

Joseph and His Brothers (Gen. 37-45):

A Story of Divine Providence, #1

## **“A Household in Strife”**

Gen. 37

*Topic: Providence*

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The wisdom of Proverbs puts it like this:

**“Better a dry crust with peace and quiet  
than a house full of feasting, with strife” (17:1).**

Those of us who enjoy domestic tranquility (at least most of the time)  
can sometimes forget that there is almost nothing  
more heartbreaking in human experience than trouble at home.

We don't need a multimillion-dollar government study to tell us  
that a stable, loving and supportive home environment is essential  
not only for the healthy development of children  
but also for the mental and emotional well-being of adults  
in the pressure-filled world in which we live.

God intended the home to be a place of peace—

husbands and wives loving one another,

children obeying their parents –

Psalm 133:1—**“Behold, how good and pleasant it is**

**when brothers dwell in unity!”**

Yes, how good and pleasant!

We used to relish those moments!

But instead of a place of peace,

homes can too easily become a battleground,

and a policeman friend of mine tells me it's a brave man

who enters unarmed into a home

in which there is a domestic quarrel in progress.

What a tragedy it is to see strife in the home,

but as we all know the trend toward the disintegration of healthy families

is ever increasing.

Divorce statistics seem cold and impersonal,

but it is heartbreaking to consider that each case represents

a household torn apart by anger, mistrust, deceit,

unfaithfulness, a love grown cold and lifeless.

Every divorce represents a defeat,

a failure in a human relationship which no doubt,

began with a love that each thought could never die.

One could say the same thing about statistics concerning juvenile delinquency,

or youth drug abuse, or teenage pregnancy.

The bare numbers disguise, in each case, a human tragedy.

It is a shattering experience to see children,

born in glowing hope and brought up in great expectation,

and even with loving and caring parents,

turn away to travel down a road of self-destruction.

And as we know, family strife spares no social group.

It cuts across all social, cultural, economic,  
intellectual and religious barriers in society. //

The home -- it is, indeed, a hothouse of human emotion.

Nowhere is there greater potential for human joy and happiness.

Yet equally, nowhere is there a greater potential  
for disappointment, misery and grief.

The wise man knows:

**“Better a dry crust with peace and quiet  
than a house full of feasting, with strife.”**

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I begin with this theme this morning because, on the surface at least,  
the story of Joseph and his family recounted in Genesis 37  
is a horrible tragedy of a family torn apart by strife.

It is the story of favoritism, jealousy, and hatred,  
intrigue and violence, deceit, and then grief -- all within one family --  
and perhaps, unexpectedly, all within the founding family  
of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God.

There is a vividness to this story that makes it “ring true” to experience  
as it presents a complex web of relationships in which none of the characters  
is totally absolved from responsibility and guilt  
for the tragic disintegration that takes place.

First, there is **Joseph** -- he is obviously the protagonist, the main character, the hero,  
but there is nothing particularly “heroic” about him as the story unfolds.

In the Bible, the way in which a character is introduced  
often reveals something important about him --  
but I’m not sure *what* to make of v. 2.

Look at it.

Joseph is presented as a young man of seventeen,  
a son of his father's old age (v. 3).

He is perhaps just a servant, a tag-a-long, to his older step-brothers,  
and his relationship with them is obviously strained.

Is he being righteous and responsible

in coming to his father with a “**bad report**” about them?

or is he simply being prigishly self-righteous, a tattler,  
a daddy’s boy who can’t get along?  
We’re left to wonder.

And what about these dreams?

v. 6—“[Joseph] said to [his brothers], “Listen to this dream I had:

**We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field  
when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright,  
while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.”**

v. 9—“Listen,” he said, “I had another dream,

**and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.”**

The apparent eagerness with which he reported these dreams to his brothers

suggests that he was at the very least insensitive to the impact they would have,  
and at the worst Joseph is portrayed as pompous about his own importance --  
an idle dreamer, in quest of power over his elders, a megalomaniac even.

We can't be sure.

One can't help thinking that his alienation from his brothers was, in least in part,  
a result of his own actions.

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Then there is Joseph's father **Jacob** -- what a tragedy this episode is for him.

In the end, he is left captive to a grief from which he would not be rescued.

But he, too, is far from innocent.

In his doting favoritism toward Joseph, the eleventh of his twelve sons,  
born of his beloved Rachel,  
he is hardly a model of sound parental judgment.

The gift of this richly ornamented robe, which probably had royal connotations,  
was sure to arouse the anger and jealousy of Joseph's brothers,  
and it may have planted in Joseph his own dreams of grandeur  
which only made the situation worse.

Poor Jacob -- completely out of touch with his own children.

Just like his own father Isaac, Jacob is blind to the scheming of his sons.

By sending Joseph to check on his flocks,

Jacob is unwittingly responsible for his son's misfortune.

And never once does he suspect the intensity of the brothers' hatred of Joseph.

That, in fact, makes the deception all too easy.

They simply bring the torn robe, dipped in the blood of a goat,  
and Jacob supplies the cover-up story himself --  
“some ferocious animal has devoured him.

**Joseph has surely been torn to pieces,”** he says in v. 33.

The brothers need lie only in their silence.

Hadn't Jacob once deceived his father with the meat of goats (27:9),

when he stole the blessing from his brother Esau.

How often children become just like their parents  
in all the wrong ways.

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In the light of the behavior of both Joseph and his father,

it's not hard to feel a little sympathetic for **the older brothers**,  
though these ten brothers are indeed the darkest villains of the story.

Sure, **Reuben** tries to rescue poor Joseph—

v. 21—he says, "**Let's not take his life.**

**Don't shed any blood. Let's just throw him into this cistern."**

But Reuben's reaction when he discovers that he's gone in v. 30 is telling:

**"The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?"** --

"As the oldest brother I'll be held accountable for Joseph's death,  
now where can I go to avoid that responsibility before my father?"

**Judah** demonstrates his good will -- they shouldn't kill Joseph, he says,

“after all, he’s our brother, our own flesh and blood,” he argues.

But, alas, the recognition of such a fraternal bond

only makes his actions all the more reprehensible.

And what were his motivations?—

“What will we gain if we kill our brother?” he asks in v. 26.

Wouldn’t there to be much more to gain

by selling him into slavery—

like twenty shekels of silver!

No, Reuben and Judah are no better than the others,

only more sophisticated and more attuned to their own self interests.

They were like the rest—at bitter odds with Joseph.

They hated him because their father loved him more than all the rest.

They hated him because he dared to think he would be their superior.

They hated him because

they perceived Joseph as a threat to the social order—

a threat to their own share in their father’s affection.

But, more importantly, we suspect, they saw Joseph as a threat

to their own share in their father’s inheritance.

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Here we have, then, a vicious triangle—Joseph, Jacob, and the brothers --

with each side playing its part in this family tragedy.

The Bible is very down to earth and realistic in all of this.

This is a true slice of life—for rarely is just one party to blame in family conflict,

and if we find ourselves in such situations  
the first question we need to ask is  
“what part am I playing in all of this?”

The human situation is often complex and ambiguous --  
rarely is everything black and white with no grey areas to deal with;  
rarely is there pure innocence and pure guilt.

Apart from the quite obvious cultural difference,  
the story of Jacob's family could be the basis of a modern drama,  
a TV mini-series,  
and we would marvel at its insight into the human psyche  
and the pathos of a ruptured family situation that ended in tragedy.

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I remember back in the 1990s following the saga of the Haft family here in Washington.

The Hafts owned the Dart Drugstore chain, Crown Books, and Trak Auto  
and amassed a huge fortune.

Then their story began to be spilled out in all the newspapers—

The father enlisted the aid of one son to take control of the company  
from his wife and the two other children,  
and then that son tried to get rid of his father.

It was a bizarre situation, with legal fees in the millions,  
and the father eventually excluded all his children from his will.

It was just Genesis 37 in a modern context—the dynamics are just the same.

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We can identify with this story of Joseph and his family

because it's true to human experience.

But we can also identify with this story because,

on one level,

it's limited to human experience.

I'm sure psychologists could demonstrate

the complex series of psychological causes and effects

that results in just this outcome.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is a human story, even a secular story.

Everything happens on the human plane.

No supernatural cause needs to be postulated for these events.

In fact, you may have already noticed that God is never mentioned

in this entire chapter—

not once.

God, it seems, is absent.

In fact, God is conspicuous by his absence.

For in that respect our story presents quite a contrast

to the stories of men like Abraham and Moses --

God appears to them,

God talks to them,

and God acts through them in spectacular ways.

But, frankly, the experience of Abraham and Moses is not my experience of God.

I don't know about you, but I've never seen God manifest in the form of an angel,

nor have I heard his audible voice,

nor have I experienced a powerful miracle.

Have you?

God seems absent from our immediate experience.

And because of our modern scientific worldview,

when we hear thunder,

we think of natural rather than supernatural causes.

A flash of lightning in the sky represents an electromagnetic disturbance,

rather than a signal of divine wrath.

The world appears to be a closed system of natural cause and effect,

and as a result, God often seems distant from us in our day-to-day lives.

How can we really talk about God acting in the world?

Who can see his hand at work?

How can we say he has a plan for our lives?

I find it significant that God appears to be absent in this story of Jacob's family, too.

But in fact, we know he's not.

Sure, on one level,

Genesis 37 can be seen simply as an account of a quite ordinary family tragedy.

But we know that on another level,

it can be seen as a story of God's mysterious activity in the world.

We know that, though he remains hidden,

God is, in fact, a character in every scene,  
and his hidden presence is the most revealing  
thing about this story—  
its most important message to us.

Though he never “intrudes,”  
though there is no spectacular divine intervention,  
God is present in this story,  
working out his plan, quietly and unfailingly,  
in and through every human decision that is made.

But how do we know this?

We know this, first of all,  
because we know that the story of Gen. 37  
is just one episode in a much larger story.

That's the story of God's saving purposes in the world—  
the story that begins in the first chapter of Genesis with the creation of the world,  
culminating in the creation of the first man and woman.

But these two do not accept their God-given place in God's world,  
and instead disobey God and go their own way.

As a result, the Lord brings them under judgment,  
casting them from the garden and from his presence  
to live in a harsh and cruel world that ends in death.

But even in that judgment, the Lord promises to overcome their sin,  
predicting the coming of a Savior who would crush the head of the serpent.

And that promise took on a new form when the Lord called a man named Abraham  
and promised him that he would make of him a great nation  
that would bring blessing to all nations.

And then through his son Isaac, and then Isaac's son Jacob,  
that promise was reaffirmed.

And we know that that promise was finally fulfilled  
when through that nation  
there came a Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of God—  
the Savior of the world.

And it's in this larger context that we understand what is happening in Genesis 37.

Verse 2 gives us a clue that this is what is happening—

**“This is the account of Jacob’s family line”** we read.

In other words, this is an account of the unfolding of the divine promise,  
that divine purpose to bring blessing to all nations  
through the family line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We know that God is at work in the story of Genesis 37  
because the story of Genesis 37 is a part of the much larger story  
God is writing. /

And we can also see that God is at work in the events of this story  
because we see how this particular story ends.

We know that though his brothers tried to stamp it out,  
Joseph’s dream does come true.

Spoiler alert here, but

it was only because Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers  
that he was bought by Potiphar, one of the Pharaoh's officials.  
And only because Joseph was bought by Potiphar  
was he put in jail by the accusations of Potiphar's wife.  
And only because he was in jail  
did he meet Pharaoh's cupbearer.  
And only because he met Pharaoh's cupbearer  
could the cupbearer tell Pharaoh about Joseph's ability to interpret dreams.  
And only because he interpreted Pharaoh's dream,  
could the Egyptians prepare for seven years of famine.  
And only because the Egyptians prepared for seven years of famine,  
could Joseph's father and his brothers come to Egypt to get food,  
bowing down to Joseph in the process,  
and so survive during those lean years.  
And as a result of all that, the plan of God could be realized—  
that plan to make of Jacob's offspring  
a great nation that would be blessing to the world

Isn't God's intricate plan amazing--far beyond our ability to comprehend.

It was all orchestrated by an all-knowing, all-powerful God.

But notice that only when the fulfillment of Joseph's dream becomes public  
is the means by which it is accomplished spelled out for us.

As Joseph tells his brothers when they were receiving their food in chap. 50:

**"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good  
to accomplish what is now being done,**

the saving of many lives” (Gen. 50:20).

Only at the end is all made clear --

Only in hindsight can you trace out the chain of events

that led to the desirable result.

The characters in the midst of the events have no idea how it's all going to work out.

It's a mystery to them.

But the biblical writer does give us a few clues along the way,

a few hints that God was at work here all the time:

Joseph's dreams are a clue—

for dreams are often a means of divine communication in the book of Genesis.

As we read the story we have to wonder

if God is really behind them.

As readers, we are like Jacob—

who in v. 11 first rebuked Joseph for his dream

but then, it says, he “**kept the matter in mind.**”

It makes us think that he suspected God's hand in it.

And another clue comes in the final verse of the chapter,

where we are told that while Jacob was weeping

Joseph was being sold to Potiphar the captain of the Egyptian guard --

as if to tell us -- there's still more to come --

the dream is not dead yet.

But still, the story only hints,

it only implies --

only at the end does it make God's role in all that has happened explicit.

But isn't this what this story is really teaching us about this morning --

**the hidden providence of God in human life.**

**God's providence**—in one definition--

"that continued exercise of the divine power  
whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures,  
is operative in all that comes to pass in the world,  
and directs all things to their appointed end" (Berkof).

God is at work always in the events of our lives and of the world—

but often in very hidden and mysterious ways.

Isn't it true that in our lives, too, most of the time, God only gives hints,

and he only implies his own presence with us --

he can be seen only with the eyes of faith.

On one level, the story of the events of our lives

could be written without mentioning God at all.

You could postulate some natural cause-and-effect relationship

linking just about everything that takes place in our experience.

This is what historians do all the time—

setting forth the chain of events that somehow explains what has happened.

But the biblical writers look at history in a different way.

God himself is the true author of the story they recount.

And they want us to know that God is the author of the story of our lives, too,

though only rarely does the author manifest his presence in his own book.

Rarely does he directly show his hand.

We are caught in the middle of the story,

not sure how it's all going to turn out.

It's all a mystery to us—

and sometimes, as the events unfold, it may even seem a cruel mystery,

as it must have seemed to Joseph,

alone in that cistern,

then taken down to Egypt as a slave.

We wonder where God is—

Why has he allowed this to happen?

Why is he apparently nowhere to be found?

But in the midst of our lives—

in our day-to-day, routine lives

and in those times of difficulty and even tragedy—

we are to remember that there is always more beneath the surface.

God is still there,

even when he does not appear, speak, intrude, or intervene.

God is there, working out his good purposes,

weaving an intricate pattern which to us may look like mere chance

or even chaos.

And in the midst of our daily lives we are called to believe that God is there,

for we are to walk by faith, not by sight,

and we are to hold stubbornly to our conviction that God's purposes cannot fail --

even in the complexity of human evil and human failures  
even when we have failed him.

When you find yourself in the pits,  
think about Joseph in the pit--and then sold into slavery by his own brothers.  
Remember God can use even that to bring good to his people.

You just don't know, do you?  
You just don't know how God can work through the events of our lives.  
Sometimes God's hand can even be dramatic.

I remember the story told by Don Carson, who was a professor at Trinity Seminary.  
It was about a student who came to him  
wanting to change the time of his final exam.

Dr. Carson said No—  
it was the settled policy of the seminary that final exam times did not change.  
There were no exceptions—  
it was as firm and fixed as the law of the Medes and the Persians.

"But Dr. Carson, you don't understand—  
I'm already booked on a flight to LA, where I'm interviewing for a job in a church.  
I've just got to get my exam changed."

Dr. Carson held firm,  
and so when the exam came the student took the exam, but he didn't like it,  
And he stormed into the student lounge to register his protest one more time.  
But as he entered the lounge, he saw some of the students  
gathered around a TV, stunned in shock.  
They were watching the news report of the crash of a United Airlines flight

from Chicago O'Hare airport to Los Angeles—

killing every passenger.

You guessed it—

it was on this very flight that this student had been booked to fly.

That kind of experience is rare.

But you just don't know, do you?

God can use the circumstances of our lives in all sorts of ways.

I think of another saying of the Wise Man of Proverbs--

Prov. 19:21-- **“Many are the plans in a person's heart,**

**but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.”**

We can be confident that the Lord's purpose will prevail.

Though Joseph's brothers tried to destroy his dream,

because it was from God, it could not fail.

Though Joseph was sold into slavery,

God's purpose lives on.

That's what I want you to see in this story—

On the surface, it's about a family in strife,

but underneath, it's about the prevailing power of the providence of God—

always working to achieve his good purpose.

So long as we identify ourselves with God's purposes

we can be encouraged by this story.

What does the Apostle Paul say?—

**“For we know that in all things**

**God works for the good of those who love God**

**and have been called according to his purpose.”—**

not just any purpose—

certainly not my purpose—

but his purpose.

As we are committed to God's purpose,

this promise should be the source of our peace,

even in the midst of strife,

even in the midst of a global pandemic.

**“we know that in all things**

**God works for the good of those who love God**

**and have been called according to his purpose.”**

We know that that’s true--

because, you see, we too know how the story ends--

even the story of our own lives.

The pagan Roman poet Horace once wrote:

“Do not try to find out—

we're forbidden to know—

what end the gods have in store for me, or for you.”<sup>1</sup>

But God has revealed the end he has in store for his people.

If we are in Christ—

<sup>1</sup>Odes, I, from Macmillan *Quotations*, p. 152.

if we have been called according to God's purpose—  
if we have come to love God  
as he has revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ,  
who died as the perfect sacrifice for our sins--  
if we have turned to him in repentance and faith,  
trusting him as our Savior who rose from the grave  
and is now Lord of all--  
then we know that the story of our lives will end just as his did--  
in a glorious resurrection to new life.

That's the future for the child of God--

That's God's glorious purpose for all who belong to Christ  
who cling to him in faith,  
who love him and are called according to his purpose.

For what does Paul say?--

**“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed  
to the likeness of his Son,  
that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.  
And those he predestined, he also called;  
those he called, he also justified;  
those he justified, he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29,30).**

That's how the story ends—

and what God has begun, he will bring to completion—  
we can be sure of it.

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God is at work in the world—  
don't ever forget that.

*This is my Father's world,  
O let me ne'er forget  
that though the wrong seems off so strong,  
God is the ruler yet.*

*This is my Father's world:  
the battle is not done;  
Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and heaven be one.*

Let us thank God for the story he is writing through our lives,  
even in these most unusual days of this coronavirus pandemic.  
And let us thank him that he has still more to write.  
It's not over, this is not the last chapter—  
and he has a glorious ending in store for his people. ///

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prayer

Closing Hymn: #58 "This Is My Father's World"

Benediction:

1Tim. 1:17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God,

be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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**Joseph and His Brothers (Gen. 37-45):**

**A Story of Divine Providence, #1**

**May 31, 2020**

## **“A Household in Strife”**

Gen. 37

The book of Genesis tells the story of the unfolding promise of God to Abraham to make of him a great nation and through him to bring blessing to all nations. As we will see as we look at the story of Joseph, that promise unfolds in ways that we do not expect but which display the invisible hand of God in our lives.

### **I. The Characters in this Human Tragedy:**

**A. Joseph**

**B. Jacob**

**C. The Older Brothers**

**But Where Is God?**

## II. The Hidden Providence of God in Human Life

Prov. 19:21-- “Many are the plans in a person’s heart,  
but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”

We can trust God in the midst of our circumstances  
because we know how the story ends.

Sermon Response:

## **“A Household in Strife”**

**Gen. 37**

- How do you assess the role of each of the characters in this human tragedy?
- Where is God in this story? How do you know?
- What do we mean by God’s providence? How is a belief in God’s providence different from a surrender to fatalism?
- Is it possible to “see God’s hand” in the events of your life? Can you look back and see ways in which God has used difficult things, painful things, for good in your life?
- What does it mean to trust in God’s providence?
- How will the story of your life end?
- Take time to thank God for his providence in your life. Pray for a greater peace that comes in trusting in that providence.