

Joseph Sold Into Slavery

January 21, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Genesis 37

Session Outline

1. The Favored Son (Genesis 37:1-17)
2. The Plot Against Joseph (Genesis 37:18-27)
3. The Providence of God (Genesis 37:28-36)

Theological Theme

God is sovereign and can work all things out for our good and His glory.

Call to Action

How do you respond when you suffer unjustly? Are you willing by God's strength to forgive those who have sinned against you? Make a habit every day of laying your burdens, resentments, anger, and bitterness against others at the feet of Jesus.



Leader Guide

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Introduction

How would you define the term plot twist? It can be defined as “a change in the direction or expected outcome of the plot of a film, novel, computer role-playing game, or other form of narration.”¹ It is a popular element in both books and movies that keeps a reader or viewer on their toes.

Life can have some plot twists along the way too. Looking back, you can probably see places where things didn't happen in the way you expected or hoped. But Christians can trust that even when the plot of your life takes a huge turn, God is sovereign and in control.

- ❓ What is one of your favorite plot twists in a movie or book?
- ❓ When has life given you a plot twist? How did you respond?

Session Summary

Forgiveness and reconciliation are necessary for good spiritual health in the life of a believer. Yet the ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation are much easier to handle than the practice of them. The sons of Jacob teach us a lot about the progression of sin and the consequences of allowing sin to direct our decisions. In today's text, sibling rivalry led to a murder plot and eventually selling Joseph into slavery.

It was a tragic time for this family and yet God was at work as only He can be. God used all the terrible things that Joseph's brothers did to prepare Joseph to be the man that saved them all. In a dramatic role reversal, the younger, weaker brother who was at the mercy of his sinful siblings became the man with all the power and those same siblings had to throw themselves at his feet in desperation. Instead of revenge, Joseph offered mercy and forgiveness and a family was saved and restored.

1. The Favored Son (Genesis 37:1-17)

Jacob, also known as Israel, was the son of Isaac. Jacob had a history with favoritism in his family and although this caused problems between him and his twin Esau, he followed in the same pattern with his children.


As the father of twelve sons from four women, Jacob favored one son over the others. Joseph, Jacob's favorite, was one of the two sons that Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, bore.

Since Jacob loved Rachel deeply, he also loved her two sons in a special way, especially after she passed away. One word to describe the relationships of Jacob and his family could be dysfunction. Imagine the amount of rivalry and competition between twelve brothers from four mothers, with four very different connections to Jacob. Instead of working to create unity, Jacob played favorites and was obvious about who he loved the most.


Joseph didn't help himself by doing things that fed into the rivalry and jealousy of the brothers. He reported the bad behavior of his brothers to his father. Then his dad rewarded Joseph with a special coat to designate his favor. This coat of many colors created even more discord among the siblings.

 Why is favoritism so destructive in a family?

We might not accuse Joseph of being overly self-aware or at the least, he may have lacked in humility. Joseph shared about a dream he had involving the brothers. Joseph told his brothers of his dream that set him above them all. This fueled the hatred they felt toward Joseph. After another dream where Joseph again saw himself elevated over his family members, he again shared with his very unreceptive siblings and his father. It is evidence of Joseph's lack of wisdom that even his very doting father was offended at the revelation of his dreams.

 What do you think the brothers were feeling when they heard these two dreams of Joseph's? How could Joseph have responded to these dreams in a more God-honoring way?

Following the sharing of these dreams, Joseph's brothers were out working, and Jacob sent Joseph to check on them. The brothers had the task of tending the wandering herds of their father's sheep. Conversely, Joseph enjoyed the comforts of home except when Jacob sent him out periodically. Picture the situation of the younger son, wearing his distinctive coat of many colors and being given a supervisor type over his hard-working siblings. This mounted to further tension that sparked dramatic decisions that altered the course of this family.

 Application: What can you learn from this portion of Joseph's story? How might you apply what you learn to your own life?

Joseph's Dreams


Like his father Jacob (28:12–15; 31:10–13), Joseph received two dreams from God during his lifetime. Both portrayed Joseph as gaining a position of supremacy in his family, though the symbols differed greatly. The first dream used an agricultural image (v. 7). The second, more important and wider in scope than the first, was astronomical (vv. 9–10). The pairing of dreams with a shared meaning meant that God would certainly make the events happen (41:32).

2. The Plot Against Joseph (Genesis 37:18-27)


The brothers' negative feelings, Jacob's special treatment, and his boasting about his dreams worked together to build resentment. As Joseph arrived to check on his brothers, the brothers conspired to kill him. They were not content only to bully him, prank him, or anything else we might consider typical sibling rivalry. Their resentment had grown to a point they desired to be done with him forever.

At any point in this story, the brothers had the opportunity to recognize what they were thinking and feeling as sin and make a better decision. That is the way of sin. It begins as a thought, and unless it is taken captive and made to be in line with Jesus, it will take root and become action. As we see with the sons of Israel, unaddressed sinful thoughts can become devastating and destructive.

Once the idea to rid themselves of Joseph for good took root, the brothers planned how to kill him and even considered what they would tell their father about his death. Their plan was involved and determined in detail. With all of brothers coming against Joseph, there was little doubt that they would be able to pull off their evil plan. When we have already planned out how and why to justify our sin, we are in a dangerous place. This is where the brothers found themselves.


 When have you faced a moment like the brothers, even if not as drastic as involving murder? How does having an excuse already prepared affect your choice to sin or not?

It turns out that not all the brothers felt like it was a good idea to kill their younger sibling. Instead of speaking up and taking a direct stand against the idea, Reuben offered a different suggestion. He appealed to the others to not be quite that drastic and simply throw Joseph into a pit. His plan was to go back and rescue Joseph thus thwarting the evil his brothers were about to take part in. In hard situations like this, it can be difficult to reconcile two opposing sides and almost impossible to make both happy. This is especially true when the battle is between right and wrong or good and evil.

 Why is it hard to influence a group by trying to play both sides? When are you tempted to respond this way?


Picture the situation where his brothers literally attacked Joseph and stripped him of his special coat. The brothers wanted to kill him, so they would not have been gentle at all. Then they threw him into the empty pit, and they sat down to eat. While they were eating, their plan changed because they saw the Ishmaelite traders approaching, and Judah suggested

they not kill Joseph but rather sell him as a slave. Though the brothers decided not to murder Joseph, their disregard for his life was still very clear.

 Application: What can you learn about your own tendency to sin from this story?


3. The Providence of God (Genesis 37:28-36)

When Reuben went back to the pit to rescue Joseph and found him gone, it all came to a head. His weak attempt at doing the right thing had fallen short as so often happens when we make half-hearted attempts to stand for what is right. After selling Joseph into slavery for twenty shekels, the brothers developed a new plan. Taking Joseph's coat and dipping it in the blood of a goat, they took the evidence to Jacob. Consider how uncaring the brothers were in the way they treated their father too. Sin can blind us and cause us to act in ways that are nothing like Jesus.

 When was a time sin blinded you to the reality of your actions? How do all of us face this danger at some point?

Jacob responded to the news of Joseph with great grief and sorrow while the ten brothers silently kept their sin hidden. Meanwhile, Joseph was headed to Egypt with the traders and was sold as a slave to Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh. The Egyptian nation was large, powerful, and thriving. But God was with Joseph in his trials, and God was working His plans out as only He can. The Lord brought Joseph to a place that had natural resources and into the service of one of the leaders of this nation.

Even though God was working, things were not easy for Joseph. Going from the cherished, favored son to a slave would have been extremely difficult and unpleasant. Just because God is working doesn't mean everything is easy or enjoyable. Sin has consequences for both the sinner and the ones affected by the sin. Most of us have no trouble remembering an instance where we experienced great difficulty due to someone else's sin as well as suffering from the consequences of our own sinful choices.

 When was a time you were painfully aware of sin's consequences?

The rest of the story of Joseph (Genesis 38–50) is a beautiful picture of God's providence at work on behalf of His people. Joseph developed into a mature, godly man who took a stand for the right things even when it brought him hardship. He trusted in the Lord and did not compromise his principles, and God rewarded him for his faithfulness. Joseph continued to find favor with leaders of the Egyptian nation until he was

finally the second in command to Pharaoh. Interestingly it was his dreams that caused problems with his brothers, and it was the dreams of Pharaoh that led to Joseph being instrumental in the protection and provision of Egypt and surrounding nations.

Through all that happened to Joseph, he continued to trust the Lord and do the right thing until God used Joseph to save his entire family and provide for the people of Israel in a time of famine. After all the years of slavery, prison, unjust accusations, hatred from his siblings, and distance from his father and family, God sent Joseph's brothers to him and restored their relationships. Ultimately, Joseph forgave his brothers and told them that what they meant for evil God meant for good (Genesis 50:20). He could see how God had greater plans than his circumstances and looking back was able to see how God orchestrated things perfectly to preserve His people.



Application: What circumstances do you need to trust God to work in currently? Where is it hard to see how God might use what you are going through for good?

Conclusion

The story of Joseph is about trusting in the providence of God. Instead of being overwhelmed with our circumstances that we may or may not have contributed to by our actions, we can trust that God is working in our lives. Joseph gives us an example of how to suffer and trust at the same time. He endured some very difficult situations and was able to look back and see how God worked to protect and provide for His people.

Joseph was instrumental in saving the nation of Egypt as well as his estranged family. When they finally were reunited, Joseph demonstrated the power of forgiveness and the beauty of reconciliation. Instead of holding a grudge against the brothers who treated him unfairly, he chose to forgive and move past what happened.

This story is also a reminder that sin left unchecked can lead to devastating consequences. Joseph's brothers allowed bitterness formed by jealousy, frustration, and general dislike to rule their minds until those thoughts developed into plans to murder their little brother. God's providence does not negate the sinful choices the brothers made, and this dysfunctional family reminds us of the importance of addressing sin early on so that it is not allowed to take root and form into action. But through it all, God is in control and His plans will never be thwarted.

- ❓ How do you typically respond when you suffer unjustly? What does Joseph's story teach you about these moments?
- ❓ Where might God be calling you to offer forgiveness to those who have wronged you? How can you move toward that with His help?
- ❓ How might you have a gospel conversation with another person by sharing the story of Joseph?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for His work in your life. Praise Him that you can trust Him even when you are suffering. Ask for wisdom to see His hand at work and courage to forgive those who have wronged you so that He might be glorified.

Memory Verse

"You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people." - Genesis 50:20

Additional Resources

- *Be Authentic* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Exalting Jesus in Genesis* by Russell Moore and Phillip Bethancourt
- *Genesis 11-50* by Kenneth Matthews

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Genesis

Purpose

Genesis lays the groundwork for everything else we read and experience in Scripture. Through Genesis we understand where we came from, how we got in the fallen state we are in, and the beginnings of God's gracious work on our behalf. Genesis unfolds God's original purpose for humanity.

Author

Since pre-Christian times authorship of the Torah, the five books that include the book of Genesis, has been attributed to Moses, an enormously influential Israelite leader from the second millennium BC with an aristocratic Egyptian background. Even though Genesis is technically anonymous, both the Old and New Testaments unanimously recognize Moses as the Torah's author (Jos 8:35; 23:6; 1Kg 2:3; 8:9; 2Kg 14:6; 23:25; 2Ch 23:18; 25:4; 30:16; 34:14; 35:12; Ezr 3:2; 6:18; Neh 8:1; 9:14; Dn 9:11, 13; Mal 4:4; Mk 12:19, 26; Lk 2:22; 20:28; 24:44; Jn 1:17, 45; 7:19; Ac 13:39; 15:21; 28:23; Rm 10:5; 1Co 9:9; Heb 10:28). At the same time, evidence in Genesis suggests that minor editorial changes dating to ancient times have been inserted into the text. Examples include the mention of "Dan" (14:14), a city that was not named until the days of the judges (Jdg 18:29), and the use of a phrase that assumed the existence of Israelite kings (Gn 36:31).

Setting

The Torah (a Hebrew term for "law" or "instruction") was seen as one unit until at least the second century BC. Sometime prior to the birth of Christ, the Torah was divided into five separate books, later referred to as the Pentateuch (literally, five vessels). Genesis, the first book of the Torah, provides both the universal history of humankind and the patriarchal history of the nation of Israel. The first section (chaps. 1–11) is a general history commonly called the "primeval history," showing how all humanity descended from one couple and became sinners. The second section (chaps. 12–50) is a more specific history commonly referred to as the "patriarchal history," focusing on the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants: Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons. Genesis unfolds God's plan to bless and redeem humanity through Abraham's descendants. The book concludes with the events that led to the Israelites being in the land of Egypt.

Special Features

The book of Genesis is the great book of beginnings in the Bible. True to the meanings of its Hebrew and Greek names (Hb *bereshith*, "In Beginning" [based on 1:1]; Gk *Geneseos*, "Of Birth" [based on 2:4]), Genesis permits us to view the beginning of a multitude of realities that shape our daily existence: the creation of the universe and the planet earth; the origins of plant and animal life; and the origins of human beings, marriage, families, nations, industry, artistic expression, religious ritual, prophecy, sin, law, crime, conflict, punishment, and death.

Extended Commentary

Genesis 37-50

Israel's role as the people of promise was being jeopardized by their acceptance of the loose moral standards of the native Canaanites. The incest between Reuben and his father's servant-wife (35:22) hints at that moral compromise. Judah's marriage to the Canaanite Shua and his later affair with his own daughter-in-law, Tamar, makes the danger clear. To preserve His people, Yahweh removed them from that sinful environment to Egypt, where they could mature into the covenant nation that He was preparing them to be.

This explains the Joseph story. His brothers sold him to Egypt to be rid of their brother the dreamer. God, however, used their act of hate as an opportunity to save Israel from both physical famine and spiritual extinction. The rise of Joseph to a position of authority in Egypt in fulfillment of his God-given dreams illustrates the Lord's blessing upon His people. Joseph's wisdom in administering the agricultural affairs of Egypt again fulfilled God's promise that "I will bless him who blesses you." What appeared to be a series of blunders and injustices in Joseph's early experiences proved to be God at work in unseen ways to demonstrate His sovereign, kingdom work among the nations.

No one was more aware of this than Joseph, at least in later years. After he had revealed himself to his brothers, he said, "God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance." Years later after Jacob's death, when Joseph's brothers feared his revenge, he reminded them that they had intended to harm him, "but God intended it for good to accomplish ... the saving of many lives." Human tragedy had become the occasion of divine triumph. Joseph's dying wish—to be buried in the land of promise—looks past the future tragedy of Israel's experience of slavery and anticipates God's triumph in the exodus.²

References

1. *YourDictionary*, s.v. "plot-twist (n.)," accessed November 3, 2023, <https://www.yourdictionary.com/plot-twist>.
2. Eugene H. Merrill, "The Pentateuch," in *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 19.