

The Joseph Story | Broken Family/Beautiful Plan

Betrayal

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Genesis 37.2ff

These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. ⁴ His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms. ⁵ Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, "Please listen to this dream which I have had; ⁷ for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸ Then his brothers said to him, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. ⁹ Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰ He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?" ¹¹ His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

¹² Then his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem. ¹³ Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them." And he said to him, "I will go." ¹⁴ Then he said to him, "Go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. ¹⁵ A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, "What are you looking for?" ¹⁶ He said, "I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷ Then the man said, "They have moved from here; for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸ When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. ¹⁹ They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer! ²⁰ Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!" ²¹ But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, "Let us not take his life." ²² Reuben further said to them, "Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him"-- that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father.

²³ So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it. ²⁵ Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt. ²⁶ Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷ Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. ²⁸ Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt.

²⁹ Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. ³⁰ He returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?" ³¹ So they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood; ³² and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, "We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not." ³³ Then he examined it and said, "It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has

devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!" ³⁴ So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, "Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son." So his father wept for him.

³⁶ Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard.)

Each year in the fall we look at the work of God in the Old Testament church. Last year we read through the lives of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) in the book of Genesis. THIS YEAR we pick up with Jacob and his family – and especially his son Joseph... It's a famous section (even a Broadway musical based on it!).

Last week, we saw how the rest of the OT treats these narratives ...how the songwriters, for instance, used these fascinating stories *as moorings for the soul*, i.e. when they were adrift and losing touch and deeply discouraged, THEY CAME BACK to these stories and used them ON THEIR OWN SOULS. The stories reveal the Invisible Hand of God, the providence of God that moves everything toward a designed end.

Today, we move FROM the summary of the events in the historical Psalms RIGHT TO the history itself. We read the whole long story today because it really sets the stage for this last third of the Book of Genesis and not ONLY is this amazing story-telling and written with what we could only call, "supernatural artistry" and so many layers of detail and intentionality (themes here that run right through the end of the Bible) BUT ALSO, we want to sort of breathe in the air of Genesis and get a feel for the world of Jacob and Joseph and their broken family.

Today we want to see this terribly broken family and find IN IT the same kind of signs we see in our own families (on a personal level) AND on a broader level, signs in our own community and region, South Florida and the United States and even stuff we see on an international level (what can be done in Syria with over 100,000 dead and 6 million displaced...can you imagine...the suffering in that?) HOW, using this story and the method we discussed last week, how can we find an anchor here...and a deep sense of peace and a motivation to work and help and do something (both on a personal level and locally and even internationally) to HOPE and TO HELP?

Three points today:

- 1) What's Happening?
- 2) What's missing? (and point #3)
- 3) What's happening and what's missing?

The story opens with Jacob settled in the land, Esau has moved away and makes it possible for Jacob and his broken family to move back. Jacob was a polygamist. He had grown up with sibling rivalry and with parental favoritism. His mother loved Jacob and his father loved the other twin (Esau) and now the chickens have come home to roost (as we say). The favorite wife (Rachel)

gave birth to a son and that son was the favored among all the brothers, Joseph the son of Rachel.

Rachel had one more son (Benjamin) and he may have been Jacob's second favorite but Rachel died in childbirth and maybe Jacob associated Benjamin with her death...in any case, Joseph was the apple of his father's eye and all the brothers knew it well. And there's resentment.

Jacob sends young Joseph (17 years old) to be apprenticed by the sons of the concubines because he dares not put Joseph with the sons of Leah! The sons of Leah, *especially* hate the sons of Rachel (the mothers were rival wives) ...but all the brothers dislike Joseph. *And Joseph comes back from being apprenticed and tattles*; he squeals to dad about those slacker brothers and how they're falling down on the job. So, Jacob, *to appease Joseph*, Jacob makes Joseph their supervisor.

Jacob takes Joseph off "the floor" and puts him in the front office and he makes it clear to the other brothers by giving Joseph this royal robe. BTW, the varicolored tunic...(which some know as the Technicolor Dream Coat)...is probably just a way of saying it was "Royal"- a supervisor's coat.

And Jacob is blind to the damage he's doing. He sort of transfers his love of Rachel to her son Joseph (what Freud would've done with that, I don't know!) And in his Freudian blindness, Jacob exacerbates the sibling rivalry with this "power jacket" so that all the brothers feel, "WE wear t-shirts and jeans – like shepherds wear...but HE wears Armani... like he's front-office...like he sits on a throne!"

And now they really hate him. And then there are the two dreams. Which were somehow divinely inspired because in the end, all the brothers WILL bow to him and even the parents will bow...and he will save the lives of his whole family but DID HE HAVE TO BE SO CHATTY ABOUT IT? That Armani suit just went right to his head...and he's a 17 year old hotshot who just won't SHUT up!

His brothers are really getting FED Up and even his father barks at him... even while he also ponders these things in his heart (Luke 2.19, 51) (as if to say, "Wow! He is really self-confident...that's my boy!")

And dislike becomes disdain becomes hate... becomes "hated him even more" becomes (v. 11) "his brothers were jealous of him". Ahhh...jealousy. It's a very destructive emotion and drive when it's found in a family or a workplace or a church. And now we feel, "something's going to happen!"

Jacob sends Joseph from the front office to supervise your “brothers” and they’ve moved 14 miles farther away...away from dad...on their own...with no one to see. And THEY see him coming from a distance and they plot to kill him.

“They said to one another, "Here comes *THIS DREAMER!* Now then, come and let’s kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we’ll say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' *Then let’s see what’ll become of his dreams!*"

But the oldest brother, Reuben, is responsible...and has to answer for Joseph and he wants to slow this train down... so he says, “Hold on guys! Let’s just throw him in a pit and leave him there...” Then Reuben leaves and plans to get Joseph out later.

So they do...but, “first...let’s get rid of that stupid ‘power coat.’” They strip him of his robe and throw him in the deep hole and they have lunch (shows how fed up they were...and calloused!)

And that’s when an economic opportunity appears on the horizon! A caravan headed south to Egypt... And Judah says, “We can sell Joseph as a slave...make a buck, be rid of this nuisance and not have blood on our conscience – PERFECT!” And all the brothers listened to Judah...like he’s all that...like he’s very persuasive...a man with a plan!

So they lift him from the earth and sell him for a bag of silver...Joseph is headed to Egypt! He’ll never bother us again! We’ll never see his stupid face again!

Reuben, the eldest, returns...Joseph has been sold. Reuben knows he’s in trouble with Dad...We better come up with a good story. They dip the robe in blood and prepare to tell a BIG LIE – that Joseph must’ve been eaten by wolves. And they brace themselves because “Dad’s going to be pretty bummed out!”

But DAD’S NOT pretty bummed out! He’s utterly shattered and broken beyond repair and devastated beyond words and inconsolable and grieved beyond description...and the BROTHERS must have thought... “Uh oh! We really messed up! Had no idea what this would do to the heart of our father!”

Joseph ends up in the capital of the world...in Egypt and is put up for auction. And there happens to be a buyer there...named Potiphar...who happened to be in the security business...a military man...who happened to work for the government...the secret service...protecting the President...the King of the World...the Pharaoh. Joseph is close to Pharaoh.

So...that’s what happened...that’s what sets up everything to follow. It’s all wonderful storytelling but there does seem to be one little detail missing... I don’t know if you saw it...OR DIDN’T see it...

You'd think that I, as the preacher, would see to it that THIS little detail was IN the story... that there would never be a sermon with out this...I'm speaking of GOD.

There's NOT A SINGLE reference to God in this entire long, long chapter. God is not even mentioned. Isn't that odd... a Bible story without...God?

And YET isn't that the very point the writer is making that when God is apparently NOT there...that He is actually MOST there? Isn't this chapter seemingly devoid of God IN REALITY SATURATED with God?

All the decisions that people make in this episode, Jacob's decision to favor Joseph (which was due to Jacob's weakness as a husband and a father and a person) and Jacob's decision to send the 17-year old son to be apprenticed and to entertain his tattletale squealing and Jacob's coddling Joseph...and putting him in charge... and the fact that they were not at a pasture nearby but far away from home where they could do their dirty deed unknown to anyone...and that they were where a trade-route ran where a caravan HAPPENED to be passing... and on and on and on...

When it looks like God isn't there, it turns out that He is orchestrating everything...in this case to get His people into Egypt and multiply them exponentially and then 400 years later to bring them out with a series of miracles that will be the backbone of what OT people thought about when they spoke of salvation and of God rescuing His people.

And in time...so many little details in this story of a disastrous, messed-up family...so many details will coalesce in another story of a Father who sends a Son (not a prideful punk like Joseph) but a perfect Son who embodies humility...a Son who came to His brothers..."came to His own but his own knew Him not" (John 1.11) ... a Son who was stripped of His robe and laid aside his Royal authority and was stripped of His clothes...was the picture of shame and was lifted up from the earth in order to draw all people to Himself (John 12.32)...a Son who also went into Egypt (Mt 2.14) and was betrayed for a bag of silver.

It says of this other Son, Jesus Christ, in the last book of the Bible that He wears a robe dipped in blood and His Name is the Word of God. (Rev. 19.13)

And when this other favored Son...the fairest of the fair...when He gave Himself to be torn by beasts and ripped apart by sinful men (Ps. 22)...when He agreed to go into the pit for ME ... to take the justice that MY sin deserved...the grief that it brought to His Father's heart can never be estimated...It blotted the sun from the sky.

In that MOMENT of human history when God appeared most absent, and human evil seemed most present, in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ...God, the Father, was actually most present. It was a moment planned forever (Acts 2.23) and it was a moment God was preparing the world for EVEN as He was giving us a picture of it in the Joseph Story and in so many of the stories in

the OT. All these stories getting us ready for the One Big Story that brings it all together – “the Myth that is True” (C.S. Lewis)

Is it possible that when we look at the stage of world events, wars and earthquakes and tyrants and travesties of all kinds...THAT THE GOD WHO goes unmentioned is still working all things together for the good of those who trust Him and for His beautiful purposes to appear? The Joseph Story says, “Yes!” ...the Jesus Story screams “Yes!”

Is it possible that when in our own lives God seems MOST absent He is actually most present? In our own messed up families...and moments in our own family history that are so painful we wish we could forget... somehow, the Invisible Hand was moving and steering and orchestrating all details...for our ultimate good?

I’ll preview what’s coming (since most of us know how this story ends) but the good that comes out of Joseph’s abuse...and the good that comes out of the shattered broken-heart of Jacob...is a good that could NEVER have been imagined!

It’s the ultimate rags-to-riches story...it saved the world in that day and it made Joseph the most powerful man on the planet. “Eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has it entered the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1Co 2:9 NKJ)

Now I end on this: what’s happening and what’s missing? What’s happening in the world right now that YOU just can’t understand...that may even push you to ask, “Where in the world is God right now when we NEED Him? And what may be happening in your own life and family? What painful stuff and sometimes (as in this ancient family) sometimes horrific stuff? What’s happening?

And what’s missing?

It may appear that God is missing...but He’s NOT...and in fact He may be very MOST at work in this moment...in the world and in your life and family. God may be ready to unleash a great awakening in the Arab world...and in South Florida! and He IS indeed doing some unimagined works even where HE seems most UNMENTIONED and absent...and that’s GOOD because...what other power can heal this broken world...can governments? Can militaries?

And what else can ...who else can heal and transform us and our families?

God is NOT missing...but don’t let faith be missing. Jesus Christ said to the despairing "Do not be afraid; only believe, and she will be made well." (Luke 8:50) I’m not saying that, “it’s all going to work out in the end if ya’ just believe” ...But I AM SAYING, “He is going to work it all out in the end so BE BELIEVING IN HIM...” Believe the Gospel!

It’s the wisest thing to do...the Joseph Story says it and the Jesus Christ Story SCREAMS IT.