

Teenage Dreamer

Genesis 37

Introduction

One of the great delights of preaching through the book of Genesis has been hearing people comment that they never realized how practical an Old Testament book could be. Genesis has been just a part of that dry, old, dead section that makes the Bible a little thicker and heavier than you would really like it to be. It is not quite slim enough to fit into your purse or into your pocket.

To be perfectly honest with you, I myself have been rather surprised at the richness that I have often overlooked or ignored. As a pastor, preaching through this book for the first time, I have often come to a passage in Genesis, read it, and then stopped and said, “Okay, Lord, nothing hit me that time.”

I will read a Genesis passage again and again and again. Yet, as you may have experienced, with the instruction of the Holy Spirit and being surrounded by books written by men who have come this way before me, Genesis has come alive. It has been a real thrill, up to this point, to feed you from the pasture land of this great book.

Why study the Old Testament

I have been asked the question, “Why is it that we study the Old Testament? If we are New Testament believers, is it really relevant?”

I appreciate that kind of question. In fact, let me answer it a bit more than I normally would.

Turn in your Bible to Romans, chapter 15. This is where the apostle Paul tells us why we, in fact, should study the Old Testament. It is not a dead section of the Bible; it is not old; it should not be dusty. In verse 4, Paul says, in reference to the Old Testament,

For whatever was written in earlier times . . .

(You should write in the margin of your Bible, “O. T. or Old Testament,” because that is what Paul is referring to. In fact, let us read it that way, “For whatever was written in the Old Testament . . .”),

. . . was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the

encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

So, in studying the Old Testament, we have been given the promise of two things.

- First, the Old Testament gives us present instruction.

This is teaching that would edify the New Testament believer. I have found no one who could teach us any more than Joseph.

As one man wrote, “We will observe him and learn from him as he blazes a trail through the jungle of mistreatment, false accusations, undeserved punishment, and gross misunderstanding.”

We will observe how Joseph lives and how he acts.

- Secondly, what a future hope we are given!

We will learn from Joseph how to forgive others, how to be free from bitterness, and how to have rock-solid faith. And, by the way, Joseph had rock-solid faith in a God that he never saw. God never appeared to Joseph; God never spoke directly to Joseph, as He did Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and yet, Joseph trusts Him. We will learn how to trust Him too.

It is interesting, before we begin the biography of Joseph, that there are only two people in the entire scripture that nothing negative is said about their character or their life. One is Joseph and the other is Daniel. It is fascinating to think that both of these men were sold into captivity. They were deposited into paganism, when they had once been so secure in their home lives as young men. We have a lot to learn from Joseph, as we study this individual, who will show us it is possible to live purely in an impure society; it is possible to have character in a morally chaotic society.

The Contrast Between the Record Books

Let us begin in Genesis, chapter 37. We will start by noticing the contrast between this chapter and chapter 36.

Esau

I think the contrast between these two chapters is subtle, because chapter 36 begins by listing the genealogy of Esau, Jacob's brother, and it is impressive. Count it and you will find that Esau had five sons and, from that, he had twenty-seven chiefs and eight kings. Verse 1 of chapter 36 says,

Now these are the records of the generations of Esau (that is, [the king of] Edom).

A very impressive genealogy unfolds.

Jacob

Then we come to chapter 37 and verses 2 through 3a says,

These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age,

...

I think this is an implication of contrast. The world would consider twenty-seven chiefs and eight kings impressive, as contrasted to a seventeen year old boy named Joseph.

As I pondered this thought, it occurred to me that what the world would consider noteworthy may not even make the back page in heaven's news release. While the world would consider Esau impressive and his genealogy something to take note of, God will spend chapter after chapter recording the life of one who starts out, in these verses, as a teenage boy.

I recently read a story that illustrated this point. If Dan Rather had been living in 1809, his evening news would have centered, not on Britain or America, but on Austria. In fact, all eyes would have been on Napoleon as he swept across the canvas of civilization bringing emperors to their knees and controlling vast empires. What could have been more important on the international scene than Napoleon? Who could have been more important; who more noteworthy than this little dictator?

Yet, in 1809, a teenager took a book from the shelf of his father's library. He went out behind the barn and began to read. The phrase that captured his thoughts, as he read it over and over again, was, "the finished work of Christ." That boy got on his knees and accepted Jesus Christ. Soon after, J. Hudson Taylor went to China and founded the China Inland Mission that would literally bring millions of Chinese to Jesus Christ.

I think it is interesting that we see a teenager compared to an impressive genealogy, yet God finds the teenager noteworthy. He takes note and wants us to as well.

The Favoritism of Joseph's Father

Now, look at chapter 37, verses 1 through 3a.

Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan. 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. Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than all his sons, . . .

In this passage, two phrases will occur that reveal the first thing that strikes me about Joseph's biography; that is, the favoritism of his father toward him.

"Son of his old age" = "Son of discernment"

The first phrase, in verse 3b, is,

. . . because he was the son of his old age; . . .

.

Now this is not Joseph's fault or Jacob's perhaps, for considering Joseph a favorite, because the phrase could be translated, "the son of the ages". It is a reference to a child who is very perceptive and discerning, as well as compliant and obedient.

Joseph, the son of the ages, though he is seventeen, has the maturity of a twenty, thirty, or forty year old. He has the perception of one who is far beyond his years. How easy it would be, as a father, to give more note to a son who would be called a "compliant child" in books today. Joseph is the dream of every parent. There is never a conflict with this son; he is always obedient.

Can you, who are parents, imagine this for just a moment? I expect conflict around our home. I expect it in daily portions. I cannot imagine a compliant child who would be considered a "son of the ages". Yet, Joseph was that kind of boy. So Jacob is endeared to him as a result of this compliancy.

In Joseph's home, eleven brothers were constant trouble. They would grow up to be rebellious and

immoral. Yet, while they are growing up, Joseph is growing into a mature, obedient, godly young man.

“Varicolored tunic” = “Sleeved coat”

The second phrase that I think reveals an exaggerated favoritism is in the last part of verse 3, and tells us,

. . . and he made him a varicolored tunic.

Your translation may call this tunic a coat of many colors. The many color idea comes from that culture where nobility would wear robes that had been expensively dyed. The literal Hebrew translation comes from the word “pas,” which is not “many colored,” but means “extremities or wristed”. In other words, this tunic reached to Joseph’s wrists and to his ankles. It was a garment of the nobility.

It is interesting that a person who would wear that garment would be obviously recognized as someone exempt from hard labor. In that day, the men wore cut off tunics that came to their knees so that they could move easily and work and sweat. But here comes Joseph, dressed in a garment that reaches to his wrists and to his ankles; a garment of nobility. It literally meant, “Joseph, you don’t have to work. You are exempt from hard labor.” Perhaps this was an unwise move for his father.

So Joseph is given the honored position, obviously, as the heir to the blessing. He is also given the favored position of one who oversees the work. Everyone else is working, but Joseph, who is second to the youngest, is calling the shots.

To make matters worse, Joseph, according to the last part of verse 2, in case you missed it,

. . . brought back a bad report about them to their father.

Here Joseph is – the straw boss – on the scene, but not working. He is watching and notices the immorality of his brothers. So he goes back and tells his father.

Some commentators suggest that this is tattle-telling. I do not think so. In fact, the more you learn about Joseph, the more you realize that his conscience is easily pricked by immorality. He probably feels a sense of duty to his brothers, who are dragging the family name through the mud. So he goes back to his father, Jacob, and tells him what they are doing.

What is Jacob’s response? It is characteristic – it is silence. Jacob is a classic example of a passive

father who is unwilling to confront the sins of his sons. He thinks, “If I ignore it, maybe it will go away. If I excuse it, maybe it won’t seem so bad. It would be easier to ignore and excuse, than to confront.”

My friend, passivity in the home; silence in response to sin will literally make this home an illustration of Proverbs 29, verse 15b, which tells us,

. . . a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother [and father].

Note, however, if you have been studying with us, that Jacob’s passivity started years ago, as he silently watched Leah and Rachel fighting for preeminence in the home. Then, his daughter, Dinah, is raped, and he is uncharacteristically silent for a father who would seem to leap to her defense. Then, when his sons rise up and massacre an entire city, Jacob is silent. As his sons further develop their immorality and it has become known, where is Jacob? He is quiet.

The Envy of Joseph’s Brothers

Now, Jacob’s sons hate and openly disdain one of their own and he never says a word. Notice the inevitable response of Joseph’s brothers to such passivity and partiality. Look at verse 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.

These brothers literally could not speak to Joseph, “Shalom”; they could not say, “Peace,” to him. They hated the sight of him.

The Dreams of Joseph

Look at verse 5a.

Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.

I think, perhaps in his naiveté, Joseph shares his dreams with his brothers. You probably know the story. Let us look briefly at it. Look at verses 6 and 7.

He said to them, “Please listen to this dream which I have had; 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.”

Joseph has had a legitimate dream and this seventeen year old is going up to his brothers and saying, “Hey brothers, I had a dream and I was a

sheaf in the field and all of you bowed down at my feet. What do you think of that?"

- Dream number one is basically this: Joseph is saying, "I am heir to Jacob's blessing."
- Dream number two is basically this: Joseph is saying, "I am the future leader of the Jewish nation."

Look at verse 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."

Now this has gone beyond just an ordinary field. Now Joseph is saying that Mom and Dad, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars, "You are bowing down to me."

In other words, "I will be the ruler of the future Jewish nation. Isn't that exciting, guys?"

The Crimes of Joseph's Brothers

It is tragic that, instead of responding to Joseph, the brothers reacted. I think part of the problem is that they were bitter against God, as I will reveal in just a moment.

Let us look at verses 12 and 13.

Then his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem. Israel [Jacob] 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."

Note that now, Joseph is not with his brothers in the pasture anymore. In fact, he is no longer even working – he is exempt; he has the coat. His father says, "Go and find out how they're doing."

Continue to verse 14.

Then he [Jacob] 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." . . .

Skip to verse 18.

When they [the eleven brothers] saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death.

Can you imagine the immorality that has so seeped into their hearts that now they will kill their half-brother. Look at verse 20a.

Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits . . .

The brothers are, by the way, in Dothan, and "Dothan" is literally translated, "two cisterns". This is the place of two wells, and they said, "Let's throw Joseph into one of the two wells."

Note what they say in verse 20b.

. . . and we will say, "A wild beast devoured him." Then let us see what will become of his dreams!

Look at verses 21 through 23, as Reuben, the oldest brother, speaks.

But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, "Let us not take his life." 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 [come back later], to restore him to his father. So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, . . .

You can almost see it, "Get that coat off! That has incensed us because of what it stands for."

The first thing they did was rip the coat off of Joseph's back. Continue to verse 24.

and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty . . .

Evidently one of the cisterns did not have any water in it.

Note the crassness of their character, according to verse 25.

Then they sat down to eat a meal. . . .

They sat down to eat a meal! A later passage of scripture tells us that while they are eating, they can hear the pleading of Joseph. They hear his entreating as he calls out, "My brothers, please! Reuben! Judah! Can you hear me? Save my life!"

They were sitting there, within earshot, eating a meal. How hard they had become. Continue to verses 25b and 27.

. . . And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, . . . Judah said to his brothers,

“What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? 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.

Look at what they do in verse 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.

Twenty shekels is the price of a crippled slave.

Continue to verse 31. The brothers take care of that long sleeved thing they so despised.

So they took Joseph’s tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood;

Having studied Jacob, it was fascinating that while Jacob had one time deceived his father by slaughtering a goat and pretending to be Esau, now he is about to be deceived by the blood of a goat.

Continue to verse 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.”

In other words, “We’re not going to actually lie to you, Dad, you make up your mind what you think happened.”

Look at verses 33 through 35.

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!” So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 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.

Jacob’s sons and daughters thought, “Man, this mourning has gone on long enough!” and tried to comfort him, but he would not be comforted. Continue to verse 36.

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

The consequences of Joseph’s brother’s scheme

The crimes of Joseph’s brothers yield three consequences. Let me give them to you.

- For Jacob, it meant incredible sorrow that would last until he sees Joseph again face to face. It will take years.
- For the eleven brothers, it meant living in guilt. We know they will live in guilt because one day, they see Joseph and their hearts are terrified by the recalling of that incident that played over and over in their minds. One day, when Jacob will die, they will live in fear that Joseph will now retaliate. Their guilty consciences have robbed them of joy. Envy has been rottenness to their bones.
- For Joseph, it resulted in slavery.

Application – Lessons Learned From Joseph’s Home Life

Let me give three principles of application from this passage from the lives of Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph’s brothers.

While parents may not be perfect, they must not be passive

1. First, from Jacob we can learn that while parents may not be perfect, they *must* not be passive.

We are living in a day and an age when, more than ever, the voice of instruction, of correction, of discipline, and of purity *must* be heard. By whom must it be heard – the preacher? Absolutely. But I would agree with the old proverb that says, “An ounce of motherhood is worth a pound of clergy.” It is time that they hear your voice no longer refusing to ignore or excuse their sinful bent and their wayward path.

Will your children howl in protest? Will they rise up; will they threaten to retaliate? Will they threaten to reject you and say, “Mom, I don’t love you anymore.” Absolutely!

I think that is what motivated Mark Twain, though not a believer, when he said something rather true about this. He said, “When I was fifteen, I thought my father was a fool. And then I turned twenty, and it amazed me how much he had learned in five short years.”

I think the howling and the protesting is what motivated God, through his writer Solomon in the Proverbs, to write into scripture, in chapter 23, verse 13,

Do not hold back discipline from the child, although you [discipline him], . . . he will not die.

I cannot help but chuckle because I can well remember giving my parents the idea that I was about to die. Children will do that, as they manipulate and as they try to have their way. They will say, “Mom, Dad, if I can’t do that . . . if I can’t go there . . . if I can’t say this, I’ll die! I can’t live. I can’t go on.”

Solomon says, “They won’t die.”

But, as I read this passage again, it struck me that not only did Jacob not discipline, he also did not express love for his eleven sons. It is interesting that you never see him doing anything for his other sons. That led me to think and in fact, convinced me in my mind, that a parent who is unwilling to instruct; a parent who is unwilling to discipline and to correct is a parent who in reality, is not expressing biblical, genuine love for the child.

That is what Solomon meant when he wrote these words, in Proverbs, chapter 13, verse 24,

He who [refuses to discipline] . . . hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently.

A passive parent, like Jacob, is one who refuses to discipline and to express his love. Ultimately, like Jacob, they are a parent who refuses or somehow ignores his children so that he is never involved in their lives. I do not really think Jacob was that involved in Joseph’s life. He certainly was not involved in the lives of his other eleven sons.

I do not think there is a parent alive who, though not disciplining or showing expressions of love, would say, “Hey, at least I’m involved.” When was the last time you took your children to a park? When was the last time you called your child in college just to say, “I love you.”? When was the last time you sat on the edge of their bed and expressed your love for them?

David Jeremiah records in one of his books, “The average father has less than three meaningful encounters with his children every day, and each encounter lasts no more than fifteen seconds.”

Mom and Dad, it is time to put the newspaper away, to store the golf clubs, to put the vacuum away, and to get involved in the lives of your children.

Envy is actually a symptom of bitterness against God

2. Secondly, from Joseph’s brothers we can learn that envy is actually a symptom of bitterness against God.

This is clearly seen in the brothers’ response to Joseph’s dreams. Look again at chapter 37, verse 20, the last part,

. . . we will say, “A wild beast devoured him.” Then let us see what will become of his dreams!

This strikes home. What if your little brother, if you have one, had come up to you one day and said, “Hey, one day I’m going to be the president of the United States, and you’re going to be the janitor that will clean the bathrooms outside the oval office – and they had better be clean.”

Do you know what you would do? You would fall on the ground in laughter. You would hold your sides, “President of the United States, that’s great, keep it up! Sure, I’ll clean.”

Why? Because you really do not think it will come true.

Joseph’s dreams, however, incensed his brothers and angered them enough to make them want to kill him. Why? Because they knew Joseph’s dreams would come true. Their envy and bitterness was really against, not Joseph, but God, because God did not deal that hand to them. Would they submit to that plan? No way! “We will not serve.”

While God’s blessings seem to stop, His plan never hesitates

3. Thirdly, from Joseph’s circumstances, let me give you this thought – while God’s blessings seem to stop, His plan never hesitates.

Imagine the first seventeen years of Joseph’s life – surrounded by loving attention; wearing the tunic declaring that he was the heir apparent. He had complete respect from his father and from the adults who knew that he was the next patriarch.

However, now we see him bound and fettered in a long line of slaves who are headed for Egypt. Joseph

will be sold to a man he has never met. He will be introduced to a country he has never been to. He will hear a language he does not understand. He will be abandoned.

Yet one day, Joseph will be God's man in a foreign country who will insure the survival of the nation of Israel. That would not have been of much help to him, however, had you told him at this point.

Be careful, men and women, how you measure the plan of God. We tend to equate His plan with long sleeved tunics surrounded by loving people. But His plan may mean the opposite.

Jesus Christ, by the way, is illustrated by Joseph more than any other character in the Old Testament. I have read commentator after commentator, and in fact, one, by the name of Arthur Payne, came up with more than one hundred illustrations. It is a study in itself and it is fascinating. Jesus Christ also was the beloved son. He also was sent to His brethren. He also was rejected by them. He also was sold for a handful of silver. It is interesting that Joseph went through that so his brethren would find food when famine came. Jesus Christ went through that for who? For you and I! He went through it so that you and I could be fed; so that our souls that are parched and needy would find refreshment.

As you yield to Jesus, the One who has tasted it all, you will come to recognize that His plan is right on schedule. Everything is going according to His purpose, according to *His* plan.