

Chosen By God, Hated By Man

Genesis 37.2-11

The final section of Genesis, the *tôledôt* of Jacob, begins abruptly in Genesis 37 with the revelation of a dysfunctional family. Emotions run hot, and divisions run deep. There are hints of what is to come, and behind the scenes, the hand of God is guiding it all.

A Quick Overview of Genesis

- Gen 1-11: *Creation, Rebellion, and Redemption* (Adam to Babel)
- Gen 12-25: *God's Promise and the Journey of Faith* (Abraham)
- Gen 26-36: *Deception and Destiny* (the descendants of Abraham)
- Gen 37-50: *Integrity Under Fire* (Joseph, his brothers, and Egypt)

A Dreamer and a Dysfunctional Family (2-11)

- *Don't try this at home!* (the makings of domestic misery) (2-4)
- *I had a dream...* (some things are better left unsaid!) (5-11)

The moral: *God uses faithful people, despite the jealousy of others.*

Those who are faithful in little things, God will use in bigger things



Take your Bibles and turn to Genesis 37. Today we begin a series of messages going through the last 14 chapters of Genesis (chs. 37-50), best known for recounting the story of one of the great characters of the Bible, Joseph.

But before we start, let's take a quick look back. Two and a half years ago we began a journey through the book of Genesis, the foundation of human history, and the Bible. Understand Genesis, and human history and the Bible makes sense.

We've divided Genesis into four sections. Genesis 1-11 tells the story of creation, of Adam and Eve falling into sin, of the world becoming increasingly evil until God sent the flood. Noah found grace in God's eyes, and he and his family were saved in the ark, but after the flood, sin again infected the human race at the tower of Babel.

The second section of Genesis (chs. 12-25) tells of God's plan to rescue mankind. God calls a man named Abram to leave his home country and go to a land he does not know, and promises to make him a great nation, and that through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed. A miracle birth when Abraham is a hundred and Sarah his wife is 90 produces the chosen son, Isaac.

The third section of Genesis (chs. 26-36) is a succession of tragic events. Isaac and Jacob are in constant trouble, yet despite their difficulties, God's promise to make Abraham a great nation takes shape. Jacob has twelve sons, the foundation of a nation, but they are wild and unruly, and need refining to become the people of God.

That brings us to Genesis 37-50, the story of Joseph, who God uses to save his family from famine, and transform them into a cohesive unit that will become the nation of Israel. And that brings us to Genesis 37.2-11.

Genesis 37.2-11

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. 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. Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Please listen to this dream which I have had; for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, 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. Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." 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.

This morning we are stepping back in time almost 4000 years. Our destination is Hebron, a city in southern Israel known as 'the city of patriarchs.' You can still visit the ancient and historic 'Cave of the Patriarchs' (Machpelah; see Gen. 25.9; 35.27-29; 50.13) today. But we are going there because that is where Jacob lived with his sons.

A Dreamer and a Dysfunctional Family (2-11)

- *Don't try this at home!* (domestic misery) (2-4)

The story opens abruptly: *These are the records of the generations of Jacob.* We've seen this phrase nine times before in Genesis. It's the way the ancient writer signaled a new section of the narrative. He's going to tell us what happened to Jacob and his twelve sons.

I enjoy watching old episodes of the TV show Columbo. Peter Falk played a brilliant but bumbling detective who unraveled difficult murders. But the hallmark of the show was that it showed you the crime, but kept you wondering how Columbo would ever figure it out.

The biblical narrator masterfully lets us see what is going on in the story – the emotions and crimes and injustice, then slowly unravels the plot, so that in the end we see the hand of God that was guiding events all along.

The writer begins by focusing on one of Jacob's sons: *Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth.* Just a

teenager, Joseph was shepherding his father's flock with four of his older brothers, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, sons of two of Jacob's four wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. It isn't mentioned, but those who've read the story up to this point know that Jacob's wives didn't get along, and not surprisingly, neither did his sons. But it gets worse.

At the end of v2 we are told that Joseph *brought back a bad report about [his brothers] to [Jacob]*. Sounds like a bratty little brother, right? That may be partly true here – and Joseph's brothers obviously wouldn't appreciate him telling on them! But this incident shows that Joseph was faithful to his father. He would not hide evil. It wasn't a wise thing for him to do, but it shows his character.

The best-known part of the Joseph story is found in v3: *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*. Some translations read *a richly ornamental robe* or *a long robe with sleeves* (etc.). We don't know what it looked like, but we know what it stood for, and so did Joseph's brothers: *Joseph was daddy's favorite!*

As a result of Joseph telling on his brothers and his father's favoritism, his brothers *hated him* and couldn't even *speak to him on friendly terms!* The Hebrew can be translated, *they could not so much as greet him* (Waltke, p500). You've heard of *Everybody Loves Raymond?* This was *Everybody Hates Joseph!* If there is an opposite to domestic bliss, this is it! For those who know the patriarchal story to this point, it comes as no surprise. Jacob's family is a mess. And it's about to get worse.

- *I had a dream...* (some things better left unsaid; 5-11)

In vv5-11, Joseph has two dreams, which he unwisely tells to his brothers and family. The narrator knows, and so do we, that these dreams are from God and prophetic, but to Joseph's brothers, they sound like the arrogant and prideful imagination of a spoiled little brother.

In Joseph's first dream, he and his brothers were binding sheaves of grain, and his sheaf stood upright, while their sheaves gathered around and bowed to his! His brothers' response is not surprising: *they hated him even more* (8).

Joseph's second dream was similar: The sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him. No one could miss the meaning – and they didn't! His brothers were jealous of him (11a), and his father rebuked him: *Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?* (10b)

At the end of the narrative, the inspired writer drops in a statement we should not miss. In verse 11 we read this: *His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind*. Jacob didn't just view Joseph's dreams as childish imagination. In patriarchal times, God often revealed Himself through dreams and visions: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had all learned of God's program this way. God had shown Himself to Jacob in his dream of a stairway to heaven. Joseph's brothers were furious at him – they didn't see God's sovereign hand in play at all here. But Jacob – while he isn't sure what to make of it all, recognizes God is doing something. He takes the dream seriously, and wonders what it might mean.

The moral of the story: *God uses faithful people, despite the jealousy of others.*

In ancient Israel, when fathers read to their children from the Torah, every story had a lesson. And almost always, the lesson taught God's people something about Him. We have seen this all through Genesis, and it is true here.

Although Joseph is young, naïve, and even unwise, he is shown to be faithful. In a dysfunctional family, he stands out, and he is hated for it. God gives him two incendiary dreams, knowing they will infuriate his brothers, so that the contrast between them is heightened. Through this we learn that *God uses faithful people, despite the jealousy and hatred of others.*

The great missionary J. Hudson Taylor said, *A little thing is a little thing; but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing.* We all know the struggle with being faithful and obedient to God in our lives. Sometimes the little things are the hardest things. We'd never commit murder, but we might gossip. We wouldn't commit adultery, but we might lust in our hearts. We'd never steal anything, but we might fail to give to God and the poor.

On the other hand, we might never be a great evangelist, but we can share God's love with a friend. We might not become a missionary, but we could support one. What can you do – even something small, for the Lord? That's what today's ministry fair is all about!

What 'little things' will you be more faithful in this week?

Digging Deeper

1. Genesis 37.2 begins the *tôledôt* of Jacob – that Hebrew word is usually translated *these are the records of the generations of*, or *this is the account of*. It signals the beginning of an account of what happened to someone – in this case, what happened to Jacob’s family. How are we introduced to the main characters in this narrative in verses 2-4? What do we learn about them? How would you describe the family of Jacob?
2. At the end of Gen. 37.2, Joseph returns from the pasturing the flock with his brothers; the text says that he *brought back a bad report about them to their father*. This sounds like something a ‘tattletale’ would do – especially to those who take evil lightly! But could there be something about Joseph the narrator wants us to know? What does this show about Joseph’s faithfulness to his father? We don’t know what his brothers did, but knowing what they will do later (sell Joseph into slavery, then lie to their father and say he was killed), do you see how the narrator uses contrast to establish Joseph’s character?
3. A recurring theme in the story of Joseph is dreams. Dreams are sometimes analyzed today (dream therapy is a hot topic), but in Genesis they point to something else: God’s sovereign dealings in human events. The application from the account of Joseph’s dreams isn’t that our dreams all contain messages from God, of course! – but what does this narrative reveal about God? What is His purpose in giving such vivid and divisive dreams, which He *knows* will increase Joseph’s brothers’ hatred of him? Can you see the providential hand of God even in this?
4. The great missionary J. Hudson Taylor said, *A little thing is a little thing; but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing*. We all know the struggle with being faithful and obedient to God in our lives. Sometimes the little things are the hardest things; for example, we’d never commit murder, but we might gossip about someone! What ‘little things’ will you be more faithful in this week?