

THE WORST BEST THING

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 27:12-36
Second Message
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Genesis 37:12-36

Between high school and college, I took a year off to travel with an eight-person music ministry team.

Five men and three women from 18 years old to 25 years old were together for a year. We played seven concerts a week and drove to a new location every day.

I have a vivid memory of flying back after Christmas break that year. I was 18 years old, and I flew into Minneapolis to rejoin my team. I arrived first, so I picked up our 15-passenger Ford van and our double-axle trailer with several thousand dollars of music equipment in it. I was driving back to the airport to get my other teammates, and I remember thinking, “how did I get here?”

That year changed my life. It would be an understatement to say that my eyes were opened that year. I learned about myself. I learned about others. I learned about relational dynamics— anger, envy and annoyance; but also forgiveness, patience, and redemption.

Think about a moment that changed your life. Maybe it was something positive, like a wedding, or something tragic, such as an accident or illness or death of a loved one. We all have moments where it seems the course of our lives pivots on that point.

We’re in our second week in our series of The Story of Joseph. Last week we saw a brief overview of the whole story and met our main character. The stage was set for the story. This week we’re going to see the tragic event that kicks off all the rest of what unfolds. We’re going to watch as the worst best thing happens.

We’re looking at Genesis 37:12-36, and this is a feast of biblical literature.

As we see the story unfold, we’ll see three primary characters emerge: Joseph, his brothers, and their father Jacob. Each of them faces a moment that becomes the hinge of their lives. Nothing is the same for any of them

after the events of this passage. Joseph is lost; his brothers become criminals, and their father mourns a son.

As I said last week, the story of Joseph is one of transformation. Each of the events set up those characters for the transformation they will experience. For each of them—Joseph, the brothers, and Jacob—this becomes their worst best thing.

This week has seen some incredibly disturbing events in our country. We don’t yet know how everything will play out in the next few weeks. We’re praying for a peaceful transition. Perhaps this passage this morning can help to encourage us that God can use even the worst tragedy for transformation.

I hope that you will find yourself in this story. We can relate to each of these characters in different ways. We can see our stories in their story. But I don’t want us to stop there. My real prayer is that having found ourselves in this story, you can see how God can find you. As in all of the sermons we preach at PBC, I hope this story leads you to Christ.

Our story unfolds in eight short scenes. We’ll look at them in three parts. In each part, one of our characters is the main “actor”—the one who takes action or stands at the center of the action. We’ll begin with Joseph.

Joseph wanders

The first passage we’ll look at involves two scenes: Joseph talks to his father and Joseph talks to an unidentified man in Shechem.

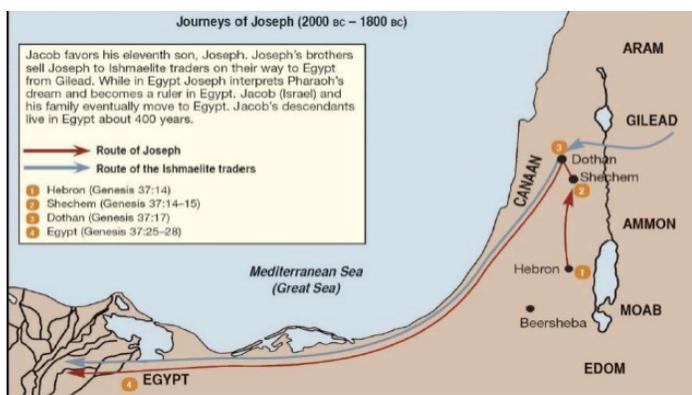
Genesis 37:12-17:

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” And he said to him, “Here I am.” 14 So he said to him, “Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word.” So he sent him from the Valley of

Hebron, and he came to Shechem. 15 And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, “What are you seeking?” 16 “I am seeking my brothers,” he said. “Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.” 17 And the man said, “They have gone away, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

Two scenes of Joseph interacting with different men.

In the first scene, Joseph is an obedient servant of his father. His father asks him to travel 50 miles to Shechem to check on his brothers, and Joseph agrees.



This interaction leaves us with many questions. You see, Shechem was a very dangerous place for the sons of Jacob to be. In Genesis 34, we read about a prince of Shechem raping Dinah, one of Jacob's daughters. In retaliation, the sons of Jacob devised a deceitful plot which ended with them killing every male in the city. Look at this map to see where Joseph followed his brothers.

Why would the brothers have gone to that place to pasture their flocks? All 11 of his brothers went. Why didn't Joseph go with them in the first place? Why send Joseph later to check on them? Why wasn't Jacob afraid of sending his beloved son 50 miles away to check up on brothers who hated him in a village which wanted vengeance against Jacob and his sons?

In the midst of all of this, Joseph is simply obedient. He doesn't question his father; he is ready to go. His response, "Here I am" is an important one. Abraham said it three times; Esau said it; Jacob said it twice; Moses and Samuel and Isaiah will say it.

Here Joseph says it. He is unquestioningly obedient to his father.

But in the second scene, he is lost. An unnamed stranger finds him "wandering in the fields." Fifty miles from home, he happens to meet a man who overheard his brothers say they were going to Dothan, another fourteen miles to the North. He pleads with this man, "Please tell me where they are pasturing."

It's a desperate, vulnerable plea. You can almost hear Joseph getting a bit whiny here. One commentator says that his grammar emphasizes his isolation and vulnerability. He is like a lost sheep.

But for now, he is alone—vulnerable and lost. Joseph is an obedient wanderer. He does what his father says, but it leads to a confusing place.

Maybe you resonate with Joseph's situation. You've been doing the best you could. You've tried to be faithful to your job, your family, your friends. But the events of the last year have changed a lot for many of us. Where should I live? Where should I work? Where do I stand politically? How do I share the love of Christ with people in this climate? Some of us aren't even sure who we are anymore. You're wandering around, not sure where to go.

Do you see yourself in Joseph at all? Where are you wandering?

I think Joseph is trying to find himself. He's trying to make sense of all the pressures in his life. His father loves him but has marked him out as his favorite. That's a lot of pressure. He has dreams in which he will be in authority over his entire family. That's a lot of pressure. His brothers hate him and can't even have a conversation with him. That's a lot of pressure. He's obedient to his father, but he ends up lost.

Years ago, my father gave me a folded piece of paper that he used to carry in his wallet. I have it in my office. It's from a book by James Michener, and the first part reads like this:

For this is the journey that men make: to find themselves. If they fail in this, it doesn't matter much what else they find. Money, position, fame, many loves, revenge are all of little consequence, and when the tickets are collected at the end of the ride they are tossed into the bin marked FAILURE.¹

In this scene, Joseph not is not only trying to find his brothers, he's trying to find himself.

This happens in every generation. Every teen movie has a “coming of age” storyline; however, our culture has taken this to a new extreme. Today, you don’t just have to find yourself. You have to invent yourself. And then re-invent yourself. We’re always wandering. We’re never sure of who we are.

Do you feel this way? Do you feel like you’re wandering?

Joseph will eventually discover himself, but he’ll do it in the biblical way. Instead of inventing himself or building his brand, he will allow God to write his story. It will happen through suffering. He will descend into the pit three different times before he will emerge confident in his identity.

That’s jumping ahead in the story. For now, Joseph has to find his brothers.

The brothers conspire

Joseph ends up finding his brothers, but it might be more accurate to say that his brothers find him. In our next section, we have three scenes: the brothers conspire against Joseph; they attack Joseph, and they sell him into slavery.

Genesis 37:18-28:

They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. 19 They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.” 21 But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” 22 And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. 24 And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25 Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down

to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. 28 Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

In the first scene, we hear the brothers plotting against Joseph. They see him coming from a distance. How did they recognize him? Maybe his coat? They refer to him as “this dreamer.” The Hebrew is literally “master of dreams”, but they say it with spite in their voice. They decide to kill him.

Reuben is the oldest son, the firstborn. That’s a very important position in the ancient near East. He is in charge, and he is the one their father will hold responsible. Reuben tries to exercise his leadership by talking them down. “Let’s just throw him in a pit,” he suggests. They end up agreeing, for now.

In the second scene, Joseph arrives, and the action intensifies. The text uses verbs in quick succession: They stripped him, they took him, they dumped him, and then they sat down. The pit they threw Joseph into would have been a dry cistern—these were dug everywhere in Egypt to collect rainwater. We don’t see it here, but we know from later in the story (Genesis 42:21) that the brothers ignored Joseph’s pleas for help. The brothers sat down to eat while he cried out to them. It could even have been food that Joseph brought them from their father.

In the third scene, we meet Judah. He is not the oldest brother, but he emerges as the leader of this group. It’s hard to tell whether he feels bad about the idea of killing Joseph or if he just wants to make some money. But his idea wins, and they end up selling Joseph into slavery. As the story progresses, Joseph and Judah emerge as the main characters among the brothers. Each of them begins a separate path toward redemption and transformation from this point on.

This week we watch Joseph be broken. Next week we’ll see Judah broken.

This scene is where we get to know these brothers. Before this moment, they were angry and jealous of their spoiled younger brother. You could call it normal sibling rivalry. But all that changes when they decide

to kill him but settle on sending him into slavery. The brothers conspire against their own flesh and blood and become criminals.

In this situation, we find out what they are really capable of—attacking Joseph; sitting down to eat while he cries for help. I don't think Joseph knew his brothers were capable of this. It comes as a shock to him. I think it even comes as a shock to them.

We're often disappointed to discover what the people around you are capable of. What happens when we find out what we are capable of ourselves? It's easy to put yourself in place of Joseph in this story. How terrible to be betrayed by your brothers. But I want you to find yourself not in Joseph, but the brothers.

Ask yourself the question, what are you capable of?

Where have you seen your jealousy, envy, or anger erupt? How have you hurt people without concern? What motivates you deep in your core?

Most of us have made mistakes. Sometimes huge ones. As bad as those mistakes are, sometimes the worst part is just to realize what you're truly capable of. I've seen that over and over in my life. I've been shocked by my own lust, anger, envy, and complacency.

The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way in Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

We will see how their decision this day will haunt Joseph's brothers. Years later, it will hang over their heads. Most of think of ourselves as fairly good people. It should be sobering to watch the brothers turn against Joseph. That could be us. We are capable of great evil. But again, as the story unfolds, we will see how God forgives and restores even these murderous brothers.

In the final scene, we see how their sin hurts not just Joseph but also their father.

The father mourns

We started by thinking about Joseph, and then we looked at the brothers. In the final grouping of scenes, their father Jacob takes center stage. Once again, there are three small scenes: Reuben returns to the other brothers and finds out about selling Joseph into slavery; the brothers give their news to their father, and the father mourns.

Genesis 37:29-35:

When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes 30 and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?" 31 Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. 32 And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, "This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not." 33 And he identified it and said, "It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." 34 Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him.

Remember that Reuben is the oldest child. His father will hold him responsible that the favored son is lost. Reuben knows this, which is why he asks "Where shall I go" or literally "Where should I come in?" He is worried about facing his father.

In the next scene, we see that Reuben should be worried. Jacob is convinced that Joseph is dead. This little scene is a masterpiece of literary allusion. You might remember that Jacob stole his father's blessing from his older brother Esau. In fact, he used his brother's clothes along with the skin of a goat to deceive his father, Isaac. Now, Jacob's sons come and use their brother's clothing along with the blood of a goat to deceive their father.

In fact, when we read in verse 27 that Jacob "identified" the robe as Joseph's, it's the same word back used in Genesis 27:23 where Isaac failed to "recognize" his son.

You see this principle throughout the Bible. It's the idea that what goes around comes around. You live by the sword, and you die by the sword. In Luke 6:38, Jesus puts it, "with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."

Jacob tricked his father, and now his sons trick him in the same way.

In the final scene, Jacob mourns. It would be normal to mourn for a week or maybe up to a month in this

situation, but Jacob mourns indefinitely. He says he will mourn until he dies. We see this play out. Jacob doesn't stop mourning Joseph until he is reunited with him at the end of the story.

And so Jacob weeps. "His father wept for him." And once again, the story of Jacob and Joseph is woven together with all the stories of Genesis.

Weeping has only happened five times so far in Genesis. Hagar (Genesis 21:16) and Abraham (Genesis 23:2) wept early on. Jacob's brother Esau wept in sadness when Jacob stole his birthright (Genesis 27:38). Then Jacob wept in joy when he married Rachel, the mother of Joseph (Genesis 29:11). Then Esau wept in joy when he and Jacob were reunited (Genesis 33:4). Now we see Jacob weeping in sorrow for his son Joseph (Genesis 37:35).

Esau went from weeping in sorrow to weeping in joy. Jacob went the other direction: from weeping in joy to weeping in sorrow. This story has so much literary beauty.

The final character I'd like to you to identify with is Jacob. Jacob has had a hard life. He worked seven years to marry Rachel. Then he was tricked into marrying her sister and worked seven more years—fourteen years to marry Rachel. He thought she was barren, but then she gave him Joseph. Now Jacob thinks Joseph is dead. He has lost so much.

What have you lost? After all that has happened in this past year, we barely have time to catalog our losses. But what comes to mind when I ask you about weeping? When have you wept? What have you lost? The past year has seen a lot of loss. Many of you have lost loved ones; you've lost jobs; you've lost relationships; vacations, family reunions, schooling, sports, and friendships. The loss of the last year is overwhelming. I've had several mornings over the past year, where I've felt flooded by a sense of loss and grief.

Friends, sometimes we have to weep. We have to weep for the things we have lost. Some of this we might have brought upon ourselves, as Jacob seems to have brought this deception upon himself. We have to weep for the ways those around us have hurt us. We have to weep for the brokenness of the world: the division, the anger, the injustice, and the death.

This week we have seen so clearly how broken our country is. There is so much division and hatred and

distrust—racism and conspiracy theories and grudges and vengeance. There is so much to grieve.

Here we see Jacob mourning the loss of his son, and we relate to him. Sometimes we have to weep.

Conclusion

This day has been a turning point for Joseph, his brothers, and his father. Many of us have had experiences that change our lives forever—a chapter division in the story of our lives.

This morning we watched as Joseph had the worst thing happen to him. His brothers did the worst thing, and their father saw the worst thing happen to someone he loved.

Joseph was lost; Judah became a criminal, and Jacob mourned a son. None of their lives would ever be the same.

But the story is not over. At this moment, each of them begins a path which will lead to their transformation. This is why our passage ends with one last note in Genesis.

Genesis 37:36:

Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

The story moves forward. Next week we'll see the turning point for Judah's transformation.

Before we do, there's one more character I'd like to invite you to consider. The story of Genesis, the story of Jacob, and Joseph's story—all lead up to the great story of the Bible: the story of Jesus.

Joseph leaves his father to go to a dangerous place to seek and find his brothers. When he finds them, they reject him and cast him in a pit. Out of that tragedy, Joseph will end up saving the world. But for now, the father mourns the death of his son.

This is the story of Jesus. Jesus leaves his father to go to a dangerous place to find us. When he finds us, we reject him and cast him into a pit. Those very actions are the ones which Jesus will transform to be our salvation. Until then, the Father mourns his only son.

We've all had different stories. Some of us have the worst thing happen to us. Some of us have done the worst thing. Some of us have watched as the worst thing happened to the ones we've loved. A few of us have experienced all three.

But no matter what path your story takes, every road leads to Jesus. Jesus was lost. His death proved the lengths to which we'll go to live apart from him. His father mourned his loss. Whatever your story involves, I pray that God would show you how it leads to Jesus.

Find yourself in this story. But better yet: find Jesus. Find Jesus so that he can find you. Joseph experienced the worst best thing. But Jesus experienced the worst worst best best thing. In this story, find Jesus.

Endnotes

1 James A Michener, *"The Fires of Spring"* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1976).