

# GOD'S WORK IN THE MESS

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 37:1-11  
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*Genesis 37:1-11*

“Up and to the right.” Are you familiar with this phrase? I know those of you who are engineers are. It’s a reference to the graph of a growth curve. As time goes on, things just keep on getting better.

This is what many of us want out of our lives. Particularly when we’re young, we are often taught to expect this out of life. I’ve had this feeling in a particularly strong way at specific points of my life. I remember feeling it when I graduated high school, when I finished college, and when I got married. I thought, now my life would begin.

I even remember feeling that way about a year ago as the year 2020 began. I was coming off several challenges—health and personal. I remember feeling that 2020 was going to be the year where things would start to get better.

That didn’t exactly happen. Not when I graduated high school. Not when I graduated from college. Not when I got married, and certainly not in the year 2020.

After a year like last year, things can only improve, right? Isn’t that what most of us are hoping for in 2021? That after the many traumas of 2020, our lives will start going up and to the right?

With a new year, we’re kicking off a new preaching series. We’ll begin today, take a break for the season of Lent, and then complete this series after Easter. All told this series will be 15 weeks. Our text will be the last third of the book of Genesis from chapters 37 through 50.

Our text is one of the richest narratives of a single person in the whole Bible. It’s a fascinating drama of family, failure, success, forgiveness, and salvation. This is the story of Joseph.

The story of Joseph is part of a much larger story throughout Genesis. In Genesis 12:1, God appeared to Abraham and said this, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” God made three promises to

Abraham: a nation would come from him; that nation would be blessed; that nation would bless the other nations of the world.

If you skip forward to the end of Genesis, you will find all of these promises fulfilled. The twelve sons of Jacob are the tribes of the nation. They are blessed by prosperity, unity, and influence. And through Joseph, they will have managed to save the nation of Egypt and most of the known world.

If we expect God’s promises to be fulfilled through a straight line that goes up and to the right from Abraham to Joseph, we will be disappointed. Instead, we are going to see a horribly dysfunctional family, brutal international powers, a devastating natural crisis, racial injustice, murder, sex, jealousy, anger, and spite. But out of that maelstrom of human experience, we will see God’s promises fulfilled.

I have to admit how much I love the story of Joseph. The Andrew Lloyd Webber musical version of this story was a huge part of my life growing up. I saw that show in person over ten times during my childhood. My family and I listened to the record version of the soundtrack regularly. I can still hear the place on the record that always skipped.

This story is of a boy dreamer who literally hit rock bottom but saw God redeem him and use his life to bless others reverberated around our house growing up.

As we begin this story of Joseph, my prayer is that we will see how God can work in the midst of a mess. We’re coming out of a difficult year. Who knows what this new year will bring? We’re hoping for more stability, but we don’t really know.

What we do know is that God is at work. We also know that the fulfillment of God’s promises often happens even amidst the worst possible kind of mess.

This morning, we’ll be looking at Genesis 37:1-11 as the introduction to the story of Joseph. First, we’ll think a bit more about what kind of a story this is as a whole.

Then we'll be introduced to a teenager named Joseph. Finally, we'll hear about his dreams and what God has planned for him.

## What kind of story is this?

The entire book of Genesis is structured around ten divisions. Each of those divisions begins with the same phrase: the Hebrew word *"toledot"*. The ESV translates the first one in Genesis 2:4 as "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth." After that we have the generations of Adam, of Noah, Isaac, Esau, and more.

The story we're starting today begins here:

### Genesis 37:1-2a:

**Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. 2 These are the generations of Jacob.**

This section is the tenth and last of the divisions in Genesis. We've called this series, "The Story of Joseph." As you can tell from the first few words, this is more than a story about Joseph. The text itself claims that this is the story of Jacob, who is Joseph's father.

Jacob is sometimes called Israel. Jacob has twelve sons, and he is the father of the people of God. While Joseph is the main character in most of the next fourteen chapters, the story is really about Jacob and Israel and God's plans for the world.

Our story will have Joseph sold into slavery to Egypt by his brothers. He will be falsely accused of sexual assault and thrown into prison. In prison, he will become an interpreter of dreams. Then, when the king of Egypt has a troubling dream, Joseph will be asked to explain it. Because that dream predicts seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine, Pharaoh will ask Joseph to manage the prosperity to prepare for the famine.

When the famine strikes, Joseph's brothers will travel to buy food from him. After a bit of back and forth, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. Then they all join him in Egypt, and Pharaoh gives them a region to live in. In the end, Joseph saves his family, the nation of Egypt, and most of the known world.

It's a stunning story and a literary masterpiece. I've seen at least four different structures of parallel thought and narrative technique. There are repeated

phrases, motifs and themes. Allusions to the past and foreshadowing of the future. Character development. Disappointment and a happy ending. This story has it all.

One thing that amazes me the most is how relatable this story is. This story happened almost four thousand years ago. Four millennia! Think about how much the world has changed in the last forty years. Now multiply that by 100. How can any of it make sense to us?

Yet, every interaction in this story rings true for us. Brothers. Husbands. Fathers. Bosses. Sexual temptation. Power. Loneliness. Revenge. Redemption. Forgiveness. This is our world. Joseph lives in our world.

It's a story about family. We'll see jealous siblings, bad fathers, favoritism, and anger. We'll see marital infidelity, deceit, and power plays. If you think your family is a mess, wait until you meet the characters in this story.

It's a story of personalities. Two of the twelve sons, Joseph and Judah, are at the center of the story. Joseph is the teacher's pet. He does everything right. Judah is the rebel who makes every mistake possible. At the beginning of the story, neither of them is where they need to be. Each has to go through their own journey in order to be used by God. The teacher's pet and the screw-up. Both of them need to be changed before God can use them.

It's a story of setbacks. We expect to see God's promises fulfilled, but at every turn, something happens which threatens that fulfillment. In the middle of the story, it seems like nothing can possibly work out. Somehow by the end, all of those setbacks have been overcome.

It's a story of betrayal, faithfulness, surprises, leadership, and suffering.

All in all, this is a story about transformation. Through all of these dynamics, we will watch the people involved be changed by God. As we walk through this story, look for transformation.

Joseph's family is transformed. His relationships are transformed. The world around him is transformed. In the end, the story of Jacob and his children transforms history so that even now, thousands of years later, we are still affected by it. Joseph's story shows us that God's promises will be fulfilled, but that fulfillment usually goes through transformation.

Just before Christmas, we finished a series in the book of 1 Peter. One of the most prominent themes of that book was how God uses suffering to transform his people. We saw personal suffering, instructions to marriages, employment, government, culture, and faith. The story of Joseph will touch on many of those same topics.

Where 1 Peter addressed those issues in abstract form, we'll see them played out in a narrative in this story of Joseph. We'll see actual people working through all these issues, and we'll see God transform them through their suffering.

This is what we can look for in our own lives. Look for how God uses our circumstances to transform us. As Peter puts it, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time, he may exalt you" (1 Peter 5:6).

We're ready to meet our main character. Let's see how his story reveals the work of God.

## What kind of a boy is Joseph?

### Genesis 37:2b-4:

**Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.**

Our main character is a teenaged boy of seventeen years old. He's the eleventh son of twelve. His father has had children with two wives and two concubines. Those four women have an incredible amount of drama just between them—jealousy, anger, spite, and revenge. And that's just between the mothers. Imagine what the dynamic must be like among the sons.

When the story opens, we are told, "he was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah." That probably means he was a servant, a helper. The sons of Bilhah and Zilpah would have been Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. So he's going along with his older brothers as a servant to them. He's doing their dirty work.

Next, we read Joseph "brought a bad report of them" to their father. Let's think about this. Sibling dynamics haven't changed in 4000 years. If your younger sibling brings a bad report about you to your father, how do you feel? Not great.

Then we hear that "Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons." So we have multiple women competing with each other. We have a younger brother tattletale, and now we add favoritism to the mix.

The irony is that Jacob of all people should understand how dangerous favoritism can be in a family. Jacob's dad preferred his brother Esau. So his mom cooked up a scheme for him to trick his father and steal the blessing. You'd think Jacob would work extra hard to be fair after all that. But he doesn't.

Finally, not only is Joseph his father's favorite, but his father gives him a huge promotion. We are told that "he made him a robe of many colors." Scholars aren't sure what the word used here means. It might mean "multi-colored" or refer to ornate decorations or simply a particular style. Most of them agree on what it represents: privilege and authority. This robe is a robe of royalty. Jacob isn't just expressing his favoritism. He's elevating Joseph above the other brothers. He's moving him up to the top of the line.

Once again, that is simply not done in the ancient near East. Jacob moved himself over his brother Esau, but they were twins. Now Jacob moves Joseph up ten spots to be the number one son. Joseph goes from being "a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah" to the prime spot.

This situation is a mess. Jacob's family was a disaster. We're told that his brothers "hated him and could not speak peacefully to him." They couldn't even be around him!

Remember that as we're reading through Genesis, we are looking for God to fulfill that original promise to Abraham. We're looking for a nation who is blessed who can be a blessing to the world around them.

What we're starting with here is nowhere close to that.

That ought to be very comforting to us. I think that means as we look at our own lives, we can expect things to look messy.

Some of you have challenging family situations. You have parents who are challenging. You have siblings who aren't speaking to you. You have children who have rejected you. Your marriage is struggling or dissolved. Or you're alone, and you desperately want someone to share your life with.

But family isn't the only way our lives are messy. Maybe you don't have the job you want. Maybe you're anxious or depressed. Perhaps you have a secret that is eating you inside, and you don't know who to tell.

It's okay to be a mess. Whatever is going on, it's okay. This is one of the most important things I had to learn as a pastor. Sometimes in the Christian community, we get uncomfortable when things get really messy. When someone shares it, we try to talk them out of it or convince them it's not that bad or offer simple platitudes.

The irony is that as Christians, we should be more comfortable with messy situations than anyone. Things often have to get messy for transformation to happen. Almost every story in the Old Testament involves some kind of crisis or trauma. All of the mess actually serves to highlight the work of God.

Joseph's story starts out incredibly messy. But in our next scene, God gives Joseph a hint of what's to come.

## What kind of a future?

Into the complicated mess of Joseph's life come dreams which only make things messier.

### Genesis 37:5-11:

**Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. 6 He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: 7 Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." 8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.**

**9 Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." 10 But when he told it to his father and**

**to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" 11 And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.**

We are told of two dreams whose meaning seems obvious. Hebrew literature is very fond of parallelism and repetition. When something is repeated like this, the second version usually intensifies the first statement by deepening it or taking it one step farther.

We see that here. The first dream use farming images: sheaves of wheat. Only Joseph's brothers are involved. The second dream uses greater images: celestial bodies of the sun, moon, and stars. And in the second dream, Joseph's parents are included as well.

The first dream gets Joseph in trouble with his brothers. They ask, "are you indeed to rule over us?" Twice we are told that they hate him "even more."

The Hebrew word for "even more" is *yasaf*. It's the same root word as Joseph's name, which means "he increases". Over the course of the story, Joseph will increase, but his brothers' hatred increases first.

Then he has a "another" dream using the same word, *yasaf*. The second dream not only gets him in trouble with his brothers, now his father is mad at him too. We are told that his father rebuked him and asked the same incredulous question that his brothers asked, "Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow before you?"

In the ancient world, dreams like this were widely recognized as coming from God. They were understood to be prophetic. Here is Joseph in the middle of a completely dysfunctional family situation. His brothers hate him. His father is upset at him. He's got a fancy coat, but not much else.

Yet there are these promises from God. Glimpses of the future which don't really seem to fit the current situation. What does Joseph do with them? What do we do with the promises of God when the world around us seems to make it impossible for them ever to be fulfilled.

We do what Joseph did. We hold onto God's promises.

Joseph inherited God's promise to be the family through whom blessing would come to the world. Yet here at the beginning of his story, that seems completely impossible.

Imagine what Joseph's dreams must have meant to him over the next several years of his life when he's a slave; when he's a prisoner; when he's been elevated to Pharaoh's second-in-charge, but had no idea how his family was doing. Imagine how he must have thought back to those dreams.

I want to invite you to think about the promises of God to you. Not many of us have had specific promises through dreams like Joseph has, though some of you may have. But we have promises for God to care for us, seek our good, redeem our pain. Some of you have a sense of God's calling on you for a certain kind of ministry.

Do you ever have a really vivid dream, but then you wake up, and you can't remember it? You know it was interesting or unique or moved you in some way. But it's buried, and you can't remember what it was about.

This is what sometimes happens to the promises of God in our lives. Our circumstances cloud them. We look around, and it seems like there is no way God can act in the midst of what's going on. So those promises fade. Worry and anxiety and stress pile on top of them so that we know they are there, but we just can't remember them.

I'd like you to take a moment now to close your eyes and ask God to remind you of his promises. Maybe it's something specific. Maybe it's a Scripture passage. Maybe it's a general truth. Ask the Spirit to bring it to mind. Hold onto it. Hold onto the promise of God.

We've seen how this story isn't only about Joseph—it's about Jacob and his family as well. A few weeks ago, as we celebrated Christmas, we talked about another Joseph, whose father was also named Jacob. That Joseph became the earthly father to a little baby who would change the world. The baby's name was Jesus.

God promised that Jesus would change the world forever. But just like Joseph, his story didn't go up and to the right. Instead, his story followed the same trajectory as Joseph. He had to suffer before seeing the promise of

God fulfilled. But at the end of his story, he will save the world. He will heal families, bridge cultures, transform individuals, and fulfill God's plan for creation.

## Conclusion

We're kicking off a new year, and we're starting a new sermon series. We expect a lot to change this year: a new president, the roll-out of a COVID vaccine, gathering together again, and our lives potentially looking more like they looked before this pandemic.

We have to remember that there is no "going back to normal." Time only moves forward. What will come of this year will be something new, not a return to the way things used to be.

For those of us who know Jesus, we pattern our lives after the gospel. We know that God's promises are sure, but we also know that the road to fulfilling them is never a straight line. There are twists and turns. There are hills and valleys.

We live in a messy world. A few weeks ago, we celebrated God becoming man in the midst of this mess. Today we're beginning a similar story where God works in the midst of the mess.

I don't know what kind of mess is going on in your life, but nothing can interfere with the promises of God. Nothing. Hold onto those promises and watch the story unfold.