

# **BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary**

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## **Studies in Rescue and Redemption**

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Lesson Two

### **God Intended It for Good**

#### **Focal Text**

Genesis 37:14-28, 50:15-21

#### **Background**

Genesis 37, 50

#### **Main Idea**

God can work through human schemes to accomplish his unchanging plans.

#### **Question to Explore**

How has God accomplished his plans through difficult circumstances in your life?

#### **Quick Read**

Out of jealousy, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. Years later, Joseph confronted and forgave his brothers because of how God had worked through his circumstances.

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### **Introduction**

If you ask any school-aged child, "Which way does the Mississippi River flow?" They will say, "From north to south." If you have flown over the Mississippi, you will see that there are places where the Mississippi River will flow in different directions; even, at times, it will flow north. There are places where the Mississippi River goes west, but ultimately, it finally flows south. This not unlike the sovereign will of God; as one pastor put it, God's purpose may be "frustrated, turned, twisted, but it is God's purpose of the ages that the reign and kingdom shall belong to Him."<sup>1</sup>

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God can work through human schemes to accomplish his unchanging plans. Even bad things can be turned around by God, as we learn in this story of Joseph. The story reminds us that God intended all that happened in Joseph's life for his (and others') eventual good. Each of us can consider our own lives and find ways God has accomplished his plans through our difficult circumstances. Our purpose here is to guide you to identify how God has accomplished his plans through difficult circumstances in your life, and in the lives of others.

The account of Joseph and his jealous brothers also reveals God's rescue and redemption. Joseph remained obedient to God through various trials and rose to an elevated position in the Egyptian government. In a time of famine, he provided rescue for his family. When reunited with his wary brothers, Joseph explained: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

A tourist to Brussels, Belgium was eager to see how and where some of the world's renowned lace was manufactured. His guide took him to a small, unassuming building where he was introduced to the plant manager. After a brief explanation, he was directed to the workroom in the basement. The only light penetrating the basement workroom came through several narrow windows near the top of the exterior wall, slightly above street level. Taped to the windows were exquisite, intricate patterns. The workers sat at tables facing the windows, working in relative darkness.

The visitor, accustomed to seeing our workspaces, asked why there was so little light. The manager responded, "Centuries of experience have taught us that the finest lace is produced when the workers are in the dark and the pattern is in the light." We often find ourselves in the dark, not having the answers we wish we had. The pattern, however, remains in the light. It's a pattern that has stood the test of time. When we don't understand God's activity, we can rest in his character and have confidence in God. Even though we don't understand it all, we can trust that he does. And that's enough.<sup>2</sup>

## **Commentary**

### ***Jealously in Response to Jacob's Favoritism (37:2-13)***

Joseph brought a bad report about his brothers (v. 2), and because he was born to Jacob in his old age, he was loved more by his father (v. 3) who made an ornate robe for him (v. 3b). The narrative tells us that the brothers "hated" him and could not say a kind word about him. When he had a dream about them bowing before him, it says they hated him "all the more" (v. 8). Adding insult to injury, Joseph told them of another dream where they bowed before him (v. 9b).

The brothers were "jealous" (v. 11), a term that describes a heightened emotional state (e.g., being heated). They were envious, angry, and smarting from the special treatment and favoritism their father showed Joseph. They were offended by his special robe (since

they took it off him). The degree of their antipathy toward him is revealed in the especially cruel way they deal with him (plot to kill him, steal his clothes, throw him into a deep cistern to die, and then sell him as a slave to Ishmaelites).

***The Revenge of the Brothers (37:14-28)***

3:17. The Valley of Hebron, Jacob’s home base, is a territory just west of the Dead Sea and almost as long. It is about fifty miles south of Shechem and sixty-four miles from Dothan. Going all the way to Dothan would have taken Joseph around four to five days. Scholars say the site was of significant size at the time, and archaeological evidence confirms its existence. It was on the trade route where caravans regularly passed going from Gilead to Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Later in biblical history, it is the home of the prophet Elisha—whose house was surrounded by an army sent from the king of Aram (2 Kings 6:8-14).

37:18. The antipathy toward Joseph by his brothers is revealed in their plot to kill him. Earlier in the chapter we are told of Jacob’s favoritism toward this youngest son, his special robe, and then also his dreams where he rules over them. The brothers so “hate” him they do not speak one kind word about him. This is not the first time the writer of Genesis describes the danger of unchecked emotions. For example, consider the story of Cain in Genesis 4.

37:19-20. The details of the brothers’ plan and plot to kill Joseph is revealed. They want to kill him and then throw him into a cistern and then lie, saying a ferocious animal devoured him. Their derision toward him has them use the term “dreamer” (v. 19) and “dreams” (v. 20), which proves truly ironic, given that his dreams are true and their own steps to get rid of him will eventually lead to the fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams.

Cisterns were used to hold water. A cistern collected runoff of rain from the wet season to provide for the sheep during the dry season. The area around Dothan received more than two feet of rainfall each year. If just a small portion of a field’s runoff were collected it could provide water for thousands of sheep during the year.<sup>4</sup>

37:21-22. Reuben—and apparently only Reuben—sought to rescue Joseph from his brothers and prevent him from being killed. He makes alternative suggestions to killing him; he says they should put him in the cistern and not hurt him. We are told that Reuben really wanted to “rescue him” and take him back to his father.

37:23-25. When Joseph arrived, his brothers stripped him of his “ornate robe” and threw him in the empty cistern—the text tells us it had no water. The story pauses as the brothers sit down to eat their meal and then spot a caravan coming by. Since Dothan was close to the main travel route passing from the north to the south, these Ishmaelites were bringing their goods from Gilead (e.g., spices, balm, myrrh) on their way to sell them in Egypt.

Ishmaelites were kinfolk of Abraham (as were the Midianites; cf. Gen. 25:2) through Hagar. They occupied the Arabian desert region. Some have supposed that the two groups, Ishmaelites and Midianites, were working together (cf. Gen. 39:1). They carried with them common commodities they may have purchased from Arab caravans while traversing this important trade route on the King's Highway.<sup>5</sup>

37:26-28. Judah proposes an alternative to killing their brother by suggesting they make money off selling him as a slave. Interestingly, Reuben plays a role in sparing Joseph, but also a key role, ironically, in fulfilling Joseph's dream. The Midianite merchants were on their way to Egypt where they would eventually sell Joseph. However, the slavery of Joseph (which foreshadows the slavery of all of Israel), would be part of God's providential plan for Joseph to become the prince of Egypt. This is a reminder that God was also providentially involved in Israel's slavery, and ultimately their redemption.

The specific amount Joseph was sold for was "twenty shekels." The Code of Hammurabi confirms that the selling of a person for twenty shekels of silver was a standard, going rate in the mid-second millennium BC. Later, these prices would become inflated to thirty, and then eventually around one hundred shekels of silver.<sup>6</sup> The New Testament also tell us that Jesus would be "sold" for thirty pieces of silver, when Judas Iscariot agreed to betray him for that amount (Matthew 26:15; cf. Zechariah 11:12-13).

#### ***Joseph's Descent into Egypt and Rise to Power (38:1-50:14)***

38:1-30. This chapter interrupts the story of Joseph by recounting much of the life of Judah, including information about his Canaanite wife, his sons who died, and especially his daughter-in-law Tamar, whom he unintentionally slept with and impregnated, after mistaking her for a "shrine prostitute." The purpose of this story seems to be a contrast in personal character. On the one hand we have the ignoble character of Judah, and on the other hand we the noble character of Joseph who refused the advances of Potiphar's wife.

39:1-23. This chapter recounts Joseph being bought by Potiphar from the Ishmaelites and prospering in Potiphar's house until he is falsely accused of attacking his wife and then imprisoned unjustly. Yet even in Egyptian prison, God blessed Joseph and placed him in charge of the other prisoners. This story further draws out the juxtaposition of the noble character of Joseph in contrast to that of his brothers (esp. Judah).

40:1-23. This chapter recounts the story of Joseph (in prison) interpreting the dream of the chief baker, whom he predicted would be impaled in "three days." Also, he explained the dream of the cupbearer who would be restored in the same time. For his reward, Joseph asked only to be remembered; however, sadly, he was quickly forgotten (but not forever). The point of the story shows the accuracy with which Joseph can recount stories. This foreshadows the next scene where he will use his remarkable gift to transform not only his circumstances, but that of his brothers, his father, and his entire family (and indeed the nation of Israel).

41:1-40. This chapter tells us that Joseph was in prison for two years, until Pharaoh had a dream that needed interpretation. None of Pharaoh's magicians or wise men could do what Joseph did for the baker and the cupbearer. This dramatically leads to the moment when the cupbearer remembers Joseph and decides to tell Pharaoh about him. At last, Joseph is removed from prison. We are even told that he is cleaned and dressed for a proper appearance before Pharaoh.

Joseph promptly tells Pharaoh his dream and its interpretation which he explains comes from God (a subtle but all-important fact). And then, he demonstrates God's power by telling Pharaoh the content of his dream and what it means. There will be seven years of abundance and seven of famine. Joseph suggests what actions should be taken to avert the upcoming crisis created by this famine. Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge, making him prince of Egypt and second in command. Now at last, the fulfillment of Joseph's early dreams will come true, when his brothers must come to Egypt seeking help. They will bow before the prince—whom to their amazement is precisely the one who dreamed all of this would take place.

Chapters 42 through 49 tell the story of the famine and Joseph's brothers coming to him for help, and finally the dream is fulfilled when they must bow before him. However, instead of nursing a grudge, Joseph magnanimously forgives his brothers. Not only does he forgive them for their past cruelty toward him, he saves them and his father Jacob. He allows them to settle in the land of Goshen with their sheep, and gives them further provisions of food. Before he dies, Jacob blesses Joseph's sons, along with his own, and gives instructions regarding where he was to be buried. After he died, Joseph asked Pharaoh for permission to bury Jacob in Canaan.

### ***Joseph Reassures His Brothers (50:15-21)***

50:15. Joseph's brothers were afraid he would still hold a "grudge" against them. Now that Jacob was dead they feared he would nurse this grudge into some form of revenge.

50:16-18. They recount their father's words—possibly making them up—of sending a request to Joseph to forgive his brothers.<sup>7</sup> When Joseph receives this request he "wept." Seeing the sight of their brother's sadness, they seize the opportunity of his grief and fall before him offering themselves to him as "slaves" (note, how in Jesus' telling of the story of the Prodigal Son, he also falls before his father saying something similar; cf. Luke 15).

50:19-20. Joseph quickly acts to allay their fears, and offers one of the most cited and insightful passages in the entire Bible, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good..." The word "good" in Hebrew is used in Genesis 1:4-31 in reference to the creation of the world ("God said it was good") when God took chaos and made good out of it. The message? God can still produce good out of chaos.

Joseph's threefold reply has been called the "pinnacle" of Old Testament faith—leaving the righting of wrongs to God (v. 19; cf. Romans 12:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter

4:19), seeing providence even in evil (Gen. 50:20), and repaying evil with affection (Gen 50:21; cf. Luke 6:27ff).<sup>8</sup>

After Joseph's announcement, he reassured his brothers of his care for them and their children. Joseph's insight of God's sovereign purpose revealed that the boy with the ornate robe was no longer just dreaming. He had lived to see how God rescued him from the cistern, slavery, prison, and now Joseph was able to rescue his own family.

### **Conclusion**

Rev. Thomas De Witt Talmage was the pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, New York, and one of the most prominent religious leaders in America in the nineteenth century. A statement in one of his sermons has become famous. He stated, concerning the providence of God, that: "Despots may plan and armies may march, and the congresses of the nations may seem to think they are adjusting all the affairs of the world, but the mighty men of the earth are only the dust of the chariot wheels of God's providence."<sup>9</sup>

This great providence of God is powerfully demonstrated in one of the Bible's greatest characters, the young dreamer named Joseph who rises to become the prince of Egypt. However, early on in Joseph's life, his dreams quickly turned into his worst nightmares. Jealous brothers envied his precious coat and despised the dreamer's visions which foreshadowed a day of his dominion over them.

Plotted against, thrown into a cistern, and eventually sold as a slave in Egypt, Joseph's fortunes continually seemed to sour before they ever have a chance to succeed. His time in Potiphar's house proved challenging, and ultimately ended up with him in jail. I suppose looking back on those circumstances, Joseph would have agreed with the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who once said, "Life must be lived forward; it can only be understood backwards."<sup>10</sup> Sitting in that Egyptian jail must have made it hard to believe that the dreams of his youth had any chance of ever coming true.

However, the dreamer's fortunes would begin to change when the cupbearer finally remembered what Joseph was capable of. At last, through his interpretation of dreams, his dream would come true. Joseph would realize the truth of what Ben Franklin once spoke of, saying, "The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, that God governs in the affairs of man."<sup>11</sup>

We have in English the word "providence" which comes from the Latin *pro* (meaning "before") and *video* ("to see"). For God to have providence means that he can see things before they happen. About providence, Charles Spurgeon once said, "We believe in the providence of God, but we do not believe half enough in it."<sup>12</sup> Believing in God's providence ultimately means more than knowing God knows the future, it means trusting in God for the future. It means believing what the Book of Daniel says, "The Most High

rules in the kingdom of men” (Dan. 4:25). God’s providence was proven when Joseph’s dreams come true.

With 20/20 hindsight, Joseph explained to his brothers, “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). Somehow, God was involved in all of it. The Apostle Paul picks up on this same idea when he says, “All things work together for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). In all things we can know that God can work through human schemes to accomplish his unchanging plans. God can make sense out of both our nightmares and our dreams. Amid our nightmares, we must remind ourselves of this by looking back at God’s hand at work in our lives. Vance Havner put it like this, “If you know how to read between the lines of secular history, you will see that God is writing another history.”<sup>13</sup>

God is writing history, sometimes behind the scenes, but always to accomplish his unchanging plans.

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**Meet the Writer: Dr. David Ritsema**

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<sup>1</sup> W. A. Criswell, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 131.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/2024.html> (Accessed 4/19/18).

<sup>3</sup> John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 122.

<sup>4</sup> Walton, 123.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 721.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 235.

<sup>9</sup> T. Dewitt Talmage in May Talmage, ed., *The Wisdom and Wit of T. De Witt Talmage: Selected from His Writings* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1922), 66.

<sup>10</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, ed. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 1996), 161.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Franklin, quoted by Ronald Reagan in his address to the National Association of Evangelicals, March, 1983.

<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Charles E. Cowman, *Springs in the Valley* (Los Angeles: Cowman Publications, 1939), 223.

<sup>13</sup> <https://christianquote.com/tag/vance-havner/> (Accessed 5/31/18).