



# WHERE DO OUR DREAMS REALLY TAKE US?

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Genesis 37:1-36

33rd Message

Mark Bucko

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As a youth, I had dreams of baseball greatness. A severely broken arm shattered those dreams. I also had a dream of world class swimming success. But mononucleosis broke that dream. Then I had a dream of great academic success. Stanford University eliminated that one. I've always been a good communicator, and I dreamed of success in the world of broadcasting. But God took that dream and transformed it into something radically different.

What are your dreams? What were they when you were young? What has life done to those dreams?

Today's text brings us to two of the most well known dreams in all of scripture and perhaps all of history. But they do not come into a peaceful and idyllic setting. They come into an arena characterized by intrigue, deception, jealousy, rage, hatred, love, grief, lust and sex. Don't worry, this is not an R-rated sermon. This is a sermon about an R-rated world invaded by a great and loving God.

The scene is this: Jacob has finally moved his family to Hebron, the land of his father Isaac. Jacob and Esau have buried Isaac, and the narrator starts chapter 37 of Genesis by saying that it is time to look deeper at the generations of Jacob, meaning the story of his sons.

In recent weeks we've seen that in the land of Shechem, where Jacob had compromised and settled to grow his wealth, Jacob's daughter Dinah had been kidnapped and raped. A silent Jacob watched helplessly as his sons unleashed their fury on the city in retaliation, while having lost all respect for their father. This chosen family, set apart to bring blessing to the world, has now become a curse. To make matters worse, Jacob's oldest son Reuben attempted to usurp his father's authority by committing incest with one of his father's wives. This is truly a fractured family.

So we come to this passage with many questions. Who will lead this family into the next generation? How will God purify his chosen family to make them adequate for his purposes? What consequences will sexual impurity have? How will this devastated family be reconciled? What hope for the future do they have?

Let's pick up the story in chapter 37 and see where it leads.

## I. Setting and Introduction to Joseph (37:1-4)

**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 loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. (37:1-3, NASB)**

Right away we see that Joseph, all of seventeen years now, will be the focal point of these stories. Joseph is apprenticing

with his brothers, learning to be a shepherd. We also discover that he's a tattletale. He may nearly be an adult, but we get a vision of a rather immature young man. The verb used here for Joseph's bad report is one that denotes news meant to damage.

Next we learn that Joseph is the favored son, singled out by his father. He gives Joseph what translators typically call a "vari- or multi-colored tunic." Scholars differ as to exactly what this coat was. Possibly it was richly ornamented and striped. Almost certainly it was a long robe with long sleeves. What is clear is that this is a gift, bestowing honor on Joseph. And more than likely, such a robe was indicative of royalty, or in this case, rule over the family. Joseph now seems to be removed from the family workforce.

It is no wonder then what we learn next:

**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. (37:4)**

Joseph's brothers see what's going on and they don't like it. They hate Joseph with such passion they cannot speak to him, literally with "shalom," or peace.

## II. Joseph the Dreamer

### A. Joseph's Dream 1—The hatred of brothers (37:5-8)

**Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. And he said to them, "Please listen to this dream which I have had; for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo [behold], my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf." Then his brothers said to him, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. (37:5-8)**

Up to this point the narrator has given a broad perspective. Now he takes us right to the heart of the action, where we get dialog and hear the tension directly. Joseph has a dream, and before we even know what it was, we learn that it intensifies his brothers' hatred.

Before we proceed we need to understand more about dreams. In the ancient world, dreams were considered revelatory, as messages from God. To dream in such a manner was a powerful experience. What this dream seemed to signify was not lost on the brothers. Dreams indeed were used of God at times to communicate his sovereign and providential will. But no one reflects here. Joseph's reaction is immediate and prideful, and his brothers are profoundly angry.

While we can rightly criticize Joseph for his immature and unwise reaction, he nevertheless has received truth. His brothers would do well to move beyond the hatred and consider these things, though it's difficult to blame them for not doing so. Indeed, "they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words."

## **B. Joseph's Dream 2—The jealousy of brothers, the rebuke of a father (37:9-11)**

**Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo [behold], I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." And he related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. (37:9-11)**

Joseph has a second dream and wastes no time. With two more "beholds," and youthful exuberance, he recounts what is essentially the same dream, this time with imagery raised to a new level. Now Joseph has seen the very heavens bow down. This is outrageous! The notion of anything bowing down, much less the heavens, to this lad, is detestable to his brothers. Joseph tells the dream to his father, and even he is taken aback. The outraged Jacob rebukes him. He understands the imagery to mean himself, his sons, as well as Joseph's mother. The idea that the social order would be so upset that a father would bow down to a son is intolerable.

At this point, the full impact is difficult to translate. The narrator says that Joseph's brothers were jealous of him. This sounds rather tame compared to the earlier hatred, as we tend to think of jealousy as somewhat less intense than hatred. In this case, however, Gordon Wenham states that the Hebrew word used is often used in other parts of scripture reflecting emotion so strong that it spills over into violent action.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the brothers were jealous rings an ominous note.

## **III. Joseph Sold into Egypt**

### **A. Jacob sends Joseph: Bring a report (37:12-14)**

**Then his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem. Israel 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." Then he 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." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. (37:12-14)**

Joseph has been removed from the family workforce. No longer is he required to venture out with the family's flock in the work of shepherding. Jacob has promoted him to headquarters.

Twenty times in this text we get the word "brother." At each mention the tension mounts. Jacob's favoritism and Joseph's dreams have raised the stakes in this story. And now, seemingly with no clue as to the depth of hatred his other sons have for Joseph, Jacob is about to send him out sixty miles on a reconnaissance mission. He is to bring back a report on the welfare, or shalom, of the brothers and flock.

Note where the sons have gone: Shechem, a place of great disaster. All signs point to trouble.

### **B. Jacob searches for brothers in Shechem (37:15-17)**

**And a man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, "What are you looking for?" And he said, "I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock." Then the man said, "They have moved from here; for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.**

The scene shifts to a field of Shechem, where young Joseph is wandering like a lost sheep himself. The narrator zooms in for a short interaction with a total stranger, a man with no name and no identity, only a brief question: "What are you looking for?"

Why do we get this scene? I am persuaded that this is a brief vision into God's providence. Without this stranger, Joseph has no hope of finding his brothers. The man just "happens" to find Joseph wandering. He just "happens" to know where the brothers are. Just as Israel wandered in the wilderness generations later, Joseph wanders. And, like them, apart from God's divine intervention, there was no hope of reaching the goal. Ironic, is it not, that Joseph is safer with this stranger than with the brothers for whom he is looking?

### **C. Plot to kill Joseph (37:18-20)**

**When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer! Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!" (37:18-20)**

The narrator reveals the core of their jealousy. It was one thing for Joseph to bring bad reports and to be father's favorite, but to be subject to his dreams was too much. They actually refer to him as a "dream-master," or as Robert Alter says, "...someone with special proprietary relation to, or mastery of [in this case dreams]."<sup>2</sup> So they do not hesitate. These men are not just betraying an audacious brother, they are bucking against that which is behind his astounding dreams.

Their plan, short and efficient, is as well thought out as it is heinous. Not only are they planning a merciless death for Joseph, they are going to do it with no proper burial—an appalling atrocity in that culture. Additionally, they have conceived a plan of deception for their father. Jacob the deceiver would soon become Jacob the deceived.

### **D. Reuben tries to intervene (37:21-22)**

**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, to restore him to his father. (37:21-22)**

Suddenly Reuben, Jacob's eldest, who had tried to usurp his father's authority, steps forward to take leadership. The pit into which the brothers were planning to throw Joseph after killing him would have been a deep cistern for the collection of water, and too difficult to climb out of. Reuben, who is secretly planning to later rescue Joseph, suggests that they simply throw him in there and let him suffer.

Finally, Joseph reaches his brothers:

### **C' The plot changes: Judah intervenes and Joseph is sold (37:23-28)**

**So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it.**

Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt. 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. 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. (37:23-28)**

The first thing we note is that Joseph has worn his coat. Now we know how the brothers recognized him from so far away. As Reuben suggested, they toss Joseph into the pit, an empty one fortunately, lest he drown, callously ignoring his desperate pleas for help (cf. 42:21). Unbelievably, they then sit down to a picnic dinner.

As they dine, they raise their eyes and see a caravan of traders. Reuben seems to be off on his own, and now Judah attempts to take leadership. The caravan gets him thinking and he proposes they sell Joseph. They can get rid of him for good without actually spilling his blood and then having to cover-up the blood-guilt. Additionally, they can make some money into the bargain. What a plan! So the brothers pull Joseph from the cistern and sell him off.

Before we move on, we must not miss that line at the end. Verse 28: "Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt."

#### **D' Reuben's grief and impotence (37:29-30)**

As in every good story, there is no such thing as instant gratification. Rather than take us to Egypt with Joseph, the narrator keeps us in suspense and right with his brothers. He takes the focus back to Reuben:

**Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. And he returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?" (37:29-30)**

Reuben finds Joseph gone! In his grief he tears his garments, like his father will do Jacob later. But the question is: What is driving Reuben's grief? Has Jacob's oldest son turned from his self-serving ways?

Reuben, who tried to wrest family control from his father by sleeping with Bilhah (35:22), reveals his true colors. He is not concerned with Joseph or Jacob; he is concerned only with his own future. As eldest son of this clan he should be preparing for future leadership of the family. But the eldest son has been disqualified, and we see his true motivation: saving his own hide.

Into this leadership vacuum has stepped Judah. As a result, Joseph receives a free, one-way ticket to Egypt. Now the brothers have some major cover-up work. So we return to the subject of Joseph's tunic.

#### **B' Joseph's coat brought to Jacob (37:31-33)**

**So they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the tunic in the blood; 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." 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!" (37:31-33)**

With Joseph gone, the brothers quickly execute their scheme. Jacob used garments and a slaughtered goat to deceive Isaac; now his sons use the same to deceive him. Joseph's tunic, first a symbol of favoritism, becomes a symbol of grief.

The brothers play dumb to let their father draw his own

conclusions. Jacob is so clueless as a father, so out of touch with his sons, and so blinded by his favoritism, he doesn't suspect foul play. And notice how the brothers speak of Joseph. Twenty times the text says "brother," but pointedly they do not refer to him as "our brother," only as "your son." Jacob responds in kind, "It is my son's tunic." Surrounded by eleven men who desperately want to be called sons, Jacob calls only one: Joseph. And Jacob draws exactly the conclusion for which they were hoping.

What began as the journey of an exalted son to check on his brothers has now become the story of unbridled grief.

#### **A' Jacob mourns: will not be comforted (37:34-35)**

Finally, the spotlight has come full circle and returns to Jacob:

**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. (37:34-35)**

The pathos of a devastated family comes to a crescendo in this final scene. Jacob's sons and daughters arise to comfort their father. While his grief is surely understandable, it is striking to see his sons and daughters surrounding him, longing to comfort him, longing to be embraced, longing to be accepted, only to be invisible. The only alternative Jacob can see is Sheol. And so he weeps.

It is here, in the depths of despair, that we the readers gain a small insight, of which Jacob and his sons have no idea.

**Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard. (37:36)**

The narrator ends this act of the drama with a brief glimpse into the fate of Joseph, setting the stage for the next episode with just a couple of details to whet our appetite for more.

## **IV. Where Do Our Dreams Really Take Us?**

What a story! This is a dense and powerful text. We have to ask, Where does this take us? What do we do with this opening chapter of Joseph's odyssey?

I will offer three reflections.

### **1. God's dreams for us transcend our wildest imaginings**

When we meet Joseph, we see that he has a vision, a dream. His dream is to rule over his family. For a young male in these ancient days there could be no greater dream than that of taking the reins of family leadership into the next generation. For one so far down in the birth order this was a virtual impossibility, but for Joseph it was becoming reality. However, Joseph was limited by his earthbound vision. In his failure to ponder and quietly consider his dreams, he failed to realize that God had something far greater.

But we can't really blame him. How many of us have dreamed of great plans only to see that God has a radically different plan? I dreamed of a career in broadcasting. I dreamed of being God's man, salt and light, in a pagan environment. I dreamed of using my communication and technical skills for fame and fortune. But God had a much greater vision. First, he took me into the business world. There he humbled me, molded me, and taught me to cling to him. I was often misunderstood for my priorities, and reviled by some. Then the Lord said it was time to use my skills elsewhere. He set me to work communicating his truth to and

loving Junior Highers. In the world's eyes, it's a step down. But I have never before been so passionate about my work and felt so right about what I am doing. God's vision was so much greater than mine. I had no idea!

In contrast, think of Jesus, who fully understood his Father's vision. In the wilderness, Satan tempted him to embrace a limited and false dream of what his kingdom could be. But he knew his Heavenly Father had something real and far greater, and he was willing to wait for that dream to be fulfilled.

That brings us to our second point.

## **2. Those who embrace the Father's dreams will suffer pain and rejection**

If we are going to be an instrument of salvation in the hands of God, we will be misunderstood and rejected. Joseph's dream died on the day his brothers sold him into slavery. Can you imagine his bewilderment, his fear and pain as he made that tortuous journey to Egypt?

Perhaps many of you can. How many of you have had a dream die?

Many of you have watched your career dreams vaporize—perhaps even your whole company.

Many of you have been shattered by the invasion of disease or even death.

Many of you are watching your dreams crumble as we speak: shattered marriages, homes, lives.

Many of you have suffered because of your faith—at work, in your neighborhood, even at home. I have a friend who has come to faith in Jesus, and as a result, his wife has left him and taken their children and every penny she could get.

David knew such pain.

**Save me, O God,  
For the waters have threatened my life.  
I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me.  
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched;  
My eyes fail while I wait for my God.  
Those who hate me without a cause are more than the  
hairs of my head. (Ps 69:1-4a)**

And ultimately, Jesus knew such pain. He perfectly embraced his Father's dream, and as a result, the world turned its back. He knew pain and rejection beyond human comprehension. But because of that, we have a hope and a future. We have a dream: a dream that God would use us according to his purposes. We have a dream that our lives will count in eternal ways. Ultimately, we have the dream of eternity in paradise with our Heavenly Father—a dream that there is so much more than our limited vision can comprehend. In the midst of your shattered dreams, hold onto the Father's dreams for you.

Finally,

## **3. Any dream that dies will be resurrected on a larger scale**

Joseph's dream died, but the Sovereign Lord resurrected it to provide something far greater. Through this young man he opened the most powerful nation on earth as an incubator in which to birth his nation. Here he will restore the family, purify them, grow them, and ultimately birth them into the nation of Israel.

Likewise, King David's dreams of peaceful and long rule will be crushed under intense persecution and consequences of sin. But the line of this king lives on and from it comes the Savior of the nations.

Jesus could have grasped for an earthly kingdom; it was his for the taking. Think of the immense pain he could have set aside. But that dream had to die for his transcendent, eternal kingdom to arise. With his resurrection came resurrection of the dream on an eternal scale, cutting across all generations, all nations, all times.

Your dream may have died or be dying. But your Savior knows your pain. He knows your broken heart, and he has a dream for you that is grand and glorious and eternal. Will you dare to dream? Will you come before your Father today asking for a new lens, a new vision, into the great dream he has for you?

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1. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 352.

2. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 212.