

I

HOPE FOR DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES (GENESIS 37:1–11)



Some towns and cities seem to be misnamed. My wife grew up in Mount Morris, Michigan—elevation: a whopping 774 feet. People wore T-shirts proudly proclaiming: “I climbed Mount Morris.” It is probably not the only misnamed place in America. Take Philadelphia, for example. It is a great city, famous as the home of the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, whose very name means “brotherly love.” Yet some of their sports fans don’t seem to have got the message. Where else would Santa Claus get booed and pelted with snowballs, as he once was at an Eagles football game? Not much brotherly love there, it seems.

A COMMUNITY OF NATIONS

Genesis 37 is not about brotherly love, either, but rather about brotherly hate. The theme word “brother” occurs no less than twenty-one times in this chapter, yet this is a story about brothers who cannot get along. Actually, brothers don’t get along well anywhere in Genesis. The theme of brother against brother started with Cain and Abel and continued down through the generations with

Isaac and Ishmael, followed by Jacob and Esau. Clearly, God did not choose Abraham's family because they were a better representative of traditional family values than their pagan neighbors—unless you count favoritism and murderous envy as the traditional values of this family.

The same pattern continues as we enter the story of the next generation in Genesis 37. In the introduction to a story, you expect to encounter the main characters and plot conflicts that will make up the body of the story. This introduction is no exception: here we meet the main characters—Joseph, his brothers, and their father Jacob—and the main complication of the plot, which is the fact that Joseph's brothers hate him.

Notice how that hostility immediately recalibrates the way that we think about this story, which we tend to assume is about Joseph and his coat of many colors. Of course, Joseph is central to what follows in many ways, even if his special coat is a rather incidental detail. Yet this is not simply Joseph's story, nor is God at work only in and through Joseph. This is actually a story about Joseph *and his brothers*, which makes perfect sense if you think about the original audience for whom Moses was writing in the wilderness. Joseph and his brothers were the founding fathers of the nation of Israel, a group of flawed and deeply sinful individuals whom God chose to make into a nation belonging to him. In fact, the story of Genesis 37–50 is not even just about Joseph and his brothers; it is a key part of the story about God's grand plan for Israel and what he is up to in the lives of his people as a whole.

Earlier in the book of Genesis, the Lord affirmed that from Jacob would come a community of nations (Gen. 35:11; cf. 28:3). Significantly, the Hebrew word used here is *qahal*, which literally means “congregation” or even “church,” since the Greek translation of the Old Testament most often renders it by *ekklesia*.¹ In contrast to the previous generations, when God sovereignly chose one member of the family to bear the line of promise instead

of the other (electing Isaac over Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau), this time God promised that he would choose all twelve of Jacob's sons and make them into a harmonious, worshipping community, the nation of Israel. Indeed, the initial readers of the story, the Israelites in the time of Moses, were a fulfillment of that promise. Moses wanted them to look back and remember that there were times when that promise of creating a harmoniously united, worshipping people looked every bit as impossible for God to fulfill as his earlier promise to give a child to an elderly and barren couple. Yet against all odds and against all of the evil schemes of sinful men, including those whom he had chosen, God would nonetheless achieve his goal of a united, worshipping community.

God's ultimate purpose was not just to create and choose the Israel of Moses' day to be his worshipping community, however. Rather, his goal was to create for himself a renewed and restored Israel, the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who would together form a united, worshipping family in Christ that would go beyond the physical descendants of Israel and encompass people from every nation and tribe on earth.

JOSEPH

First, though, we'll explore what God was up to with this particular dysfunctional family, starting with the least obviously messed-up member, Joseph. We might easily assume that because Joseph is the hero of the story, he must be perfect in everything that he does. Not so. The first appearance of a biblical character on the stage of a narrative is always important, and Joseph is no exception. We meet him at seventeen years of age, sent out into the fields to help his brothers with the sheep. The text says, "He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah" (Gen. 37:2), but this is actually as much a job description as it is

a reference to his age. He was sent along with his brothers to do all of the menial and unimportant jobs. Other biblical characters also spent time as shepherds, of course, notably Moses and David. But instead of receiving revelations from God while he was a shepherd, like Moses, or protecting his sheep from the lion and the bear, like David, what did Joseph do? He brought home a “bad report” of his brothers to his father (37:2).

In English, a “bad report” can be either true or false. In Hebrew, however, this particular phrase has the connotations of a false or malicious report.² The spies brought the same kind of “bad report” back to the people of Israel from the land of Canaan, telling them that it was not worth fighting for (Num. 13:32). In Proverbs 10:18, the word is translated “slander.” Joseph did not like his brothers, or perhaps he did not like being a servant to his brothers, and so he brought back a fabricated or exaggerated account to their father of their misdeeds. He played his own part in perpetuating the divisions in the household between the children of different mothers, a conflict highlighted by calling them “the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah” (37:2; cf. 29:31–30:24).

In addition, there is Joseph’s handling of his dreams. First, he saw himself harvesting the grain with his brothers, when suddenly their eleven sheaves of grain bowed down to his sheaf (Gen. 37:7). After that, he had another dream, in which the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him (37:9). Joseph already knew that his brothers hated him for his favored position. Yet when he recounted the dreams that declared that he was not only their father’s favorite, but apparently God’s chosen favorite as well, he seems to have been rubbing their noses in his exaltation. It is one thing, perhaps, for Joseph to tell them the first dream. Yet in the face of their bitter response to that dream, for Joseph then to turn around and recount to them the second dream suggests insensitivity on a massive scale.

I'm sure you've met people like that in your own experience—people who are in danger of being spoiled by too much success too young. It might be a freshman who becomes the starting quarterback of the football team or has the lead in the play, a young professional who rapidly makes a killing on Wall Street, or even a young preacher whose first church grows and blossoms rapidly. As a result of that quick success, they become full of themselves. They may have a great deal of talent, but that talent is in danger of going to waste or of corrupting them, unless something profound happens to turn them around. Joseph desperately needed help.

JACOB

Then there is Jacob's dysfunction as the father of the family. The special coat was not the first indicator of Jacob's preference for Joseph. When Jacob returned to the Promised Land after his sojourn in Paddan-aram and had to face Esau, he heard that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men, and he was terrified that Esau was planning a massacre. For that reason, young Joseph and his mother Rachel were safely tucked away at the back of the caravan, while his older brothers and their mothers were left exposed at the front (Gen. 33:2). How do you think it made the brothers feel to know that their father regarded them as expendable?

That brings us to Joseph's richly ornamented coat (Gen. 37:3). It was not necessarily a coat of many colors, as tradition has it, following the Greek translation; however, in the only other place where this phrase occurs in the Bible, it refers to a royal garment (2 Sam. 13:18). Whatever precise kind of robe it was, it was certainly not the kind of clothing you would wear if you were planning to work. That makes it striking that we hear about this robe *after* Joseph has brought the bad report to his father about his brothers.

There is a definite sequence here: Joseph goes to serve and work under his brothers while they are shepherding; he brings home a bad report about them; his father rewards him with a splendid coat. The next time the brothers go out shepherding, later in the chapter, Joseph is no longer working with them. Presumably, he's back home in his fancy coat, with his feet up on the couch, while his brothers are out in the fields. No wonder his brothers hated him!

Of course, Jacob was repeating the toxic family pattern from his own youth. It is tragically true that we often perpetuate the family dysfunction that we saw around us as children. In Jacob's childhood family, his father Isaac preferred Esau, while Jacob was his mother's favorite; now he turned around and did the same thing to his own children. How tragic to pass that dysfunction on to the next generation! Yet there was probably also a spiritual dimension to Jacob's preference for Joseph. In verse 3, the narrator tells us that Jacob loved Joseph because he was "the son of his old age." We might rather have expected to hear that Jacob loved Joseph because he was the son of his favorite wife, Rachel, which is certainly also true. But calling Joseph "the son of his old age" links him with Isaac, the child that Sarah bore to Abraham in his old age: the same word is used of Isaac in Genesis 21:2. This suggests that Jacob loved Joseph more than his brothers because he believed that he would be the child that God had promised, the one who would carry on the promised line of the Messiah, the promised seed of the woman of Genesis 3:15.

That expectation was probably deepened and furthered by Joseph's dreams that his siblings and parents would come and bow down to him. Surely here was confirmation from God that Joseph was indeed the chosen one. The image of a father and mother bowing before their own child is outrageous in a patriarchal society, so Jacob rebuked Joseph, yet at the same time he "kept the saying in mind" (Gen. 37:11). This is the same response that Mary had to Jesus' childhood adventure with the teachers in the

temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:51). Both parents wondered and pondered what these things might mean about their special child.

THE BROTHERS

There was no wondering and pondering on the part of Joseph's brothers. They were united in hating the dreamer. They already hated him so much after he received his coat that they couldn't even greet him: literally, the text says, "They couldn't say '*Shalom*' to him" (Gen. 37:4). That was before the dreams started. After the dreams, they hated him all the more (37:8). Don't forget that these were dangerous men, too. Reuben had already shown his disregard for both morality and the family structure by sleeping with his father's concubine, Bilhah, an act that had more to do with rebellion than with lust (35:22). Simeon and Levi had massacred an unsuspecting town back in chapter 34, while Jacob did nothing to stop them. There is an ominous atmosphere in this story, even before we get to the events later in the chapter. This is a family desperately in need of divine intervention.

BUT GOD . . .

But don't forget about God. Even though the Lord's name is not mentioned in the passage, that doesn't mean that he is not active. Throughout the Joseph narrative, God is visible primarily through his acts of providence, working all of the details of the story together to bring about his own purposes in the lives of each of the characters. Here in this passage, God's most obvious action is sending Joseph the dreams. What was God thinking? Why did he toss a lighted match into such a powder keg of family dysfunction, well knowing the pain, heartache, and suffering that would

inevitably result? You don't have to be an omniscient deity to see where this story is likely to end up!

Yet it is precisely because he is an omniscient and sovereign deity that God can do this. He knew exactly how Joseph would respond to the dreams, as well as exactly how Jacob and the brothers would respond. None of the circumstances of their lives were outside God's sovereign control for a microsecond. He knew what would happen and how he would use every scrap of the pain, suffering, and dysfunction to shape the individual lives of the members of this family into something noble and great, and thus to accomplish his own redemptive purposes, both for this family and, through them, for the entire world. There was nothing careless about God sending Joseph the dreams: it was all part of his perfect plan to bring into being his chosen, united, worshipping community.

Yet it is worth noting that God's redemptive ways are not ours. Which of us would choose to grow up in a dysfunctional family that would explode in violent and traumatic sin? Which of us would choose to be sold as a slave and carried into an alien culture? The answer is clearly, "No one." Yet that was God's perfect plan for Joseph. In our own lives, we quickly assume that wherever terrible abuse takes place, or relationships tragically fall apart, or traumatic sin blights our lives, that God must surely be absent. Nothing could be further from the truth. Certainly, God hates sin and abuse. He neither causes sin nor condones it. We are responsible for our own sin, which flows from our own wicked hearts (James 1:13–14). Yet God's redemptive pathways do not lead us around conflict, abuse, divorce, and broken families, or even away from the expression and outworking of our own sinful natures. Instead, his perfect plan for our lives often takes us right through the eye of the storm, where our dysfunction and sin, along with that of our families and friends, is on full and tragic display, so that the gospel of his powerful grace and sovereign mercy can be equally powerfully on display.

GOD'S TRAINING PROGRAM OF SUFFERING

What was God up to in all of this? In the first place, there was a work he needed to do in Joseph's heart. Joseph was not yet ready to be a leader. He was a brash, overconfident, self-centered young man at this stage, and he needed to be prepared in God's classic school of church leadership, which involved a lengthy period of cooling his heels on the sidelines, waiting for what God had in store for him. Joseph would be prepared through trials, temptations, and suffering until God decided he was ready to step onto the stage in his service. The path of spiritual growth for Joseph involved abuse and mistreatment, separation from home and family, having his character dragged through the mud, and finally being neglected and forgotten for years by the very people he had helped. But this training process was necessary to make him into the person God was calling him to be. It was precisely these trials and difficulties that would show Joseph his weakness as well as his strength, and cast him back repeatedly on his need to rely on God. These were lessons that he could never learn while sitting at home comfortably in his father's house, dressed in his fancy coat.

Yet, at the same time, God also gave Joseph dreams at the outset of his difficult journey. The dreams were the trigger that launched his brothers' hatred into action, but they were also given to Joseph to build in him a solid hope in God's promise. Joseph would later have to return to those dreams time and time again, trusting that the God who gave them to him would in due time fulfill them, no matter how unlikely that might have seemed.

Perhaps you are in this phase of God's training program right now. You feel like your life is on hold—or worse, that God has completely forgotten about you. Maybe your gifts have not been recognized, or there is no opportunity for you to use them right now; perhaps you have been misunderstood and mistreated by the church community, and

you wonder if God will ever open a door for you to serve in a meaningful way. Perhaps you are seeing your whole life explode around you right now in a catastrophic maelstrom of sin, whether your own or that of others. Perhaps you have personally experienced abuse from your own family or from authority figures around you, even from within the church.

How should you respond to this period of life? You don't have personal dreams like Joseph to fall back on, explaining God's plan for your life. But you have something better: you have the solid promises of God that, having begun a good work in you, he will bring it to completion (Phil. 1:6). It may be that this period of painful training will equip you to serve God more fully further down the road. In other cases, it may not be so easy to see the plan in what God is doing. Yet we know that he is always at work and that he will bring that work to completion on the day of Christ Jesus. During the dark days of trial and suffering, therefore, hold on to God's assurance that he will use your life in the way that he sees fit to bring glory to himself, and that that path will also be good for you. God's training route for you may take you along a path that you would never have chosen for yourself, a path that will wind through the valley of deep shadow and take you into battles from which you will emerge with wounds whose depth only you and he know. Yet he will nonetheless be with you every step of the way, as he has promised, shaping you for greatness in his sight through each of those difficult and painful experiences.

GOD'S TRAINING PROGRAM OF SIN

Joseph's brothers were not ready for leadership over God's people yet, either. Their training ground would be different from Joseph's, however. Joseph was prepared through the school of hard knocks and difficult provi-

dences, in which he would suffer a wide variety of abuse and mistreatment. He would learn by being sinned against. His brothers, meanwhile, would suffer none of these things. Their schooling involved a double major in the departments of sin and repentance. They would learn about their own depravity by bitter experience. Would the brothers have imagined that they could stoop to the depths of contemplating the murder of their own brother and then selling him as a slave? Certainly they hated him, but enough to do something like that? After they tossed Joseph into a pit, they were not immediately wracked with remorse; instead, they casually sat down to eat a meal together (Gen. 37:25) while their brother's life hung by a thread. Then they callously deceived their father into thinking that his beloved son had been killed and eaten by a wild animal (37:31–33).

Out of all of the brothers, Judah would have a particularly intense schooling in the training program of sin and repentance. Would Judah have thought that he could casually pursue a roadside prostitute and then hypocritically insist that if his daughter-in-law had been promiscuous, she must die (Gen. 38:24)? As we track Judah's story, we'll see him change and his heart soften precisely through the experience of his own sin and its exposure, to the point where he was finally ready to give up his own life, rather than see his brother Benjamin imprisoned and his father's heart broken a second time. The experience of his own sin and its aftermath transformed Judah and, through the work of God, made him into a different person.

Maybe this is where you find yourself right now: in the pit of seeing your own sinfulness clearly, perhaps for the first time. You may find it profoundly puzzling that God does not protect you more from sin. After all, you pray repeatedly, "Lead me not into temptation," yet temptation seems to come seeking you anyway, and you fall repeatedly into the same patterns of disobedience. Perhaps these patterns of sin are secret, known only to yourself. Or perhaps they are public knowledge, so that everyone in your

community knows what a great sinner you are. Possibly you sinned under great provocation after resisting for a long time. Or perhaps you gave in easily, in spite of all of the blessings and comforts that God had showered upon you. Either way, God is as completely sovereign over your sin as he is over your circumstances. You cannot even sin outside the will of God. So what is God doing when he turns you over to your own sin in this way? Why doesn't God reach down and stop you in time?

The answer is that our sin is also part of God's training program for us. As we said earlier, God is not the author of our sin; it comes readily enough from us. All he has to do is leave us to ourselves, and we will give in to temptation in whatever shape or form it comes. That is why there is so much sin around us and within our own hearts. Is the church today any better than the original Israel, the dysfunctional family of twelve brothers who couldn't get along? We each shame the name of Christ daily through our anger, our malicious words and actions, our pride, our gossip, our rumor spreading designed to bring others down and exalt ourselves. It happens in our families, our communities, and in our churches. By the grace and gift of God, I happen to be a hard-working person who can measure up to a certain standard of outward righteousness. Yet how quickly I confuse that gift of God with something I do myself, and imagine that the good things that I do come from within me. That attitude makes me a proud and judgmental person with little compassion for those who are weak and struggling. It is easy for me to mock and condemn others for their weaknesses and failures. It is a way of pumping myself up and trying to show God that I ought to be the favorite of his children because of how hard I work for him. In short, it is sin, a self-glorifying heart attitude that easily emerges in ungracious words toward others.

Yet God has good purposes even for my sin. God can use my inability to control my tongue to expose my arrogance

and to humble me. In this way, I gain a greater appreciation of grace than I would have if God sovereignly enabled me to restrain my sinful heart. Our sin repeatedly chastens us and shows us that God did not choose us because of what wonderful people we are. Far from it, we are profoundly broken and rebellious people, who left to ourselves cannot remain faithful to him for an instant. But our God is a great savior for great sinners, like Joseph's brothers and like us, a God who revels in rescuing and redeeming hopeless cases and lost causes and turning them into a united community who together worship him and sing of his grace, not of their own goodness.

JACOB

Finally, God's work in Jacob was not complete yet. This may seem strange and discouraging to us, as Jacob was already well on his way to becoming an old man. He had been in God's training school of suffering for many years; his own sin had repeatedly been exposed, and he had been brought to repentance many times. Although he had learned many lessons in God's school, he had still made only small beginnings on the road to righteousness. One moment he was the old Jacob, full of self-centeredness, focused entirely on his own needs and desires, while the next he was the Israel of God, the man who clings to God and trusts him for blessing in spite of all his circumstances. Even after all these years of learning, he still had further to go, a few more rounds in the training ring where he would learn once again that God's providence can be trusted to fulfill what he has promised.

Maybe this is where you are today: puzzled by the slowness of your spiritual growth. You thought that you should have arrived at a greater degree of holiness by now. At this stage in your life, you should have a more stable trust in Christ and a greater measure of personal holiness.

What is God up to in your life? He is showing you that you will never outgrow your need of his grace and power. You will need his strength every bit as much when you are eighty-five as when you are five, fifteen, or forty-five. As long as you live in this world, you will experience the fact that you are both saint and sinner. You are as justified today as you ever will be by Christ's righteousness, and yet in some ways you may be as far from living out the full implications of that reality as you ever have been.

JESUS

We will all struggle with that reality until Christ returns. For this narrative is not merely about what God is up to in the lives of Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers. It is about what God is doing in redeeming a people for himself in Christ. In the same way, your story is part of that larger story of God's redeeming purpose. The dreams in this chapter are too big to be merely about Joseph. To be sure, they foreshadow later events, when Joseph's brothers will come down to Egypt and bow down to him. Yet when Jacob blesses his sons in Genesis 49, he tells Judah, not Joseph, that his father's sons will bow down before him. It is from the tribe of Judah that the one will come of whom the promise in Genesis 3 speaks. Joseph's life foreshadows Christ's life in profound ways, but he is not the Christ himself. The promised Christ will be the son of Judah's line, yet he will be far greater even than Judah: he is God himself, the one before whom the sun, the moon, and the stars themselves truly bow.

Yet this glorious Messiah, the God-man Jesus Christ, willingly humbled himself and entered the school of suffering and temptation. He set aside the deserved robe of honor and the safe place at his Father's side as the chosen favorite. The firstborn of all creation left behind his glory and the constant praise of angels and archangels, and

exposed himself to a world that would reject him, scorn him, hate him, abuse him, and ultimately kill him. During his earthly ministry, his own brothers did not believe in him (John 7:5). How painful that must have been—yet he never responded with hatred in return. He never built himself up at the expense of others or mocked weak and broken sinners. He could justly have been filled with pride, impatient with foolish and sinful people, but instead he was humble and gentle, kind and compassionate to those weighed down by their own sin. We quickly judge and condemn anyone who doesn't measure up to our standards of righteousness, but Jesus was patient and long-suffering with sinners, even those who nailed him to the cross.

What was the Father thinking, willingly sending his beloved Son into such a powder keg of fallen and sinful humanity, giving him a physical body that could be tortured and wounded? He was thinking of you and me, of the church that he was creating and calling into existence—a new, united, worshipping community of redeemed sinners. To reach that goal, Jesus took upon himself the punishment that all of your sin deserves, so that now the discovery of your sin need not destroy you, but instead leads you to marvel afresh at the wonder of God's grace. To accomplish that purpose, Jesus endured the heavenly Father's rejection on the cross, where all of God's perfect and pure hatred of sin was poured out on his head. He was forsaken and abandoned by his own Father, placed under a curse, so that we might be included forever in the Father's blessing.

As a result, your standing before God does not depend upon your best efforts to love your brothers and sisters, whether in your literal family or in the church. Ask God to help you respond to his marvelous grace by showing a similar grace to those around you. However, never forget that though you are called to try hard, you will often fail in these things, putting others down and puffing yourself up. You will continue to sin against your siblings and friends, just as they will sin against you. Look afresh, therefore, to

Jesus' perfect obedience, and praise him that in Christ the gospel provides marvelous hope and rest for the most broken of individuals and the most dysfunctional of families.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What kind of community did God promise to create through the family of Abraham?
2. How did each member of Joseph's family (Joseph, Jacob, and the brothers) undermine community and contribute to the dysfunction of the family?
3. How have you felt broken community in either your family or your church? What did you contribute to the dysfunction?
4. How did God act providentially in the circumstances that led to the brothers selling Joseph? Has God brought healing through upheaval in any of your relationships?
5. In what ways do you identify with Joseph's suffering, the brothers' sin, and Jacob's slow spiritual growth? What do these experiences reveal about your own heart?
6. How does the perfect life and sin-bearing suffering of Jesus overcome our disunity? In what specific ways could the good news of Jesus' brotherly embrace transform relationships in your immediate and church family?