

Foundations: Joseph I--Dreaming Dreams
Genesis 37:2b-13, 23-24 (AFBC 10/8/17)

We find four individuals in Genesis whom God used to forge Israel into a people—His people. We refer to them as our “patriarchs.” These men continue to be important to who we are and what we believe today. (*Deceased loved ones may be Patriarchs for us*)

First, we have Abraham, often called “the father of our faith.” Next comes Abraham and Sarah’s son, Isaac. Following Isaac is his trickster of a son, Jacob—whose life was transformed by the grace and God. He received a new name as a result of his change of heart. Jacob was honored to be called “Israel.”

Today, we begin a four-week look at one of Jacob’s sons, Joseph. The last 14 chapters of Genesis weave in and out of Joseph’s story—a story that’s occasionally interrupted by the actions of his dysfunctional family.

Any family that’s not living as God intends them to is dysfunctional to some degree, but I think we’ll recognize the extreme dysfunctionality in this family as Joseph’s brothers seize him, throw him into a cistern, and then sell him into slavery.

I’m calling today’s episode in Joseph’s life “Dreaming Dreams.” It will be followed by three other challenging times in his life, which I’m choosing to call “Suffering Setbacks”; “Waiting Wisely;” and “Restoring Relationships.”

I hope you’ll be here for the whole series. With that, let’s look at our text for today: **Genesis 37:2b-13, 23-24a:**

“Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. 4 When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

5 Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. 6 He said to them, "Listen to

this dream I had: 7 We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

8 His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. 9 Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." 10 When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" 11 His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

12 Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, 13 and 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. (But things did not go well for young Joseph, as we learn beginning with verse 23.)

23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing— 24 and they took him and threw him into the cistern...

Until this moment, Joseph had been on top of the world. He was the son of his father's old age--the favored one, the baby of the family, pampered and preferred above all the others. Remember the coat of many colors—that was Joseph's. None of the other children had one.

Maybe you know this child. Let's say, you're a teacher and you've had him in your classroom. You have our sympathies. I do hope you are not actually the parent of this child—if so, well...

At any rate, Joseph spent the first 16+ years of his life at the summit of favored-child status, but like Leonardo DiCaprio--extended as if flying from the bow of the Titanic--and shouting "I'm the king of the world"--like young Jack Dawson, Joseph was loving the cruise while never realizing that his ship would soon be taking on water!

It would be Joseph's own brothers who would see to it that his boat would not float much longer! Young Joseph was "living the dream" without realizing it would soon turn into a nightmare!

Do you ever dream? I've read that we all do; but do you remember your dreams? I don't remember dreams very often; and when I do, I usually wonder why I bothered. Honestly, they don't usually make much sense.

Joseph, on the other hand, not only remembered his dreams, he told them to anyone who would listen. One dream had him and his brothers out in a field harvesting grain. Remember?

His sheaf of grain stands up, and his brothers' sheaves all bow down before Joseph's sheaf. Don't you know they loved hearing Joseph tell about that dream!

In another dream, the sun and moon and eleven stars fall down before Joseph—hmmm: Dad, Mom, and eleven brothers—you can see why these dreams didn't go over well. I mean, why couldn't he just dream that he had forgotten to get dressed before going to school—did you ever have that one?--or dream that he was flying—you know, the kinds of dreams normal people have?!?

What's so fascinating, though, is that before we get to the end of Genesis, we learn that Joseph's dreams actually come true. He accomplishes great things. God uses his life in remarkable ways—indeed, as a ruler in Egypt who, as a result, is able to save his family from famine.

But Joseph wasn't ready for that yet—not anywhere close to ready...not yet. Joseph didn't understand this, of course. He was quite full of himself—very self-assured—and in no way ready to let God have His way in his life. So there would need to be a lot of growing up before his dreams could come true.

We have no way of knowing whether Joseph was aware that God was preparing him for something important. Do you think it ever crossed his mind to ask--say, when he was down in that rain pit, that cistern—did it occur to him to ask, "What are you up to God; what are you trying to teach me; what are you preparing me for?"

Do WE ever think to ask those questions? We may find ourselves down in the dark places of life. Perhaps God includes stories like

this in His Book so that we might raise the question—could any of these troubles, challenges, sadnesses be coming my way for a reason?!? Or at least ask this: what does God want to do in my life because of what I'm going through?

You know I like the now-defunct comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes. One day in the funny papers, young Calvin had a money-making idea. He turned a box upside down to make a stand. He writes some words on it and places it out by the street and waits for some customers to stop by. But no one comes.

Before long, Hobbes, Calvin's stuffed tiger, happens by... and asks, "How's business?" Calvin replies: "Terrible."

Hobbes looks at the box, notices the sign that explains what Calvin's trying to sell: "A swift kick in the butt - \$1.00." Hobbes sympathizes with Calvin's lack of business: "Boy, that's hard to believe," he says.

And that's all Calvin needs to hear to launch him into one of his tirades. He throws up his arms in exasperation, and complains vehemently: "I can't understand it. Everybody I know needs what I'm selling."

Joseph was destined for great things, but he had some weaknesses to overcome first. Maybe God knew that Joseph needed what Calvin was selling. Before his story was over, Joseph had received quite a few boots to his backside!

His father Jacob had placed him way up on a pedestal; but Joseph still craved the attention of his brothers, he pursued their acceptance and affection--but he did this in all the wrong ways: showing up where he was not invited, saying what nobody wanted to hear, and flaunting what no one else had.

Like that coat—especially that coat--that loud, multi-colored coat that just really got on His brothers' nerves. Joseph was the little brother from "you know where"—and the other brothers despised him.

It's noteworthy, I think, that the Hebrew word for "hate" occurs more in this chapter of the Bible, Genesis 37, than any other. And we're told here that even Joseph's father—Jacob--got tired of

hearing about his youngest child's dreams. He tried to tell his son to keep those dreams to himself—but he didn't listen.

Later, as you know, Joseph would become a hero among God's people. But for now, he still had a long, long way to go—and a whole lot to learn in order to be ready for God to use him.

That's a lesson most of us have to learn at some point—that whatever gifts and abilities we have are not for us alone. To be pleasing to God, and to experience any personal happiness and fulfillment, we have to be good stewards of our lives--our resources and abilities--so that the good of everyone is served—rather than pursuing only what we think is best for us.

When we understand this truth and live our lives accordingly, it brings people together and makes families and communities stronger. But the very same gifts and abilities--if used only for ourselves, exclusively for our own benefit—they will cause jealousy, discord, and division. These were hard lessons that Joseph had to learn. And, honestly, they're hard for us too.

So, on the way to learning these important life lessons, Joseph winds up in a pit--a cistern. This was simply a hole carved into the ground with a small opening at the top that gets wider underground—a shape which made it good for holding water--or people, for that matter—because once a person was in a cistern, there was no way to get out without someone providing some help from above. You couldn't just climb out on your own.

Of course, before long, Joseph's brothers helped him get out—but that was so they could sell him to some Ishmaelite slave traders who came by on their way to Egypt. They didn't know it at the time, of course—not the brothers, the traders or even Joseph--but this would be a huge turning point in God's plans for Joseph's life.

Think about this: his brothers did this to Joseph for all the wrong reasons—jealousy, hatred, greed. Their actions were inexcusable.

But there's this theme that runs all through Joseph's story—and what a remarkable story it is of one troubling situation after another—but this whole sordid story has a crucial underlying theme: that while others intended to do Joseph harm, God kept turning their actions into something good—for Joseph's life, and

eventually, even for the lives of these brothers who hated him so, and who were so intent on doing him harm.

Only God can do this kind of thing in our lives (bring good from bad). Does everything that happens happen for a reason? I hear that a lot, but I'm not always convinced it's true.

But I do believe that God can make a good reason for everything that happens to His children. God will cause things that He would not have chosen to put us through to still serve a useful purpose in our lives. You see the difference?

There are things that have happened in my life—and likely in yours too—that we wouldn't blame on God. We really don't believe that God chose these things for us—but once they've happened, we trusted that God would work—just as He promised us He would--to bring something good from the bad.

We do this with our own children. We would never touch their little hands to a hot stove to teach them that it burns, but after they've done that for themselves, we want to make sure they learn something from it.

Such a painful experience—for them and us—should serve a purpose. Otherwise, they'll just get burned again—right? Well, I believe God does something like this for us—just as He did with Joseph.

And let's give Joseph credit. As we've already noted, he had a lot to learn. He had a lot of growing up to do before God could use him as a leader in the Egyptian government, and then as the one who would save His people from starvation.

Along the way, though, Joseph goes through one troubling experience after another. But he keeps learning and growing and becoming a fit vessel that God would be able to use when the time was right.

As I reflect on what happened to Joseph on this occasion—and the other calamities that we'll consider over the next few Sundays—it would have been so easy for Joseph to make excuses, to become bitter, to give up.

If anyone ever had reason to blame his failures on others—say, that dysfunctional family of his, for example--Joseph did. But he didn't try to shift the blame.

Joseph's story teaches us that whatever negative experiences we have in life—family or otherwise—God enables us to rise above them! God can still use us. He can still make our lives count!

In one of Chuck Swindoll's books, he quotes these words from Hudson Taylor: "It does not matter how great the pressure is. What really matters is where the pressure lies—whether it comes *between* you and God, or whether it presses you nearer His heart." (Swindoll, *Grind*, p.99)

Where are the pressure points in your life right now? Are you allowing them to come between you and God, or between you and others?

Or, are you reaching out to God and embracing Him as the only One who can take that pressure and those problems, whatever they are, and use them to help you grow and mature and become better prepared for whatever God has in mind for your future?

There are always going to be difficulties, friends—as long as we live—there will be sadnesses and defeats, challenges and frustrations—and we have to decide what to do with them or, should I say, we must choose what we'll allow them to do to us.

God is with us when life is "all good." But, listen, He's just as much with us when we're down in the pit—where it may seem like there's no way out.

We can try many things in an effort to get out—things that are not really helpful--maybe even harmful things. But the truth is, we need help.

The only good way out is to reach up, trusting that there is help available from above. There's God's help—just as He has promised us. He alone can take those bad moments and turn them into something good. So, in every moment, trust Him!