

Where Do Our Dreams Really Take Us?

Genesis 37:1-36

This week we begin the first of a nine week series in the account of Jacob's sons, where the young Joseph becomes the leading character. We pick up the story of a fractured family that is riddled with jealousy, raging resentments, violent vengeance and gaping wounds. The heroic faith and sacrificial love that characterized Abraham has been all but lost on the fourth generation. A daughter's purity was violently stolen and, while the father sat silent and refused to act, his sons unleashed their rage in a bloodbath, killing all the males in Shechem under the guise of religion. God's family, which was chosen to bless all the families on earth has become a curse. One can hardly imagine a darker place to begin our story.

And yet, as the apostle Paul affirms, *"if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself"* (2 Tim 2:13). The narrative dramatically details how, in the hidden and unnoticed ways of God's providence, a broken family is radically transformed and reconciled, fulfilling God's covenant promises. The announcement of God's purpose is revealed at the outset of the narrative through **dreams** given to Joseph. However, neither Joseph nor his family have any idea how God will fulfill them, as his dreams initially provoke jealousy and hate, which escalates to abduction, slavery and prison. Everett Fox writes,

Initially the tale is one of family emotions, and it is in fact extreme emotions which give it a distinctive flavor. All the major characters are painfully expressive of their feelings, from the doting father to the spoiled son, from the malicious brothers to the lustful wife of Potifar, from the nostalgic adult Yosef to the grief-stricken old Yaakov. It is only through the **subconscious medium of dreams, in three sets**, that we are made to realize that a high plan is at work which will supersede the destructive forces of these emotions.¹

This text could not be more relevant to our present world that is riddled with hate, bigotry and impenetrable division. Walled in by a pandemic for 13 months, many have lost the ability to dream and to see how God's kingdom is at work. It is my prayer that God will use these sacred texts to open our eyes to the providential, hidden ways of

God and that we become his ambassadors, bringing the gift of reconciliation to the church and the waiting world. Amen.

In the opening scene, we are introduced to the family dynamics and the tensions that will drive the story.

I. Setting the Stage: Love and Hate (37:2-11)

A. Jacob's love and the brothers' hate (37:2-4 ESV)

This is the account of Jacob's line. Joseph at seventeen was tending the flock with his brothers. Now he was an assistant of the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah.² And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. (Gen 37:2-4 ESV)

The account of Jacob's line opens with the name of the young favored son, Joseph, "All the promises of Abraham are now lodged with this new one, Joseph, though his brothers will not concede it... His name is 'add.' He is added by the mercy of God. According to his brothers, he is an unwelcome afterthought." Joseph is last in the dynamics of the family hierarchy and excluded from the circle of power, but in the home, he lives intimately close to his father,³ and is not shy about exposing his brothers' evil deeds to his father.

Jacob, perhaps even more than his father before him, has no qualms about expressing his preferential love. "Out of this deep, arbitrary, almost embarrassing devotion, Jacob gives Joseph a magnificent robe, a mark of regal status, and announces that this son is the wave of the future."⁴ The significance is not lost on his brothers and provokes such hatred they could not so much as greet him (Lit. "speak to him in shalom"). Though the brothers refuse to speak to Joseph, God is not silent. He speaks future mysteries to Joseph in such a way that only deepens the family divide.

B. Joseph's First Dream (37:5-8)

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and

bowed down to my sheaf.” His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. (37:5-8)

In the ancient Near East, dreams were a common means of divine communication and prediction. The prophetic significance of the dreams was not lost on the brothers—they will bow down before their brother’s rule (the fulfillment occurs in **three stages** 42:6; 43:26, 28; 50:18). Joseph is either incredibly naïve and socially unaware or, as Robert Altar suggests, “this whole speech shows us a young Joseph who is self-absorbed, blithely assuming everyone will be fascinated by the details of his dreams.”⁵ It isn’t just Jacob’s favoritism or Joseph’s manner that the brothers hate. It is the dream itself that announces a new social and political order that threatens the old and calls it into question. God’s choice of Joseph to rule threatens his brothers and causes discord. But the brothers will have to learn to accept his election to kingship.

B. Joseph’s second dream (37:9-11)

Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, “Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?” And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. (37:9-11)

If one dream is not enough, Joseph has a second and wastes no time reporting it, first to his brothers and then to his father in his brothers’ presence. As Waltke observes, “Dreams in this story come in pairs (see Gen. 40 and 41) to show that the matter is **firmly decided** by God and **will come quickly** (see 41:32). An isolated dream might be misinterpreted. Two dreams with the same meaning confirm the interpretation.”⁶ The dreams unmistakably point to Joseph’s prominence, first over the family and then over the whole house of Israel. The brothers can see nothing in Joseph’s dreams but a self-absorbed, conceited youth, and their jealousy continues to boil and seethe. The father’s reaction is mixed. On the one hand, he is mystified and plays his public role by leveling a sharp rebuke on his son, but on the other, he takes the dream to heart. Could it be true?

II. Joseph Searches for his Brothers (37:12-17)

A. Joseph sent to Shechem in search of his brothers (37:12-14)

Now his **brothers** went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your **brothers** pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your **brothers** and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. (37:12–14)

First, we see that Joseph is no longer shepherding the flock with his brothers; he remains at home with his father, strengthening the bond between father and son. Meanwhile, the brothers are feeding the flock in Shechem, which gives Jacob reason to worry for their welfare. Shechem is where their sister was raped and Joseph's brothers retaliated by slaughtering all the men of the city and plundering their livestock and wealth. Jacob seems clueless of the hatred he incites by his favoritism and sends Joseph alone and vulnerable some 50 miles to report on his brothers' welfare (*shalom*).

B. Lost and Found

And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my **brothers**," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his **brothers** and **found** them at Dothan. (37:15–17)

The terrible irony of the conflict that drives this scene is thundered by the twenty-one uses of the word "**brothers**." When Joseph is lost and wandering aimlessly in the field he is **found** by an anonymous man and asks, "What are you seeking," and Joseph answers, "**I am seeking my brothers**." This statement epitomizes Joseph's career and longing. The stranger has been watchful and observant and provides Joseph with the necessary information to be able to complete his quest—the brothers have gone to Dothan, 13 miles northwest of Shechem. In retrospect the irony is painful, for Joseph, alone and vulnerable, is safer with a stranger from Shechem than he will be with his own flesh and blood.

III. Hate Escalates to Violence and Slavery (37:18-28)

A. United in death (37:18-20)

They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this lord of the dreams. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.” (37:18-20)

The sight of Joseph from afar instantly ignites the brothers’ hatred and unites their resolve to murder him and cover their tracks with a lie to deceive their father. In this way they will kill the dream.

B. Reuben attempts to intervene (37:21-24)

But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands. He thought, “We will not take his life.” And so Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him”— that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. 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 threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. (37:21-24)

Reuben, as the eldest son who was responsible for his younger brother in his father’s absence, objects to their proposal. But Reuben is a coward and uses deception “to persuade his brothers that he, too, wants Joseph dead, as long as that result is achieved without their spilling blood.”⁷ Rather than killing Joseph, he advises them to throw him into a cistern that was in the pasture land between the villages, where no one will hear his cries. Eventually he will perish without them having to lay a hand on him. Secretly he intends to return and rescue Joseph and restore him to his father.

When Joseph finally makes his appearance, the brothers act swiftly in unison. Like well-trained storm troopers, they pounce upon their prey, stripping him of that despicable royal robe, carry him outside the village into the field and throw him into an empty cistern. With no water, Joseph will die either of thirst or of exposure.

D. Judah trumps Reuben’s plan (37:25-28)

Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon

him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. 28 Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt. (37:25-28)

With no remorse and "callous indifference to their brother's cries at the bottom of the cistern (42:21), the brothers sit down to enjoy a celebratory meal. The next meal in Joseph's presence will be with Joseph at the head of the table."⁸ As they dine, they see a company of Ishmaelite traders from Gilead coming down the road that passes through the plain of Dothan to the great caravan road that runs from Damascus to Egypt. Seeing the caravan laden with valuable spices, Judah seizes the opportunity to propose to his brothers that they sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. His appeal is not from brotherly love, but "from the feeling of horror, which was not quite extinct within him, at incurring the guilt of fratricide."⁹ This way they can still get rid of Joseph and his dreams and turn a handsome profit.¹⁰ Judah merely substitutes one evil for another, as murder and kidnapping were both capital offenses (Exod 21:16; Deut 24:7). But to his brothers, Judah's plan is genius.

Together they stood "one for all and all for one" above the cistern and pulled Joseph out of the well and sold him for a price. Richard Longacre captures it well: "The bell solemnly tolls for Joseph," and the exceptional threefold repetition of his name "marks an extremely important and providential event in the family of Jacob and the history of the embryonic nation."¹¹

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

When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?" (37:29-30)

Now we discover that these negotiations were settled in Reuben's absence. I suspect the brothers deliberately kept Reuben out of the loop because they saw through his deception and knew he would object. Deception is a two edged sword in this family. Reuben is undone, consumed in his personal grief and failure to restore Joseph to his father. "The boy is no more, and I, where will I go!" But the brothers were at no loss.

IV. Scene 4: Deception and Unending Grief (37:31-35)

A. Deception by the brothers (37:31-33)

31 Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. 32 And they sent the robe and brought it to their father and said, "This we have found; please recognize whether it is your son's robe or not!" 33 And he recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! A vicious (lit. "evil") beast has devoured him. Joseph is ripped, ripped-to-pieces."¹² (37:31-33)

The robe that was first a symbol of a **father's love** and then torn by the **brothers' hate** is now is a tool for the sons to **deceive** and betray their father. In God's sovereign justice, Jacob reaps what he sowed. As Jacob deceived his father with the skins of a goat and his brother's favored garments, so his sons use a goat and Joseph's royal robe to deceive him.

B. Grief of the father (37:34-35)

Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him. (37:34-35)

The pathos of a devastated family comes to a great crescendo in this final scene. Brueggemann captures the moment well: "The father believes. He does not know, as we do, that the beasts couch at the door of his other sons. (like Cain and Abel [Gen 4:1-16]). The hate of the brothers has triumphed over the profound love of the father."¹³ The father's grief is extreme, beyond anything the sons expected, and their feigned comfort is vain and worthless. This wasn't just any son that was torn by the beast, it was **the** son who was the recipient of the dream, the one carrying the promises of Abraham and the future of the people. The loss of *the* son is the end of life for everyone.

While Jacob is in mourning, the narrator lifts our gaze to see a ray of hope on the horizon.

Postscript: Joseph is sold to Potiphar in Egypt (37:36)

Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. (37:36)

Joseph is not free, but he still alive...and so is the dream. Joseph was sold by the Midianites to Potiphar, commanding officer of the royal body-guard. And we are left to

wonder about the odds of the dream surviving as it moves to a larger sphere of power and confronts kingdom politics in Egypt.

V. Where Do Our Dreams Really Take Us?

After thirteen months of a worldwide pandemic, I suspect most of us can identify with Jacob's inconsolable grief over the death of dreams. But the good news of our text is that **God's dreams** for us never die—though "weeping may last through the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning" (Ps 30:5).

A. The foundation stone of our dreams is the doctrine of election.

Many are offended by this doctrine, because it seems arbitrary and exclusive. However it is important to understand that election is **not** God's choice of one to the **exclusion** of others; but rather, the choosing of **one** to bring **life** and **salvation** inclusive for **all**. In Joseph's case, he was chosen to rule in order to **save** his family and to **feed** the world in the midst of a coming famine. John wrote of Jesus, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:17-18).

God's choices are often surprising, bypassing the firstborn and subverting the existing order. So the hatred mounts and, in Joseph's case, his election drove his brothers to seek to kill him along with the dream. But God dreams cannot be resisted. Yet it is only in retrospect, through **the lens of faith**, that we are able to discern God's hidden hand of providence directing everything at just the right time to bring about their restoration. As Waltke observes,

Joseph providentially wastes time wandering around Shechem looking for his brothers when he happens to meet a man who had happened to overhear the brothers say where they would go. Without Joseph's delay, the Ishmaelite merchants would not have happened to come along at the right time. On the spur of the moment, it occurs to Judah to sell Joseph, so Joseph happens to end up in Egypt. The favoritism of a father, sibling rivalry culminating in selling the favorite into Egypt as a slave—"the crime of the century"—and the cover-up all play a part in God's providence to save his elect!¹⁴

B. The Joseph story prefigures the Jesus story and our story

This story of *election—humiliation—exaltation* operates on a larger plane than Joseph's family dynamics and Pharaoh's kingdom. It prefigures the life of Jesus as God's favored Son, and by extension, our life hidden in Christ.

The Father sends his Son from heaven to his brothers to check on the welfare. At Jesus' baptism God, like Jacob, is not shy about publicly expressing his devotion for his Son. *You are my Son, whom I love" with you I am well pleased!* (Mark 1:11 NIV). In his first public appearance in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus reads from the Isaiah text and like Joseph, boldly applies it to himself and sits down. Then, like Joseph, he indicts his brothers for evil and they want to kill him, but he eludes their grasp until the proper time. Jesus explains to the disciples the depth of the Father's love with the Son in the most intimate of terms: "The **Father loves the Son** and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel" (John 5:20). When faced with the prospect of Jesus' death, a disciple vainly attempts to intervene like Reuben, but fails miserably, while another, like Judah, successfully sells him to the authorities for 30 pieces of silver.

Unlike Joseph, Jesus dies an excruciating death on the cross, but as the heavens grow dark, we never see the father weeping. Why? Perhaps he hides his inconsolable grief because of the joyous prospect, that based on his Son's sacrifice, he has made it possible that **all** who believe become "**beloved**" sons and daughters.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom 8:28-30) Amen.

¹ Everett Fox, *In the Beginning: A New English Rendition of the Book of Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1983), 152.

² Verse 2 is Bruce Waltke's translation. Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 499.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation* (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1982), 299.

⁴ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 300.

⁵ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible Volume 1, The Five Books of Moses Torah, A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 140.

⁶ Waltke, *Genesis*, 501.

⁷ Richard C. Steiner, "He Said, He Said" *JBL* 138 (2019), 492.

⁸ Waltke, *Genesis*, 503

⁹ C. F. Keil and Delitzsch F., *Commentary on the Old Testament* 10 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), paragraph 506.

¹⁰ The average price of a slave being 30 shekels. But the Ishmaelites naturally wanted to make money by the transaction.

¹¹ Waltke, *Genesis*, 503.

¹² Verse 33 is Everett Fox's translation (Genesis 37:33 SB)

¹³ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 305.

¹⁴ Waltke, *Genesis*, 492.