

Joseph: God's Plan and Human Failure
Genesis 37, 39

Turn to Genesis 37 please. God has plans for his people. Sometimes his people fail badly. What happens then to God's plans? Genesis has been saying the same things all along, but we are moving toward the end of Genesis now, and the Joseph story is even clearer than Genesis has been so far.

When other people do things that injure you and mess up your life, how does that affect God's plans for you? When your own sins and failure mess up your life badly, and damage other people, how does that affect God's plans for you? How does that affect God's plans for them?

These are important questions for everyone, and these directly affect many of us in this church. And the Joseph story in Genesis shows us human failures and God's plan in action.

This story is mostly about Joseph and his brothers. We're now on the fourth generation of Abraham's family. Abraham and Sarah were first, second was Isaac and Rebekah, third was Jacob with Leah and Rachel, and now the story shifts to Jacob's twelve sons, the fourth.

Joseph's Bad Start – Gen 37:1-11

Joseph was 17, tending flocks with his ten older brothers, and the first thing we hear about Joseph is that he brought their father a bad report about them. I grew up with three brothers, and we did not tell on each other. Even if we really did not like what the brother had done, we did not very often tell our parents. That's normal. I don't know if it's the same with sisters, I expect so.

But there's something else here. The Hebrew word for "bad report" means "misleading report." It means a story told to leave an impression that is not true. Genesis does not tell us what the brothers did, or even that they did anything wrong at all. Joseph told a story to get his brothers in trouble, that's the point. That's the first thing we learn about Joseph.

Two chapters later, Potiphar's wife told her husband that Joseph tried to rape her, which was not at all true. But Joseph got in big trouble. The writer of Genesis wants us to connect that with what Joseph did to his brothers. Potiphar's wife did to Joseph what Joseph did to his brothers.

Jacob the father loved Joseph more than his brothers, and made a special robe for him. The result of all this was that the brothers hated Joseph. They grew up seeing their father Jacob treat Rachel, Joseph's mother, like gold, and seeing Jacob not care very much about their mothers, Leah and Bilhah and Zilpah. They saw Leah and Rachel struggling against each other. The brothers saw all this. Joseph saw this, and he felt special because his mother was Rachel.

And Jacob's favoritism was part of *his* upbringing. His father Isaac preferred Esau, and his mother Rebekah preferred Jacob. So Jacob the father continues what he grew up with, and his sons continue what they grew up with. They hated Joseph, not without reasons.

Joseph had two dreams, and he told them to his brothers. The Bible does not tell us the dreams directly, rather we and the brothers listen together to Joseph. Both dreams say the same thing: Joseph told the brothers his dreams that they will all bow to him, and he will rule over them.

We see that Joseph knows that his brothers hate him, and why, and he tells them his dreams to rub it in. They feel that of course, and they hated him all the more.

We also see from these dreams that God has chosen Joseph for a special role. God plans to do something remarkable with Joseph's life. Is there any reason in Joseph why God would choose Joseph rather than one of the other brothers? None that Genesis knows about. Nevertheless God had plans for Joseph.

Joseph Sold by his Brothers – Gen 37:12-36

The next time we hear about the brothers and their flocks, Joseph wasn't with them, he stayed at home. No surprise there I suppose. Jacob sent him to find out how the brothers are doing.

And I need to throw this in: it is not just Joseph that will have a special role in God's plans. All twelve sons are the twelve tribes of Israel, who will bring God's blessing to all peoples on earth. This is not just any troubled family. This is the chosen family. This troubled family will bring God's blessing to all.

When the brothers see Joseph coming, they agree together that they will kill him, and be done with him. Cain killed Abel, Esau planned to kill his brother Jacob, and now the ten brothers plan to kill Joseph. And they probably would have, but Rueben the oldest talked them out of doing it right away, so they tore off Joseph's fancy robe, they hated that thing. They threw him in a pit, and sat down to enjoy lunch.

Just then they saw traders going by, taking goods to Egypt, and Judah said "why not just sell him to these traders going to Egypt? That way we are not actually guilty of killing our brother, and we've gotten rid of him, and we make some money off him." So that's what they did, sold him as a slave to traders, who took him to Egypt and made some money off him there.

They killed a goat, and put the blood on Joseph's fancy robe, and took it to their father Jacob to fool him. And it worked, Jacob was sure a fierce animal had devoured Joseph. Many years earlier, young Jacob used a goat and his brother's clothes to deceive his father Isaac and steal the blessing. Now Jacob's sons use a goat and their brother's clothes to deceive their father Jacob. Use a goat and your brother's clothes to fool your father.

And Jacob mourned, and would not be comforted. He dressed and acted as one in mourning. Until this all got cleared up, many years, Jacob openly mourned. The brothers saw this all the time.

Joseph, Slave and Prisoner – Gen 39:1-23

Joseph was a slave in Egypt, and then he was falsely accused, and then he was put in prison. We don't know how long either one lasted, but together they lasted 13 years. He was 17 when he was sold by his brothers, and he was 30 when he got out of prison.

The most important part of those thirteen years is what God was doing, Gen 39:2-5. *The Lord was **with Joseph** so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master... His master saw that the Lord was **with him** and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did ... (v5) The Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.*

Gen 39:20-23 *But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was **with him**; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden... The Lord was **with Joseph** and gave him success in whatever he did.*

Now people, did Joseph do anything at all to deserve this from God? Joseph improved while in Egypt, but God started all this before that happened. What did Joseph do to deserve this? I'll tell you: he happened to be Abraham's great grandson, and God had decided to bless Abraham and his descendants, and through that family, to bless all the peoples. That's all.

And understand what it means that God is with us. Four times in what I read, it said the Lord God was "with Joseph." The Lord is always with us, we read that often in the Bible. But it is not just so we won't be lonely.

God's with us doing things, he's paying attention to how others treat us, he's managing them as well as us, he's helping us do what he wants us to do. And we might say, "God, if you're with me and blessing me and giving me success, why does my life have such disasters, and why do people mistreat me like this?"

And God would say to us, "Remember Joseph: he was hated by his own brothers. They sold him to human traffickers. Then he was a slave in a foreign country. Then he was falsely accused, and he was put in prison in a foreign country. And he was there for years." God says to us, "Is your life worse than that? Trust me."

People did terrible things to Joseph, and God did not stop them. At the same time, God was with Joseph powerfully, blessing him and giving him success. And Joseph was good for other people. God wanted Abraham's chosen family to bring God's blessing to the nations. And he did.

The Bible says, “The Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph.” Because Joseph was so wonderful? No. Joseph is getting better, but that’s not why God blessed Potiphar.

God wants to bless all the nations, and he’s using his people to do that. Does Potiphar deserve this above other Egyptians? Not that we can tell. Then Potiphar believes a lie about Joseph, and puts Joseph in prison. And that was good for the prison warden, and for life in the prison. Because Joseph is wonderful? No. The prison warden is wonderful? No. It is God’s plan to bless.

Give this much to Joseph – he knows and trusts the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He will not sleep with Potiphar’s wife because that would be a sin against God, and he tells her that. Joseph is Abraham’s great grandson, and he worships and serves that God, as did his Jacob and Isaac before him, but not Ishmael, Hagar yes but not Ishmael, and not Esau.

The only right thing Joseph has done so far was flee from sexual immorality. That matters, it counts, but Genesis does not give us that to explain God’s blessing. And his obedience to God took him from the hard life of a slave, to the worse life of a prisoner. That happens sometimes to people that trust in our God.

God’s Plans Continue.

The thing is, the failures of God’s people do not stop God from bringing his blessing. He works with what happens. Here are important verses from the end of Genesis. Old Jacob has died, the ten brothers are afraid that since dad is gone, Joseph will now kill them in revenge for selling him as a slave. They come to Joseph and beg for mercy.

Gen 50:19-21 - But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish his purpose. The brothers did intend to harm Joseph, no doubt about that, and they injured him terribly. But God wanted Joseph in Egypt, and used this terrible thing to accomplish that. Potiphar’s wife also intended to harm him, and did so. Joseph had his own failures. There was suffering, that’s for sure, but God’s plan to bless him carried on.

We don’t know what God’s purposes are for any of us. We may well have suffered wounds from those who intended to harm us. These things often change the shape of our lives drastically, and it seems to us that we’re changed for the worse. This all happened to Joseph. But God will use these things to accomplish his purpose, if we will just trust him and live in his ways.

What does Peter say? “Commit yourselves to your Faithful Creator, and continue to do good.” That’s our business. God’s purpose is God’s business. Let’s do our part. Trust him and do good. We have inherited Abraham’s blessing. The One who calls us is faithful and he will do it. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, this fills us with hope. Are you really with us to help us and bless us like this? So we accomplish your purpose and your will? Have you been with us like this all along? We know that in Christ we have the blessing you gave to Abraham, so this must be true also for us. Thank you, and again, we thank you. Lead us to do what Peter said. O God, we commit ourselves to you, our Faithful Creator, we put our lives in your hands, and with your help we will continue to do good. Amen.

PRAISE TO GOD: Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.