

Joseph the Captive (Gen. 37:12–36)

By Jacob Gerber

The first part of the story of Joseph set the stage in an ominous direction. We read about Joseph's faithfulness, but we also read about the brothers' ever-increasing hatred for Joseph. We have no indication that Jacob knows anything about the murderous intentions developing in the hearts of his sons, a naiveté that sets up the horrifying story that we will study in Genesis 37:12–36. Here, we see Joseph walk right into an ambush, narrowly escaping with his life, but only by being sold into slavery in Egypt. Even so, this story is not written to lament the misfortune of Joseph, as deeply as he suffers here. On the contrary, we are subtly reminded at every stage of this passage that it is the Lord himself who is personally, powerfully, and providentially in control over the intricate details of Joseph's life. By implication, this passage has a powerful message for us about the Lord's providential guidance of the many details of our own lives, including our suffering. Here we are reminded of what the Apostle Paul puts so powerfully in Romans 8:28: *God works all things together for our good.*

Seeing our Enemies' Peace (Gen. 37:12–17)

The story of Joseph's betrayal begins on a note that sounds, at first, innocent enough: "Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem" (v. 12). Shepherd the flock was the occupation of Jacob's family (cf. Gen. 47:3), so on one level, this is routine background information. On the other hand, it was in Shechem where Simeon and Levi had slaughtered all males for a crime committed against Dinah, Jacob's daughter (Gen. 34:25).¹ Jacob had rebuked his sons, saying, "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household" (Gen. 34:30). That the brothers would return to the scene of their crime not only suggests that they are callous to former their violence, but that they are reckless and ready for more trouble. Both of those insights into their temperaments will become clear through the remainder of this story.

Jacob's Naiveté in Hebron (v. 13–14)

Apparently naive of any danger, Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers (v. 13). Although the narrator has informed us about the hatred of Joseph's brothers for Joseph, it seems that the other brothers have hidden their hatred from their father.² Jacob, therefore, instructs Joseph to "see (ראה; *ra'ah*) the peace (שָׁלוֹם; *šālôm*) of your brothers and the peace (שָׁלוֹם; *šālôm*) of the flock" (v. 14; my translation). These instructions are ironic, since when Joseph's brothers "saw [ראה; *ra'ah*] that their

¹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 353.

² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 413.

father loved [Joseph] more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully [שָׁלוֹם; *šālôm*] to him” (v. 4).³ The brothers hated Joseph and could not speak “peacefully” to him because they “saw” that their father loved Joseph more than any of them. Nevertheless, their father is sending Joseph into the way of harm in order to “see” their “peace” (i.e., well-being). Jacob may show preferential treatment to Joseph, but Jacob loves the rest of his sons more than they believe he does. As for Joseph, we see once again that Joseph’s first loyalties are to his father, whatever his apprehensions about his brothers may have been. In response to his father’s command, Joseph responds with a word of gracious, humble obedience: “Here I am” (v. 13).⁴

“The Man” in Shechem (v. 15–17)

The story of Jacob’s interactions at Shechem with “the man” in v. 15–17 prompt many speculations from commentators. Is this a man, or is this, in fact, some kind of angel or theophany (c.f., the “man” in Josh. 5:13)? The text here, however, does not seem interested in the identify of the man, so it is probably better to try to understand the function of this conversation in the narrative. Along these lines, we may make a number of helpful observations. First, Joseph’s conversation with this man to find his brothers demonstrates that Joseph will do whatever it takes to carry out his father’s instructions.⁵ This becomes all the more clear when we realize that Shechem is already 50 miles (a day’s journey) north of Hebron, and that Dothan is another 13 miles further north.⁶ Joseph demonstrates the full extent of his faithfulness by obeying every bit of his father’s instructions, even though his faithfulness will lead directly to his own “death” at the hands of his brothers.

Second, this scene heightens the drama by delaying the encounter between Joseph and his brothers.⁷ Even if Joseph does not know the hearts of the brothers toward Joseph, we do. There may even be a sense of relief that Joseph will be unable to find his brothers, but that relief is quickly shattered when this man tells Joseph exactly where to find them. Third, this story underscores the Lord’s providential guidance over even Joseph’s deepest moment of suffering, as the Lord works even this evil story toward good (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28).⁸ If Shechem is a city associated with the treacherous violence of Joseph’s brothers, Dothan is a city that will later be associated with the angelic chariots of fire from God surrounding Elisha for his protection (2 Kgs. 6:13–17).⁹

Saved by our Trials (Gen. 37:18–28)

As Joseph approaches, v. 18 (וַיִּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ) begins identically to v. 4 (וַיִּרְאוּ...אֹתוֹ): “And they saw him....” Earlier, when they “saw” (רָאָה; *ra’ah*) him, they could not speak “peacefully” (שָׁלוֹם; *šālôm*)

³ Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 606.

⁴ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 694.

⁵ “He searches them out anxiously; and though they had changed their place, he spares neither labor nor trouble till he finds them.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 2, 264. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xv.i.html>>)

⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 414.

⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 353.

⁸ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 695.

⁹ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 193.

to him (v. 4). Now, even though Joseph came to “see” (רָאָה; *ra’ah*) their “peace” (שָׁלוֹם; *šālôm*; v. 14), when they “see” (רָאָה; *ra’ah*) him, they conspire to kill him. This is a horrifying tragedy, but it is not unprecedented in the family of God. Earlier, Jacob’s brother Esau intended to kill Jacob (Gen. 27:41). Before that, even the peace of the very first family was shattered by fratricide, when Cain murdered Abel (Gen. 4:8).¹⁰

Why do they wish to kill Joseph? We read earlier that Joseph’s brothers hated “for his dreams and for his words” (v. 8), and this twofold hatred of Joseph again becomes the focus here. As for their hatred against Joseph for his *dreams*, the brothers immediately identify him as “this dreamer” (v. 19), and they later say, “we will see what will become of his dreams” (v. 20). As for their hatred against Joseph for his *words*, notice how the narrative highlights the brothers’ evil words: “They said to one another...” (v. 19) and “Then we will say...” (v. 20). Not only do they intend to murder their brother, but they intend to lie about what they have done by blaming an “evil” beast (v. 20; cf. v. 2).

Reuben’s Intervention (v. 21–24)

Not all of the brothers go along with this plan, however. While the brothers reacted with violent hatred the two times they “saw” Joseph (v. 4, 18), the narrative tells us that Reuben jumps into action “when he heard” what his brothers were planning (v. 21). Reuben delivers Joseph from his brothers by first urging them not to take Joseph’s life (v. 21), and second by urging them simply to throw him into a pit in the wilderness (v. 22). The text tells us that Reuben does this out of a desire to restore Joseph to their father (v. 22). Reuben, we may remember, defiled himself by the scandal of laying with Bilhah, Jacob’s concubine (Gen. 35:22). By rescuing Joseph, Reuben likely wanted to restore his place of honor as the firstborn in the eyes of his father.¹¹ While Reuben does not rescue Joseph as he intended, his words here do prevent the direct murder of Joseph. Instead, the brothers only strip him, take him, and throw him into the pit (v. 23–24). The rapid succession of verbs “conveys the speed and roughness of the brothers’ assault on Joseph,” so that even the word for “strip” is a word used elsewhere for skinning an animal (e.g., Lev. 1:6).¹²

To compound the heinousness of their crime, the brothers sit down remorselessly to eat (v. 25).¹³ This phrase, “sat down to eat,” will appear again in another shocking scene of Israel’s remorseless sin: “And the people *sat down to eat* and drink and rose up to play” (Ex. 32:6; cf. 1 Cor. 10:7). Here, though, the scene is filled with irony, as Kenneth Mathews points out: “Jewish midrash recognized the irony of this picture: the brothers ate bread, while Joseph was left in the pit, when it would be Joseph who fed bread to the whole world (*Gen. Rab.* 84.17). Moreover, the scene is reversed in Joseph’s house when the brothers next eat in Joseph’s presence (43:33–34).”¹⁴ The “empty” pit (v. 24), then, foreshadows the “empty” years of famine that Joseph must later manage (Gen. 41:27).¹⁵

¹⁰ Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 603.

¹¹ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 696–97.

¹² Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 354.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 2, 269. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xv.i.html>>

¹⁴ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 697.

¹⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 419.

Judah's Negotiation (v. 25–28)

The loose translation “looked up and saw” (v. 25, ESV) masks a highly significant phrase: “And they lifted up their eyes, and they saw, and behold—a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead” (v. 25, my translation). The three phrases about seeing (lift up the eyes / see / behold) are repetitive, but not redundant, but they usually signify an unusually important moment in salvation history (e.g., Gen. 18:2; 22:13; 24:63; 31:10; Josh 5:13). In the Joseph narrative, the arrival of this caravan becomes the means of Joseph's delivery from death by starvation in the pit (v. 26–28), as well as the means by which Joseph will be transported to Egypt (v. 36). Thus, the arrival of these traders is a key part of God's providential work of what he means “for good” (Gen. 50:20).

Significantly, Judah—not Reuben—becomes the brother who advocates for saving Joseph from immediate death (v. 26). Certainly, Reuben's motives are better than Judah's, for Judah only wants to make some “profit” (v. 26). Even when Judah appeals to the wisdom of selling Joseph by identifying Joseph as “our brother, our own flesh,” he only highlights how evil their actions against their own brother truly are.¹⁶ Nevertheless, part of what this narrative is doing is to explain the process by which Judah transforms from a scoundrel (here, and Gen. 38) into the one from whose tribe “the scepter shall not depart...nor the ruler's staff” (Gen. 49:10).¹⁷

The caravan itself, comprising Ishmaelites and Midianites (v. 25, 28; and, possibly, Medanites; v. 36), are both related to these brothers as the descendants of Abraham through Hagar (Ishmael; Gen. 16:15) and Keturah (Midian and Medan; Gen. 25:2).¹⁸ Even these relatives do not help Joseph. Instead, they merely purchase Joseph as a slave for twenty shekels of silver, the price of a slave (v. 28; cf. Lev. 27:5).¹⁹

Suffering for Our Sin (Gen. 37:29–36)

Apparently, Reuben was not with the other brothers when Judah spearheaded the plan to sell Joseph into slavery. When Reuben returns to the pit and finds Joseph missing, he tears his clothes and asks, “The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?” His grief over what will happen to *him* (“where shall I go?”) from Joseph's death may underscore Reuben's dependence on saving Joseph as his only hope for restoring himself before his father (v. 29–30). Nevertheless, though Reuben intended to save Joseph, his plans have come to nothing. Surprisingly, Reuben's actions demonstrates that it is Judah alone who has rescued Joseph from death.²⁰

The brothers conceal their actions by deceiving their father, Jacob, that Joseph was killed. To do so, they use their brother's distinctive clothing (the robe) and dip it in the blood of a goat (v. 31). As Gordon Wenham observes, “There is of course irony in their choosing their brother's clothing and a kid to deceive their father, for it was with his brother's clothes and a kid that Jacob had deceived his

¹⁶ Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 607–08.

¹⁷ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 207–08.

¹⁸ Walton, *Genesis*, 665.

¹⁹ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 195.

²⁰ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 208.

father Isaac (cf. 27:9–17).²¹ In precisely the same way that Jacob earlier deceived his own father, Isaac, so the brothers now deceive Jacob. When they ask Jacob to identify the robe, they ask Jacob to identify whether it belongs to “your son” (v. 32)—they no longer call Joseph their “brother” or their “flesh” (v. 27).²² The brothers do not need to do anything further to pull off the cover-up. While Jacob had explicitly lied to his own father, telling Isaac that he was Esau (Gen. 27:19, 24), the brothers simply let Jacob reach their desired conclusions for himself.²³ Jacob, of course, is crushed by the news. He tears his garments, puts on sackcloth, mourns, refuses to be comforted, and wept for Joseph (v. 34–35). Even here, however, there is a glimmer of hope for Jacob. Jacob will indeed “go down to Sheol to my son” (v. 35), but not in “mourning,” as Jacob expects. Instead, Jacob will eventually “go down” to his *living* son in Egypt before Jacob himself goes to Sheol—that is, to his own grave.²⁴

Joseph, however, is purchased by an officer of Pharaoh, a man named Potiphar (v. 36). As a slave of Potiphar, the Lord will bless Joseph greatly (Gen. 39:2), but because of Potiphar’s wife, Joseph will end up imprisoned (Gen. 39:20). Through all of this, the Lord will continue to work evil toward Joseph together for good—good for Joseph, and good for the whole world.

Discussion Questions

- 1) In how many ways does the beginning of this passage hint at the suffering that Joseph will experience when he finally encounters his brothers? Why does shepherding in Shechem strike such an ominous note (v. 12; cf. Gen. 34)? What are we reminded of when Jacob instructs Joseph to “see” the “peace” of the brothers and the “peace” of the flock (v. 14; cf. Gen. 37:4)? How does the long distance from Hebron to Shechem, and then Shechem to Dothan, make Joseph vulnerable?
- 2) In how many ways does this passage underscore the extent of the evil of Joseph’s brothers? How does this passage inform us about the motivations of Joseph’s brothers? What does Reuben want? Why? What does Judah want? Why? What do the Ishmaelite and Midianite traders want? Why? How does this evil contrast against Joseph’s willingness to go (v. 13) and his diligence to finish the job and find his brothers (v. 15–17)?
- 3) In how many ways do we see the providential hand of the Lord through all of this? How does the Lord providentially send Jacob to his brothers in the first place? How does the Lord providentially ensure that Jacob has no protection? How does the Lord providentially prevent the brothers from killing Joseph? How does the Lord providentially rebuke Jacob for the sins of his youth, when he deceived his own father, Isaac?
- 4) How do we reconcile the great evil committed against Joseph with the providential goodness of God? Later, Joseph will say to his brothers, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”

²¹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 356.

²² Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 608.

²³ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 356.

²⁴ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 208–09.

(Gen. 50:20). Much later, the Apostle Paul will write, “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28). How do the Scriptures demonstrate that God is not the author of evil, but that he nevertheless gives boundaries to evil and orders evil for our ultimate good (WCF 5.4)? How do you understand this doctrine? Is it a comfort to you? Why or why not?