

Evil Cannot Stop God's Plan

Genesis 37.12-36

I hate horror movies. Something awful is about to happen, you know it, but you can't stop it. That's our story today: Joseph heads straight into a predictable disaster! He escapes death, but is sold into slavery. This leads to lies, and his father's grief. But God has a hand in it all.

Obedience sometimes leads to persecution (12-28)

- *Going the extra mile to obey (12-17)*
- *Hatred bears its awful fruit (18-28)*

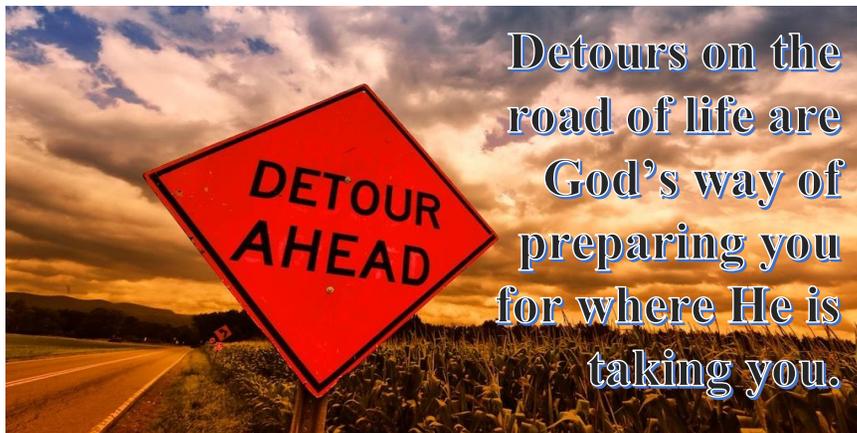
Sin begets sin: Brothers lie, Jacob mourns (29-35)

- *Sin never lies still...it always spreads its awful tentacles.*
- *Sin leads to death – or the experience of death.*

A Peek at the Future: God has a plan... (36)

Applications

- *Godly living leads to tests of faith (Js. 1.2-4; 1 Pet. 2.19-20)*
- *Holding a grudge leads to worse evil (Eph. 4.26; Js 1.19-20)*
- *We can't always see it, but God always has a hand in our lives.*



I hate detours. You're on your way to work, or home after a hard day; the last thing you want is any delays – then you see the signs. *Road work ahead, flagman ahead, slow down, detour.* If you drive I-35 or Loop 337, you know them well. Road construction always means detours. We know they're only temporary, and they don't stop you from getting where you're going, but they're annoying!

It's no different in the Christian life: If you've been walking on the 'road of faith' very long, you've encountered unexpected 'detours' – sometimes it seems like that's all you have! Detours can feel like they're taking you off the road of faith altogether. But what we often fail to recognize is that detours in life are signs that God is doing construction on us!

It may happen in the course of life: You lose a job, get sick, face a major decision, or just find yourself getting in a funk. But often it hits us in the gut. Someone we thought we could trust betrays us. Christians we counted on for support gossip about us. Even those closest to us may suddenly turn on us. Many of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

In our survey of the life of Joseph, today we come to a passage in which he has just this kind of experience. If you remember from last week in Genesis 37.2-11, the tension between Joseph and his brothers had reached a boiling point! First Joseph squealed on his brothers, then he had dreams of him ruling over them, and them bowing to him. When he told them about his dreams, they were furious. Soon, they got the chance to get rid of him.

Genesis 37.12-36

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. A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, "What are you looking for?" 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.

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!" 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. 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.

Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. He returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?" 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!" 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.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard.

Obedience sometimes leads to persecution (12-28)

- *Going the extra mile to obey (12-17)*

We all like to think that if you do something good, you will be rewarded. Sometimes in this life, that isn't true. This chapter in the story of Joseph's life begins like a horror movie. Some people like those, but not me; I hate them. Something awful is about to happen, everybody knows it, but you can't stop it.

There are three parties in this horrific scene: First, there are Joseph's ten older brothers. They dislike Joseph with a passion, and don't respect their father, who has treated Joseph with special favor and given him a prized cloak.

Second, there is Jacob, the father, who shows remarkable recklessness in sending Joseph to check on his brothers. He had done this before, and Joseph had ratted on them, and they hated him for it. Add to this his obnoxious dreams and his beautiful coat, and Jacob should've known he was sending Joseph into danger.

And then there is Joseph. Young and naïve, he obeys his father unquestionably. He is honest and faithful. His trip north took him some fifty miles, through Bethlehem, by Jerusalem, past Bethel, and when he got to Shechem, he couldn't find his brothers. A man tells him they've gone further north to Dothan, so on he goes.

If I took a vote this morning on who deserves to come out of this scene on top, we'd all chose Joseph. He's done exactly what his father told him to do. But his heavenly father has something far greater for him to do.

- *Hatred bears its awful fruit (18-28)*

When Joseph's brothers got up that day, none of them were planning to kill Joseph. But deep inside of them the hatred was simmering, just waiting for the opportunity to erupt. Then they saw Joseph coming.

The text indicates their plan to get rid of Joseph came together quickly. *Here comes this dreamer! ... Let's see what will become of his dreams!* (19a, 20b). One said, *I want to kill him!* Instead of objections, someone added, *Yeah, and we can throw him in one of the pits!* To this day there are large bottle shaped pits or cisterns all over Israel, hewn out of the rock for storing water. They are anywhere from 6 to 20 feet deep. Then another brother said, *We can say that a wild beast devoured him!*

It was a perfect storm. Sin had been festering in their hearts for weeks, maybe months. And now they could sin with impunity. No one would ever know. And that might have been the death of Joseph, but Reuben, the oldest, objected. *Sure, throw him in a pit, but don't shed blood!* And that's what they did: They took off his precious coat of many colors, and threw him into an empty cistern. He was helpless. Gen. 42.21 recounts how Joseph pled with them, but they ignored him, and sat down to eat (25).

While they are eating, they see a caravan of Ishmaelite traders in the distance. Judah, the most respected brother, suggests a new plan – a way to get rid of Joseph without killing him: They can sell him, and make some money in the deal! (27) Joseph is pulled out and sold into slavery.

Sin begets sin: Brothers lie, Jacob mourns (29-35)

- *Sin never lies still...it always spreads its awful tentacles.*

Ever noticed how one sin begets another sin? If you can stand to watch the news, you've seen it: A government official does something unethical, then goes on the news shows and lies about it...then if the evidence shows his or her guilt, they blame it on others. Sin never lies still... it always spreads its awful tentacles.

The brothers took Joseph's tunic, dipped it in blood, and brought it to Jacob: *We found this – check it out; is it the cloak you gave to Joseph?* Jacob immediately recognizes it, and jumps to the conclusion they wanted him to: *A wild beast has killed him!* (33) To their act of treachery they now add deceit. Sin is begetting sin.

- *Sin leads to death – or the experience of death.*

There's one other thing sin always begets – that is death, or at least the experience of death. Remember when God spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden, and after telling them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He said, *for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die* (Gen. 2.17). The day they ate, they began to die physically. But they experienced death immediately. Their relationship with God, and with each other, was broken. And that happens here.

The pall of death falls over the family. Jacob cannot be consoled. *The wages of sin is death*, the Bible says, and it always pays its wage.

A Peek at the Future: God has a plan... (36)

On the surface, this episode in Joseph's life story ends badly. Jacob is grieving, his brothers are living a lie, and Joseph is a slave. But there is one more verse.

Genesis is the first book of the Torah, and ancient Law of God read and studied by every Jew. Joseph was a hero in Israel's history. I like to imagine a Hebrew father reading this chapter to his young son, and after all the evil, lies, and sadness, he gets a twinkle in his eye, and he reads: *Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard.* (v36)

Many of you know the rest of the story, just like most of those Jewish children thousands of years ago did. It looks bad for Joseph and his family right now, but what they couldn't know at the time, we all know: God has a plan, and Joseph's brothers have helped make it happen.

Applications

Woven into each chapter of the biblical account are lessons for our lives...

- *Godly living leads to tests of faith (Js. 1.2-4; 1 Pet. 2.19-20)*

The first take-away from this chapter is that godly living does not mean an easy life; in fact, it leads to tests of our faith. James 1.2-4 says: *Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let*

endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The Apostle Peter wrote this: *For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.*

Don't live for God in order to get what you want out of your life; live for God so He can get what He wants out of your life!

- *Holding a grudge leads to worse evil (Eph. 4.26; Js 1.19-20)*

The second lesson comes from Joseph's brothers: They had a grudge against Joseph, and they let it fester until it led to sin. Being angry at someone is not a sin; we know that because Eph. 4.26 begins, *Be angry and do not sin*. It then ends, *Do not let the sun go down on your wrath*. In other words, *don't store it up!*

In his epistle, James reminds us that *the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God* (1.19-20). It not only hurts others, it hurts ourselves. It steals your joy in life. Holding a grudge is like punishing yourself for the wrongs of others toward you! It's like a cartoon of a man hitting himself over the head with a board. His friends ask him, "Why are you hitting yourself like that?!" He

replies, "I'm getting back at all the people who have treated me badly!"

I'll never forget a few years ago after the Charleston church shooting, members of the victims' families who tearfully faced their loved one's killer, and forgave him for his evil. Satan wanted to spread hatred, but they gave forgiveness instead.

- *We can't always see it, but God always has a hand in our lives.*

But the greatest lesson from Genesis 37 is this: *We can't always see it, but God always has a hand in our lives.*

Last week we remembered 9/11, a day Satan-inspired hatred took the lives of over 3000 people. Like many of you, I watched programs about that day, and listened to the reading of victims' names. After 9/11, some people were angry at God: *Where was He when those buildings came down?* Other saw His hand in the sacrificial giving and caring that followed. We may not always know why these 'detours' come in life, but we can know this: *God is working in your life*. It's 'under construction;' He has a plan for you.

Just as God had a plan to save His chosen people, He has a plan to save every one of us. Maybe God brought you here this morning for that very reason. This is the God who could take the brothers' hatred, and use it to bring something good. Centuries later, His Son Jesus Christ took the nails of the cross, and paid the price for our sins so we could be saved.

If you're looking for a relationship with the God who can take all the bad parts of your life and transform them into something good, He's waiting to embrace you right now.

Dear Lord, my life has had a lot of detours, and I've tried to make it on my own, but now I see that You have been trying to get my attention all along. This morning I want to tell you that I need you in my life. Thank you for loving me and sending your Son to save me. Amen.

Digging Deeper

1. In Genesis 37.2-11, the tension between Joseph and his brothers is unmistakable. Joseph told on his brothers, and shared dreams that portrayed him as ruling over them. Jacob exhibited lack of foresight often during his life, and does so now in vv.12-14; he should have known Joseph would be in danger from his brothers. Joseph is trustworthy, but glibly unaware of his situation. The escalation of his brothers' hatred is at a fever, and he walks right into their arms. Have you experienced dislike or rejection from those you thought were friends? Have you battled with anger toward those who have wronged you? What came of those situations?
2. Sin has a way of 'sneaking up' on us, if we just give it a chance. Sometimes, in the heat of a moment, we find ourselves capable of awful acts. Have you ever realized your own susceptibility to sin – for example, while driving? Holding a grudge – storing up anger (what Joseph's brothers did), is especially dangerous. Read Ephesians 4.26. Is anger a sin? What *does* this verse warn us against? What does James 1.19-20 advise concerning anger?
3. Focus on the motives and actions of Joseph's brothers in verses 18-28. What do they want to do at first? How are they planning to cover their sin? Reuben spares Joseph's life, but though he's

the oldest, he is not able to resolve the problem. What is the significance of them stripping off Joseph's cloak? To what motivation does Judah appeal for them to sell Joseph into slavery? What traits of sin are exhibited in this sad account?

4. The results of sin are never good. Two frequent consequences of sin are displayed in vv.29-35 – can you identify them? What do Joseph's brothers do? What does their father do?
5. The end of v.28 (*They brought him to Egypt*), and the historical note in v.36, show God's hand. One scholar writes, *Far from preventing Joseph's dream, the brothers actually became the agents in fulfilling it!* Read Psalm 37. Are you trusting in God, and waiting on Him in your life?