

A Brother Ambushed


 JOSEPH


So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and cast him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Genesis 37:23–24



DEVOTIONAL

Occasionally we have noted how certain details of the Genesis narrative help to confirm the book's historicity. Such details can be "minor" and easily overlooked. For example, Joseph's brothers were seemingly able to take their large flock between Shechem and Dothan with ease (Gen. 37:12–17). This would have only been possible in the patriarchal age when the area was sparsely populated. Later on, the population density would have made this ease of pasturing difficult, if not impossible. Moses' accurate knowledge of the period he describes contributes to our confidence in the narrative's truth.

Joseph's brothers lash out at him in hatred while in Dothan. Years of envy and rage come to a head when they see him coming from a distance, probably because his multi-colored coat made Joseph visible from afar (v. 18). Today's passage also says they hatched their plot to murder Joseph "before he came near." They do not have to think about the deed; their decision is made when all they can see of Joseph is his faint outline on the horizon. In all likelihood they have long been waiting for a chance to get rid of Joseph.

Yet by the end of verse 24, Joseph's brothers have not gone through with their plan. Instead, they cast him into a pit. Moses is careful to tell us there is no water in this pit, a cistern cut into the limestone, in order to allay fears that Joseph might drown. Thus, he also intimates that Joseph's story is far from over and that there is much more to come.

The brothers act savagely in verses 23–24, but Reuben's intervention has prevented them from taking Joseph's life. Evidently, he was absent when the plan was conceived, and he later convinced them to hold back (vv. 21–22). As the oldest brother, Reuben would have borne the greatest responsibility if something happened to Joseph, and he may also have been trying to make amends for lying with Jacob's concubine (35:22). However, because his response to the loss of Joseph anticipated his father's reaction to the same news (37:29–30, 34), some commentators note Reuben was also probably motivated by a desire that his father not have to grieve. If this is true, Reuben's love for Jacob shows he was not a total scoundrel after all.

CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

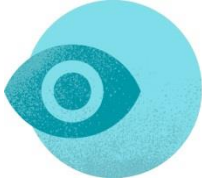
John Calvin comments, "The characters of men are not to be estimated by a single act, however atrocious, so as to cause us to despair of their salvation." Like Reuben, believers today can fall into gross sin. But they may also be forgiven and restored upon repentance. Has someone harmed you, repented,

and endeavored to make amends? Forgive him if you have not yet done so. If you have sinned grievously, know that God always forgives the repentant.¹



OPEN IT

1. Describe a time when you were mistreated by a group of people. What caused the mistreatment? How did you respond?



READ IT

Genesis 37:12–36



EXPLORE IT

2. At first, what was the plan of the brothers when they saw Joseph still far off?
3. Who changed the mind of the brothers?
4. What did they eventually do with Joseph?
5. What did they report to their father?



APPLY IT

One day Israel (Jacob) sent Joseph to check on his brothers, who were grazing the family's flocks some distance away (Genesis 37:12). "Israel said to Joseph, 'As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them.' 'Very well,' he replied" (v. 13). Joseph might have answered, "Please don't send me. Couldn't you send a servant? Don't you realize my brothers hate me? They never talk to me. It will be terrible when they see me. Besides, Shechem is miles away." But Joseph obeyed his father, knowing it was going to be a rough trip. I don't know how tuned-in Jacob was when he sent Joseph on this journey. Did Jacob realize he was putting his boy in jeopardy? Did he realize there was danger in the journey in more ways than one? Are we to assume that by this time he paid little attention to what was going on around him and was only superficially aware of the hatred his older boys had for his younger son? We don't know. It's easier to understand Jacob's decision on the basis that he really didn't think the older boys would do anything to harm Joseph. That's understandable. Lots of

¹<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/brother-ambushed>

parents say, “Oh, sure, the boys fight once in a while. But they would never hurt each other.” So Jacob sent Joseph off with a pat on the back. “You’ll be fine. Go on now. Find your brothers.”²

6. What reasons could Joseph have given his dad as to why he shouldn’t go check on his brothers?

7. What does Joseph’s decision to obey his father’s command tell us about him?

8. What are some of the excuses you give to keep from obeying?

9. When have you been tempted to disobey a clear command because of your fear of what may happen to you if you obeyed it?

10. In those moments, what must we do to remain faithful?

ROOTS OF ENVY

In Hebrews, the author of that deep study warns us about allowing a “bitter root” to grow up in our lives “to cause trouble and defile many” (Hebrews 12:15). It is a good warning, for it is precisely this that turned the sons of Jacob into would-be fratricides (those who kill a brother or sister). At the beginning they probably did not have their hearts set on Joseph’s murder. But they envied him, and envy eventually gave way to hatred that gave way to plot against his life.³

11. What things had caused envy in the hearts of Joseph’s brothers, according to Genesis 37:1–11? How might you have felt if you were in their shoes?

² The Hand of God: Finding His Care in All Circumstances by Alistair Begg

³ Genesis, Volume 3: Living by Faith (Genesis 37–50): An Expository Commentary James Montgomery Boice

Proverbs 14:30 — *A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot. (ESV)*

James 4:13 — *For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (NIV)*

Proverbs says that envy destroys the body. In Proverbs 14:30 Solomon says, “A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.” The New Living Translation says that envy is “cancer to the bones.” Envy is a little thing that starts out really small, maybe even begins benign. That little tumor has a little malignancy in it so it grows ever so slowly, little by little. Day after day it gets bigger and it’s growing. Before you know it, it starts affecting other organs in your body. Then it has consumed all of who you are. Some of you are so utterly consumed by the lives and good fortunes of others that it has affected your health and your joy. It has robbed you of happiness and stolen your contentment. It rots the organs.⁴

12. Look over verses 18–36 again. The author describes seven different sins that originated with the brothers’ envious hearts. What are they and why does the sin of envy seem to run in packs with other sins?

13. How has envy brought about disorder to your own life and evil practices in your relationships with others?

14. What steps should the brothers have taken with regard to the strained relationship with Joseph? How do you address the temptation of being envious of others around you?

ENVY CAUSES US TO BE CRITICAL OF GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY

Your envy isn’t an issue with someone else here on earth. It isn’t that girl who wears all the great clothes. It isn’t that guy with all the personality and charisma. It isn’t that person who got the promotion. Your envy has nothing to do with them and everything to do with God. If God is completely sovereign over all things — if God has created you, made you who you are, placed you in the situation you’re in, given you all that you have — then your issue is with God.

What you’re saying when you are envious is, “God, we’ve got a problem. You haven’t given me what I want. I want to look like Brad Pitt and you didn’t do it, so I’m angry with You. I’m mad that he’s got all the good looks and You’ve given me this mug. Why does my neighbor have a bigger house than I do? He doesn’t even go to church! God, what’s Your problem? God, didn’t You get the memo that followers of Jesus Christ should be healthy, wealthy and wise? Didn’t you get that, God?” Your envy is an affront to God. You are pointing at Him and saying, “You blew it! You missed it, God! And I know what’s better.”⁵

⁴ Hey Jealousy Proverbs: Search for Wisdom, Part 8 Tim Badal | September 7, 2014 | Proverbs 27:4

⁵ *ibid*

15. The above quote reminds us that our envy begins with our dissatisfaction with God and His plan for our lives. How do we begin to delight in God's plans for us even when they seem to be less than what others seem to experience?

THE EVIL MEN DO

16. The brothers' blood began to boil when they saw that "coat of many colors." What are some things that can instantly make your blood boil? What do you do to make sure your anger doesn't get the best of you?
17. According to verse 20, what do the brothers think will be accomplished if they kill Joseph? What does this tell us about their "real issue with their brother"?
18. Reuben's response in verse 22 seems loving and caring, but according to Genesis 35:22 and 37:29–30, what might have been the reasons for Reuben's secret plan to rescue Joseph from the pit and return him to his father?
19. Read Genesis 37:24–25 and then Genesis 42:21. What is the picture given regarding Joseph's time in the pit? What can we learn about the brothers from Genesis 37:25?

Joseph probably didn't feel very safe, tied up as a piece of property to be bought and sold and placed on the back of a camel for the journey to Egypt. But Joseph was safe, because even though his earthly father stayed behind in Canaan, his heavenly Father came with him into Egypt. Sometimes the will of God is found on the back of a smelly camel going down to a far country.... Joseph understood that, even in the exercise of his brothers' hatred, God was working. Perhaps on his ride to Egypt Joseph recognized that God had already provided for him through the intervention of Reuben that saved his life and through Judah's suggestion that he be brought up alive out of the pit.

Perhaps Joseph realized it was only by the hand of God that his brothers had complied with those proposals. Nor was it by chance that a caravan of Ishmaelite merchants had arrived at just the right time for Judah to see them and suggest an alternative to the cruel plot the brothers had had in mind initially. Those traders had been there by divine appointment, and God had determined they would make the decision to buy the lad. If we had asked Joseph's brothers, "Why did you sell him into slavery?" they would have said, "To be rid of him and his lousy dreams." If we had asked the Ishmaelite traders, "Why did you

buy Joseph?" they would have said, "To turn a profit." And yet as they served themselves and their own ends, the brothers and the traders did a great service to Joseph. Their selfish interests became, in God's providence, instrumental in saving Joseph's life and, ultimately, the lives of the brothers themselves.

So we are beginning to see that even when, as Calvin puts it, the world appears to be aimlessly walking about, the Lord is everywhere at work. The center of God's will may take us into the eye of a storm. For Joseph the storm was the back of a smelly camel going down to Egypt. We should not seek to confirm God's will by the absence of adversity. Consider the staggering words written about Jesus in Isaiah 53:10: "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer." We take heart by recalling, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). Ten bad-apple brothers and a whole caravan full of hard-eyed desert traders were no match for the teenage boy who appeared to be the helpless victim in the story; God was with him.⁶

20. How does seeing God's hand of providence over Joseph give you hope to endure amidst great tribulations in your own life?

⁶ The Hand of God: Finding His Care in All Circumstances by Alistair Begg