrown him. Can you hear his voice? They can. "Reuben! Simeon! Levi! Judah! Dan! Naphtali! Gad! Issachar! Asher! Zebulon! Don't leave me down here to die! Please, get me out of this pit. Don't let me starve to death."

We know they could hear him, because many years later, in Genesis 42:21, speaking among themselves they said, "Clearly we are being punished because of what we did to Joseph long ago. We saw his anguish when he pleaded for his life, but we wouldn't listen. That's why we're in this trouble." They eat their lunch. Then Judah gets a bright idea. We're hoping that maybe Judah has a little bit of brotherly love in him, because in Genesis 37:26-27 he says, "*What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?...He is our brother, our own flesh.*" You're hoping that Judah is coming to his senses and that he's going to do something to rescue Joseph. But no, this isn't fraternal affection in his heart. This is just thinking about profit margin for their dastardly deeds. Here is a caravan on its way to Egypt. Lo and behold, it's just there at the right time, on its way to Egypt. "Let's sell him into slavery and we'll gain profit."

Then the hypocrisy that follows for these brothers is just sickening. They have to make up a story, and then they go to their father Jacob with a robe dipped in goat's blood. Isn't that ironic? Just as Jacob had deceived his father Isaac with Esau's cloak and goat skins (Genesis 25:29-34), now Jacob is being deceived with his son's cloak and the blood of a goat. Whatsoever a man sows, that he will also reap (Galatians 6:6-10).

The hypocrisy in verse 35 is prevalent as they come and rise up to "comfort" their father, who is so grief-stricken he says, "I'm never, ever going to be able to outlive this. I'll never get over this." He refuses to be comforted, saying, "*No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.*" He's weeping, they're trying to comfort him—and they're the ones responsible for the whole thing.

What's going on here, friends? You've got to listen to a couple key verses from the rest of the Bible. First, Psalm 105:17 tells us God "*sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave.*" So God is relocating Joseph to Egypt. God is carrying out His purposes forecasted in Genesis 15. He's sending Joseph ahead to save them.

Then Stephen—in his sermon in Acts 7:9-10, right before he was stoned to death as the first Christian martyr—says this: "*And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.*" God was with him. God was raising Joseph up to send him ahead of his family to Egypt, so that he could deliver them from famine.

But the sin of Joseph's brothers was so blinding that when their savior was walking toward them, all they wanted to do was kill him. Stephen thinks about this in his sermon and traces the history of Israel, saying, "This is the way wicked sinners have always acted when God has sent a deliverer, a savior. They have always opposed, hated, despised and rejected the ones who bring the message of salvation. This is the way sinners always act." So Stephen wraps up his sermon—as the world's least popular preacher who is going to be stoned for his words—and this is his grand finale in Acts 7:51-53:

*You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.*

This is the way of sinful men. God raises up a deliverer, and we oppose him. We hate him. We despise him. We reject him. That's what we do in our sin with the Savior God sends. It's the way of humanity in sin. William Taylor puts it like this: "It has always been the way that God's man will be opposed and hated, despised and rejected, by wicked men." It's the way it was with Joseph. Clearly that's the way it was with Jesus. Jesus is God's Man. He's the promised Savior Who came to rescue and deliver us from our sin. But what did we do when we saw Him coming? We hated Him.

Why, what has my Lord done?  
What makes this rage and spite?  
He made the lame to run,  
He gave the blind their sight.  
Sweet injuries!

Yet they at these  
Themselves displease,  
And 'gainst him rise.

[From "My Song Is Love Unknown" by Samuel Crossman]

We despised and rejected Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him (Isaiah 53:3). We plotted a murderous scheme against Him. All those who had power to preserve or protect Him failed to stand up for Him. He was betrayed by one of His own, sold for 30 pieces of silver (Matthew 26:1-16). We mocked Him, spat on Him, pressed a crushing crown of thorns into His skull and crucified Him (Matthew 27:27-31). This is the way of sinful men. God sends a Savior—we reject Him.

But for those who will repent of their hatred toward the way of salvation that God has made, and who will turn from their enmity and receive Him, God gives the right to become children of God (John 1:12). God says, "I will forgive your rebelliousness. While you were still an enemy, Christ died for you" (Romans 5:1-11). That's the gospel. And the way it has always been for Joseph and Jesus in this world, so it will be for those who follow Jesus.

Actually, Genesis 37 helps us know something that we should expect in this world. This isn't the whole story of what it's like to live in a sinful world, but this is part of it. This is not that unusual, actually. This is fairly normative for those who follow God. Don't be naïve.

You know, if there's any fault in Joseph in this chapter, I don't think it's that he tattled. I don't think it's that he told about his dreams. If there's any fault, it may be that he was naïve, that he thought in his youthful idealism, "Hey, they're going to love me. My brothers will love me when I tell them God's word." And we're the same way sometimes. We just think, "Why wouldn't the world love us? We're good people. We're bringing them good news." But it has always been that God's man will be opposed and hated, despised and rejected by wicked men.

If you're faithful, you will not live long as a Christian without tasting the hatred of this world. It may come from within your own family. There will be times when you will be despised and rejected for no fault of your own. The world will use and abuse you; betrayal, treachery and callous indifference will be your lot. That will happen sometimes to us as a church, too. What does Romans 8:36 say is the experience of God's people in this world? "*All the day long we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.*" That's what believers should expect. We should be alarmed and concerned not at the world's hostility and opposition—instead, we should be alarmed if we don't ever experience anything like this in following Jesus.

Jesus said, "*Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets*" (Luke 6:26). We should expect some suffering, some opposition, some despising

and rejecting of us, because we follow a crucified Savior. Amy Carmichael was reflecting on this and she asked these questions of a believer. And I ask you these questions as well:

Hast thou no scar?  
No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?  
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,  
I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star,  
Hast thou no scar?

Hast thou no wound?  
Yet, I was wounded by the archers, spent.  
Leaned me against the tree to die, and rent  
By ravening beasts that compassed me, I swooned:  
Hast thou no wound?

No wound? No scar?  
Yet as the Master shall the servant be,  
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;  
But thine are whole. Can he have followed far  
Who has no wound nor scar?

To follow Jesus in this world will bring scars and wounds. If there are none, we cannot have followed very near. But that need not make us fearful. That need not rob us of our joy. That need not disrupt our peace. Joseph will never come back home to the Promised Land until they carry his bones back from Egypt to bury them there. Did you think that if you were obedient and faithful, your life would be easy? Did you think that if you follow Jesus, it would just make your already comfortable existence in these beautiful suburbs just a little bit nicer?

It was not so for Joseph. It is not so for Jesus, or for those who follow Him. Yet we can consider it all joy, my beloved friend, when we encounter various trials, because we know that God is working through that testing (James 1:2-4). God is working through the rejection. God is working through the betrayal. They mean it for evil, but God means it for good (Genesis 50:20). That's how, in the midst of suffering, betrayal and the testing of our faith, we rejoice. It's because we have developed the instinct that knows God is on the field when He is most invisible. We understand and trust in the providence of God. And what do we understand from the providence of God? This, says the Heidelberg Catechism:

God's providence is His almighty and ever-present power, whereby as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and

sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come to us not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

It was God Who made sure that when Joseph was lost in Shechem, someone “just happened” to be there who had overheard the brothers, who pointed him on to Dothan. It was God Who made sure that that deep pit into which he was thrown “just happened” not to have any water at the bottom, so that Joseph did not drown. It was God Who made sure that when he was pulled out of the pit, it was “just in time” for the slave traders to pass by on a caravan to Egypt. All of it seems like it’s going from bad to worse, yet through it all God is almighty and ever present, upholding Joseph, guiding him with His fatherly hand to be in the right place at the right time to rescue His people, to multiply them and to make them a blessing to the nations.

Did Joseph enjoy any of this? I’m sure he did not. I’m sure it was painful. I’m sure none of it felt good. But God was with him in that pit in Dothan. Just as He was later on in the history of Israel, when another prophet, Elijah, would stand in Dothan and pray, “O Lord, open the eyes of my servant that he may see.” *“So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha”* (2 Kings 6:17). Similarly, when Joseph was in a pit in Dothan, God commanded His angels concerning him, to guard him in all his ways.

God is not like Reuben was—powerless, wishing he could prevent what was happening to Joseph but wringing his hands in helpless desperation. No, God is in control. God is working it out for everyone’s good. And that same God is with us. We can know that in all things God is working for our good, even through sin and evil and suffering. He will never leave us nor forsake us, *“So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’”* (Hebrews 13:6). Thanks be to God.

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