

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 10/11/92  
Genesis 37 "God's Perspective on Human Tragedy"

**Intro:** Tragedy.

Illust:

No one here is immune from the possibility of human tragedy. In fact, some here today have been or are even now are victims of human tragedy. For some, it may be the tragic pain of a broken marriage. For some, it may be the frustration of a dysfunctional family. For some, the tragedy came in the form of an unexpected and unwarranted job layoff. You've been shafted by shifting men.

Human tragedies like these are painful. They inflict deep wounds on our souls.

Q: How can we learn to deal with human tragedy? How can we overcome the feelings of anger and bitterness and frustration we so often experience when we are the victims of human tragedy?

New Series: The Life of Joseph, Genesis 37-50

The true account of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 can teach us many things, namely how to deal with disappointments and tragedies.

Q: Who do you think is the main character in the story of the life of Joseph?

A: Warning! The answer is not what you might think at first. It's NOT Joseph! In fact, it's not Joseph's father, Jacob. Nor his 11 brothers (Reuben, Levi, Judah, Simeon, and the rest). It's not Potiphar. Not Potiphar's indiscreet wife. Not Pharaoh. No, it's not any of these characters, as important as they may be to the drama. Listen. We'll never fully appreciate the story of Joseph unless we fix our gaze on the main character in the narrative.

Q: Who is the main character?

A: God is!!

I want to challenge you to look for God in every episode of this story. He's there, behind the scenes, over the scenes, controlling the scenes. Listen. The story of Joseph is really a story about God. And the God of Joseph is a God who is in control of the details of our lives, including our tragedies.

In a sense, the story of Joseph is the OT commentary on Romans 8:28, "For we know that all things work together for good..."

Illust:

Our journey begins in Genesis 37. I've entitled the message, "God's Perspective on Human Tragedy."

**Proposition: This morning, I want us to see the hand of God in the life of Joseph in Genesis 37. There are 4 nailbiting scenes.**

I. The Setting of Tragedy (1-12)

A. Favoritism (3)

B. Friction (2, 4, 5, 8, 11)

II. The Scenes of Tragedy (13-36)

- A. The Plot (12-20)
- B. The Pit (21-24)
- C. The Plea-Bargain (25-30)
- D. The Pain (31-36)
  - 1. A Broken Father (31-35)
  - 2. A Betrayed Brother (36)

### III. The Significance of Tragedy

- A. God is Sovereign in all situations.
- B. Man is Responsible for his actions.
- C. God uses suffering to test the character of His people.

Q: How can we learn to deal with the pain of tragedy? Let's look first at...

### I. The Setting of Tragedy in Joseph's life (1-12)

Joseph's tragedy didn't happen in a vacuum. There were 2 key factors that paved the way for his painful ordeal.

#### A. Favoritism (3)

READ 37:1-3

V 1 begins with the spotlight on Jacob. Remember, Moses recorded the book of Genesis around the year 1400 BC, several centuries after Jacob lived. In v 2, Moses says he is going to list the "generations of Jacob." We would expect a genealogy (like Essau's in ch 36). But notice the surprising twist in v 2. The spotlight turns immediately to Joseph, Jacob's 17 year old son. The spotlight will remain on him for nearly the rest of the book.

Why? The story of Joseph is God's explanation to the people in Moses' day of how He turned the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into the great nation of Israel. It's a bridge that links Genesis to Exodus. It's the story of God's cov't faithfulness.

Q: What are we told about Joseph?

v 2--17 years old; a herdsman like his brothers

v 2--reported the evil he witnessed by his step-brothers (differ mother)

Notice the next fact...

V 3--"Now Israel (=Jacob) loved Joseph more than all..."

Q: Why did Jacob love Joseph more than the rest?

A: Joseph was the son of Jacob's old age. Remember, Jacob had 2 wives, the sisters Leah and Rachel, who each had a maidservant. Jacob fathered children by all 4 women. I love the Bible because it presents people as they were, flaws and all. Jacob made no bones about the fact that his favorite wife was Rachel (29:30). And though she was barren for many years, she finally bore Jacob son #11, Joseph.

Q: What did Jacob give Joseph?

A: V 3--A "coat of many colors"

What was that? Scholars debate what it actually was. Quite possibly it was many colored tunic. Some feel it was a full length coat with sleeves, such as was a symbol of maturity and status. And no doubt it represented favoritism.

The favoritism led to, you guessed it...

### B. Friction (2, 4, 5, 8, 11)

V 2 "Joseph brought to his father their evil report" (Joseph had a legal right, Lev 5:1)

V 4 "they hated him."

"hated" = the Hebrew word doesn't refer just to an attitude, but to an act. A tension had built up in the brothers that would soon erupt. They would soon spew their venom at Joseph.

The friction continued to fester...

V 5 "And Joseph dreamed a dream...they hated him yet the more."

READ the dream--vv 6-7

V 8 "...and they hated him yet the more..."

And he dreamed another dream (vv 9-10). The response?

V 11 "And his brethren envied him..."

Q: Who really wronged the brothers? Joseph? Granted, Joseph didn't help his cause with his brothers, with his words and dreams.

But who really set Joseph up? His father did. Jacob committed the favoritism.

Illust: Favoritism of parents actually hurts the child

Note: This reveals an interesting truth about human nature. The brothers were not treated fairly. By whom? By their father. But who did they hate? Joseph. Often a person who has been mistreated will take out his bitterness on the "innocent" victim.

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Tran: There's the setting, a setting of favoritism and friction.

## **II. The Scenes of Tragedy (13-36)**

God is SOVEREIGN. Do you believe that? What does it mean to say God is sovereign? I could give you a wordy definition. But you may or may not remember it. But instead of telling you about God's sovereignty, I want to show it to you. You can see it in action in 4 intriguing scenes.

### A. The Plot (12-20)

V 12 "His brothers ... to Shechem..."

What did Jacob tell Joseph to do?

Vv 13-14 "...Go, see whether it be well with thy brethren..."

Joseph did. He traveled to Shechem. Don't ho-hum! The trek from Hebron to Shechem was 50 miles! And when Joseph finally arrived, he got lost looking for his brothers. Until...?

V 15 "A certain man found him..."

The man pointed him to Dothan (17). That was another 10 miles.

Now the plot thickens. Joseph took off for Dothan. The brothers saw him first.

Q: What did the brothers do?

Vv 18-20 "...they conspired against him to slay him..."

What a wicked conspiracy!

Scene #1--The Plot. Now scene #2...

### B. The Pit (21-24)

The oldest son Reuben objected. I'm not convinced it was because he loved Joseph, but because he loved his own neck. As the firstborn son, he was responsible. He was already out of his father's favor (35:22). What he did with Joseph could either ruin him or reinstate him. So Reuben piped up...

Vv 21-22 "And Reuben heard it..."

Reuben intended to return later, retrieve Joseph, and take him home. That was the plan. Here's how it actually happened.

Vv 23-24 "And it came to pass...stripped Joseph...cast him into a pit..."

### C. The Plea-Bargain (25-30)

To me, v 25 is perhaps the most insulting verse in the story. Talk about calloused! Do you know what the brothers did next?

V 25 "And they sat down to eat bread!"

Just imagine it. Joseph is screaming in the pit, "Help me!" And the brothers plug their ears and feed their faces. Their bitterness and hatred had squeezed every ounce of mercy out of their blood.

What happened next reveals the sovereign control of God.

V 25b "...a company of Ishmaelites came..."

The caravan was from Gilead. There was a well established trade route in that day from Damascus to Egypt. It passed Dothan.

Judah plea-bargained with his brothers...

Vv 26-27 "...What profit is it if we slay our brother...?"

When the caravan actually arrived, notice what the brothers did.

V 28 "...sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver..."

I wonder who got the money?! It strikes me that the price of Joseph's sale was how much? "20 pieces of silver" Do you know what price the law set for a slave in Ex 21:32? "30 pieces of silver" It seems the Midianites had no compassion either. To them, Joseph was nothing more than a good deal. And the brothers could care less. They were glad to say good riddance to their kid brother.

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4 scenes--The Plot, the Pit, the Plea-bargain, and...

### D. The Pain (31-36)

Vv 29-30 "And Reuben returned..."

You say, "Where was he?"

I wondered that. But a comment I read this week made sense. He was probably off guarding the flocks. Remember, that's why the brothers were there in the first place, to pasture their flocks. Foreign caravans were notorious for stealing unguarded animals. When Reuben returned, he realized his scheme to rescue Joe failed.

One sin always leads to another. The carnal heart is quick to justify itself, and rationalize its deeds. Watch the brothers cover up their diabolical act with another, this time a blatant lie.

Scene #4 is a scene of great pain. The pain is felt in two ways.

*1. A Broken Father (31-35)*

READ vv 31-35

I shudder at the heartlessness of the brothers. First, they had the audacity to eat a meal and ignore the cries of their despairing brother. And now they deceive their own father, and apparently pretend to mourn their brother's death with him. When talking to their father, they don't even call Joseph their brother, but "thy son."

Jacob was a broken father. He had one dead son, and 10 deceptive sons.

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*2. A Betrayed Brother (36)*

V 36 "And the Midianites sold him..."

Joseph would spend the next 13 years of his life isolated from his father. He had been betrayed by his own blood.

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Tran: Why did God preserve this story for us?

### **III. The Significance of Tragedy**

Q: What's the point of the story? What does Gen 37 have to say to us?

A: 3 significant lessons...

A. God is Sovereign in all situations.

Joseph was victimized at Dothan. He was cast into a pit at Dothan. He cried out for mercy at Dothan.

Q: Do you know what else happened at Dothan? II Kgs 6:13-17

Several hundred years later, a man named Elisha lived in Dothan. The Syrians hated him. So they sent an army to get him. Did they succeed? No. Why not? The Lord encircled Elisha with angelic chariots of fire. Here's what v 18 says, "Elisha prayed, Smite this people...And He smote them with blindness..."

Key: Elisha called to God for help at Dothan, and God answered. Joseph called out for help at Dothan, but the heavens were sealed. There was no miracle. God didn't hear Joseph. Or did He?

Listen. God was just as watchful in His silence with Joseph as in His miracle with Elisha. God is sovereign. He invites us to trust Him in the dark.

In fact, His sovereignty is stamped all over the story of Joseph.

1. God controlled the birth order and placed Joseph son #11 (3).
2. God revealed the dreams to Joseph (5, 9).
3. God provided at the right place and the right time...
  - the person to guide Joseph to Dothan (15-17)
  - the pit (22)

--the Caravan of Ishmaelites (25)

Think about it. That caravan had been traveling for days, perhaps weeks, but it arrived just at the right time! Coincidence? Hardly.

--Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh, needed a slave (36).

God was sovereign in Joseph's life. He is in ours too!

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### B. Man is Responsible for his actions.

Who was responsible for the tragedy of Gen 37?

1. The brothers were.
2. Joseph may have been in the sense that he brought it on...?
3. Jacob was.

Jacob was in 2 ways. Because of his favoritism (which he may not have even been aware of). And also in another way. Jacob had been deceived by his own sons.

Q: But do you remember what Jacob did to his own father? (see Gen 27)

A: He deceived him by pretending he was Esau, and stealing the blessing.

Biblical principle: Be sure your sins will find you out.

Ex 34:7 God "keeps mercy for thousands, but visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and fourth generation."

Challenge: Take responsibility for your actions. If you willfully tolerate sin, you are not the only one affected!

Hope: There is forgiveness available!

1. Repent of your sin.
2. Trust Christ today.

### C. God uses suffering to test the character of His people.

Q: Is Gen 37 a tragedy? It sure is.

Q: Did God bring good out of it? He sure did. In many ways. In the big picture, He used it to accomplish His purpose for His people the nation of Israel.

But He also used these tragedies, and more to come, to refine and develop His man Joseph. He used the fire of tragedy to mold the character of this choice man.

So He does in our lives even today.

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