

Genesis 37 — Providence

September 11, 2016

It is good to be back. I am especially thankful to Pastor Jordan from our Spencer campus who took the time to fill the pulpit for the last two weeks. That allowed me extra time to work on projects around the home. Pastor Jordan did a great job. I am confident you were encouraged in Christ through his teaching.

This week we return to Genesis. We start a important part of the book. From here until the end of the book, 14 chapters, Genesis is almost exclusively about one man. The man named is Joseph. Today, we meet him and his dysfunctional family. I know some of you come from less-than-desirable family backgrounds. If that is you, today will be encouraging. If God can use Joseph's redneck hillbilly family as the foundation for the chosen people of God, that means there is hope for the rest of us that come from messed up homes.

As we look at the grand narrative of Joseph's life, there is one Bible doctrine that summarizes his story. It is called providence. Many doctrines are hard to understand until we see them lived out. As we study Joseph's life, we will see the fingerprints of God's providence all over his life.

Let me explain providence with a simple illustration. Metaphorically, we can say God has two hands. One hand is known as the visible hand of God. The other hand is known as the invisible hand of God. The visible hand of God is seen when God shows up and intervenes in obvious ways. Examples would be the miracles of Jesus. It would be the plagues God sent upon Egypt. Another example was when the prophets heard God's voice speak so they could write the words, "Thus sayeth the Lord," in the Bible. Most of us have not seen these

visible displays of the hand of God. We have not seen miracles. We have not heard God speak. God can do this any time he wants but he usually doesn't do this. This is why they are called miraculous events.

God's other hand is his invisible hand. That is the hand of providence. This is when God works subtly behind the scenes to line things up. God providentially determined where you would be born. He determined your parents. He determined the kind of people he would bring into your life. God determined what gifts, talents and passions would be in your body. These are all part of God working very quietly behind the scenes with his invisible hand lining things up in our lives so events unfold the way he wants.

God didn't just create this world. He is very much involved every day in the world. Even when we sin, the providence of God is bigger than our sin. He is bigger than the world. He is bigger than history. He is bigger than creation. *No matter what happens in our lives God can bend anything to work things out for our good and for his glory.* This is incredibly important. If this was not true, we would look at our circumstances and quickly lose hope. We don't look at our circumstances and lose hope. We are Christians. We look to our God, who is bigger than our circumstances, so we don't lose hope.

We are not deists or unitarians that think God wound up the world like a watch and walked away. The story of Joseph lets us see how God is involved in every moment of our lives, lining things up for the good of his children and for God the Father's glory.

Let's jump into the text and meet Joseph, his father and his crazy redneck brothers.

Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob. 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. Genesis 37:1-2 (ESV)

When we pick up the story, Joseph is 17. His mother, Rachel, died two years before, when he was 15. Jacob's family members were shepherds. Joseph was assigned to help some of his older brothers in the business. Joseph grew up in a complicated family.

Earlier in our study of Genesis, we learned Jacob had four wives. We do not recommend that today. We do church discipline for that kind of stuff. Jacob had a messy marriage. He only wanted one wife but was tricked into marrying four. Two of them were full-fledged wives that were sisters. Two were the servants of those sisters which were given to Joseph when those wives had infertility problems. Joseph was the favorite son of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. Rachel only had two children. Joseph was the older of the two. Rachel died two years before this giving birth to Joseph's other true biological brother Benjamin. Joseph was working for his older half-brothers that were born through the maids, but Joseph was the favorite full-fledged son of his father. Can you see tension that was going to develop when the older half-brothers from the maids started to tell Joseph what to do?

Joseph came home from working with his half-brothers, and he gave a bad report to dad about what was happening in the field. He was probably telling his father how they goofed off on the job and spend more time making farting

sounds with their armpits than tending the sheep and the other strange habits of young adult males. In Hebrew the words *bad report* mean more than just tattling. They mean Joseph didn't tell the truth. He tattled plus he made stuff up to make his half-brothers look worse than they were.

Those of you who grew up with brothers and sisters can imagine this. Imagine your little brother is blatantly favored by dad. Your brother works with you but when he comes home he tells Dad everything you did wrong plus he lies about you to make you look really bad. What would you want to do to your bratty little brother that framed you to your father? If you are like me, you would have a burning desire to beat some sense into him. That is the way Joseph's brothers felt too. From here it only got worse.

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. 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. Genesis 37:3–4 (ESV)

We first saw Jacob's favoritism of Joseph when Jacob went to meet Esau who had 400 armed men. Jacob feared for his life and his family when he met his brother. Hoping to protect those he loved, Jacob put some of his wives and sons in a line behind him as they approached Esau. He put the rest of children and his other wives in the front of the line so they would be killed first. He put his beloved Rachel and Joseph in the back of the line, in the place of greatest protection. How do you think that made his other sons feel to know their father was willing to sacrifice their lives over Joseph's?

Now, we see Dad made Joseph a varsity jacket. Joseph alone got this fancy coat. This is usually called a coat of many colors. That terminology comes

from the Greek Old Testament translation called the Septuagint and the old Latin translation of the Old Testament called the Vulgate. The original Hebrew is a little different. It is not called a coat of many colors in the Hebrew. It is literally called a long-sleeve coat. We don't know what it looked like. We just know it was long and fancy. 2 Samuel 13:18-19 uses the same Hebrew word for coat to describe the kind of clothing worn by a prince. This was a super-fancy, royal, long jacket that was probably multi-colored.

Here is the key. This was not a jacket you could wear when you worked. It was far too long and ornate. Joseph went to work with his brothers. He came home and tattled on them, plus he lied and exaggerated their sin. Did he get in trouble for it? No! Instead he got a fancy Gucci designer jacket, and he was promoted to management. He didn't have to go to work anymore. The next time the brothers went to the fields, Joseph stayed home and put his feet on the coffee table while he curled up for a nap in his fancy designer jacket. Do you see why his brothers hated him? Do you see why they had nothing good to say to him? Joseph was a spoiled rotten brat. He was prideful and manipulative. He knew how to lie to manipulate people and get away with it. He got out of the hard work of the family business plus got a promotion because of his prideful lying and scheming. It got worse.

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: 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." 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. 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.” 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?” And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. Genesis 37:5–11 (ESV)

Joseph has some dreams. If you know your brothers already hate you, these are not the kind of dreams you should start sharing at the dinner table.

In the first dream each of his brothers were binding grain. Joseph’s bundle of grain stood up and the brothers’ bundles of grain bowed down to him. The implication was clear. Joseph was going to rule over them and be in charge of them. From the way things were looking with the varsity jacket, that seemed like it might happen. It was not a pleasant thought to have a lying, scheming, bratty, prideful, 17-year-old take over the family business when you were older and had more time invested. It was like poking a stick in the eye of his brothers.

The second dream was about the sun, moon and 11 stars bowing down to Joseph, which meant not just the brothers, but the entire family would bow down to him.

If your brothers already hate you, why would you tell them those dreams? The reason he told everybody his dreams of greatness is because he was full of himself. He was a spoiled brat filled with pride. Joseph was very smart. He was very gifted. The worst people on the planet are smart and gifted people stuck on themselves. This is the freshman quarterback that leads his team of seniors to the state finals. Too much success gives him an ego problem. This is young professionals that goes into business and make a killing. They lose their compassion for others because as far as they are concerned, life is easy. These

kind of people become toxic people that ruin their own lives and the lives of others around them.

The only way to cure this kind of ego is these people need to be humiliated. They need to be broken. That is exactly what is about to happen in Joseph's life. The only way Joseph could become the godly leader of millions of people was if he is deeply broken of his pride.

To do this God used trials, temptations and suffering to shape him. Joseph would be abused by his family, mistreated by his employer, separated from his home. These trials were part of what God used to teach him to rely on God and be a humble leader. Joseph would have learned none of this if he had sat home on the couch wearing his jacket.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 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." 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. Genesis 37:12–14 (ESV)

Joseph was home when his brothers went to work pasturing the flocks because he was promoted above work. They took their flocks to the area of Shechem. Jacob, also called Israel, was concerned about them. Why was he worried? If you remember a few chapters back, Jacob's family used to live next to Shechem. Jacob's daughter, Dinah, was raped by the prince of Shechem. In response, two of the brothers, Simeon and Levi, killed all the men of Shechem. It was a massive slaughter. Nobody liked the sons of Jacob in that neighborhood. Everybody wanted to bump them off.

In addition, when Joseph was told to see if it was well with his brothers, I think Dad was asking for Joseph to do another performance review on his older siblings. Dad was handing Joseph a clipboard and asking for notes. Nobody likes it when your spoiled-rotten little brother does your performance review and determines your salary. In addition, Shechem was a long way from home. It was 50 miles away from Hebron. Joseph was moving far away from his fathers protection.

And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." 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. Genesis 37:15–17 (ESV)

Joseph arrived in Shechem and couldn't find his brothers. He just happened to run across a man who happened to overhear his brothers saying they were moving farther north. They went to the area of Dothan, which was another 14 miles away. When Joseph finally caught up to his brothers, he was 64 miles away from home. Then frustrations come to a head.

They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 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." But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 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. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 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. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 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. 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. When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?" Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. 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." 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." Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 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. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. Genesis 37:18–36 (ESV)

I told you this was a dysfunctional family. When the first thing your brothers think of when they see you is how they will kill you, that is not good. These guys were completely capable of murder. Reuben, the oldest, already slept with one of his father's wives. That was not as much an issue of a sexual passion he had for an old lady but it was his attempt to steal headship of the family from his father. Simeon and Levi, the second- and third-oldest brothers, already killed all the males in the city of Shechem. These are dangerous men capable of murder and treason.

Reuben, who wanted to get back in the good graces of his father, had the idea of not killing Joseph but of throwing him into a pit. Dothan in Hebrew literally means two cisterns. This area had two, maybe more, large water cisterns hewn into the rock. These cisterns were shaped like a Coke bottle so they were narrow on the top to prevent evaporation but were much wider inside. Historically we know one of them was 20 feet deep so if someone fell in there was no way out. The brothers may have gone to this area looking for water for the flocks in those

cisterns only to discover these deep rock cisterns were dry. Reuben figured that if they couldn't get water out of them, they could put Joseph in one of them.

When Joseph arrived it says they stripped him of his coat. The word *stripped* in Hebrew is used to describe the skinning of an animal. This was a vicious attack. Joseph was their own brother but they beat the tar out of him. They took their anger out on him and ripped the jacket off his skin before they threw him into the pit.

Reuben had plans to save Joseph but he apparently left for a potty break. While he was gone, a caravan of Ishmaelites heading to Egypt passed them. Judah, the fourth-oldest brother, had an idea. Instead of letting Joseph die of starvation, why not make money off him and sell him into slavery?

Worse than attempted murder and worse than selling someone into slavery is what they did next. They agreed to lie to their own father. They kept this lie for the next 20 years. I don't care how prideful, arrogant or privileged Joseph was, beating your own brother, trying to kill him but instead selling him into slavery is a very, very wicked thing that is far worse than anything Joseph had done.

For a moment, put yourself in Jacob's position. How many of you have lost a young child in a crowded place, such as in the mall? Do you remember that sense of panic that came over you when you realized your child was gone and you had no idea where to find them? That was what Jacob felt times but a thousand times worse when his other sons showed him Joseph's bloodied jacket.

Conventional grieving at a funeral in the Bible lasted a week. When Moses died, the people mourned for a month. When Jacob thought his beloved Joseph was dead he mourned and refused to be comforted for the next 20 years! Can you can imagine the heartbreak? Jacob never recovered from this loss. For the next 20 years his brother knew where to find Joseph but they kept their father in heartbroken grief and lived a lie. That is evil!

There is a lot we can apply from this chapter. I just want to key in on the topic of providence.

Providence means God is fully in control of life even when it feels out of control. Did you notice all the things in this chapter that appear to be coincidences but are actually God's invisible hand at work? First was the drought that made Jacob's sons need to travel to Shechem looking for pasture. God was behind that. Next, Jacob needed to be filled with worry and decide to send Joseph to check on them. God was behind that. Then, the brothers needed to decide to go to Dothan. There just happened to be a man that overheard Jacob's sons talking about leaving for Dothan and that same man just happened to run into Joseph to tell him where to find his brothers. Was that chance? I don't think so. God was behind that timing. When the brothers wanted to kill Joseph, Reuben, the oldest, just happened to be there at the right time to save him. Dothan was a city on the trade caravan route that went to Egypt. This whole trip was orchestrated by God to move Joseph to Hebron, to the trade caravan route, to send him to Egypt. History tells us the trading caravans to Egypt would only pass on that road every few days or weeks. The caravan just happened to pass

through at the right time for them to sell Joseph into slavery. If it was a little later, Reuben would have stopped them.

None of this was coincidence. It was all the work of God's invisible hand to move Joseph to Egypt and put him through circumstances that would humble him, break his pride and make him into the kind of leader God wanted him to become. Ultimately, this was all part of God's invisible hand to save the lives of the very brothers that hated Joseph, abused Joseph and sold him into slavery. Look what Joseph said about this later in the book of Genesis.

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Genesis 50:20 (ESV)

For Joseph, when Genesis 37 happened, his life felt completely out of control. It felt like life was falling apart. I am sure Joseph cried to God and asked God to save him as he experienced this betrayal and beating. I am sure he asked God to stop his brothers when they sold him into slavery. When Joseph was drug away in chains and he looked back at his brothers laughing, I am sure he was saying to God, "Where are you? God, why did you give me these dreams? God, everything is messed up. My life is ruined."

He couldn't see it at the time but this was all part of God fulfilling the dreams he gave him as a teenager.

There is another time Dothan is mentioned in the Bible. It is in 2 Kings 6:17. At that time the prophet Elisha was chased by the king of Syria. Elisha found himself surrounded by the Syrian army in Dothan. The situation looked hopeless for Elisha, just like it looked hopeless for Joseph. It looked like God

forgot to protect them. Elisha's servant was freaking out so Elisha prayed to God asking God to open the servant's eyes. This is what happened.

Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. 2 Kings 6:17 (ESV)

It didn't matter if the Syrian army surrounded them. For the providential God that controls history, nothing was out of control. When God opened the eyes of Elisha's servant, he saw God was protecting them. If God had opened Joseph's eyes on this day I think he would have seen the same horses and chariots of fire surrounding him. Nothing more could happen to Joseph than God ordained. God was fully in control the whole time, even when life was falling apart.

In the same way, each of us will face times when our world falls apart. your business fails. A loved one is diagnosed with cancer. A spouse leaves you. You lose your job. You need to know that God has everything fully under control no matter how hopeless the future looks. God even has a good purpose for the hard times, pain and suffering. We may not understand what possible good God can bring out of the sin and suffering we experience, but if you are a Christian, he will do something good with it. Maybe 20 years down the road, like Joseph, you will see how God's plan makes sense. Sometimes, even after 20 years, we may never understand God's wisdom. We know this. Someday when we stand before God and see the panoramic picture of God's plan, we will tell God that is plan was good and wise and if we were writing it we couldn't have done it any better.

Providence means we don't lose hope. This is what I love about the doctrine of God's providence: Even when sinful people do sinful things, and they intend them to be used for nothing more than evil, God uses those things for good and the saving of many lives. That's why we always have hope. No matter how dark our lives become, we still have hope. When hard times come, we do not freak out like people that do not know God. When someone sins against us, we do not give up. We do not give in. We trust that even when we have done evil and deplorable things that we should not do, we do not give in to despair. We do not lose hope. We do not think about ending our lives when things feel hopeless.

We don't lose hope no matter how much people sin against us. Who here has been sinned against greatly? Some of you were raped and you struggle with the emotional scars. Some of you were mistreated by men. Some of you were abused. Some of you were abandoned by a parent. Others of you had a spouse cheat on you. Many of us are just like Joseph. We had terrible things done to us. For the next 20 years of Joseph's life he would be sinned against again and again. He was either a slave or a prisoner in a dungeon from age 17 until he was in his 40s! He deserved none of it.

How did Joseph make it through? He didn't curse God. He didn't give up. He didn't lose hope. He didn't get lost in self-pity. He had a deeply rooted confidence in God and his control of history.

Some of you this morning are thinking your life is like Joseph's. "Life has gone bad through no fault of my own." Things keep getting worse. You wonder where God is in the mess. I'll tell you where he is. God is on his throne. He has

everything under control. He promises that, for his children, what others do against you for evil will be used by God for your good and his glory. That is a guarantee.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (ESV)

If you don't know this promise from God, you will lose your hope. Life will get hard and you will not make it. This morning, If you do not know Jesus, know I love you. Please confess your sin to Jesus. Ask Jesus' death on the cross to pay for your sin. Become a child of God. The Bible says in that moment you will literally be born again. God will take all of your hurt and pain and he promises to use it for your good and his glory because you are his child. It may take 20 years to figure out what God was up to. You may never understand the good God brought about through your suffering until eternity but we will eventually see God's wisdom and declare him good.

We don't lose hope no matter how great our sin. Some of you don't identify as much with Joseph, but you can identify with his brothers. You have sinned greatly. Maybe you were unfaithful to your spouse. Maybe you are looking at things on the Internet that are not healthy. Some of you are addicted to alcohol. Some of you have said or done some very evil things to your family. The truth is many of the evil things we do we cannot take back. We cannot fix the damage. We can't take back the hurtful words we said. We can't take back the infidelity. We can't take back our sin. We have to live with the consequences.

I have good news for you. There is hope. Joseph's brothers plotted his murder and sold him into slavery, but there was still hope for their sin. The God of

providence took what they meant for evil and used it for good. We can't fix the damage caused by our sin, but God can. We can't make a happy ending out of our lives, but God can. This is why we love God so much. He doesn't just sympathize with our sin but he is bigger than our sin and he can take and twist the sin in our lives for something good.

It doesn't matter how much we were sinned against or how much we have sinned, we serve a providential God that promises to work everything out for his children's good and for God's glory.

The best example of this is Jesus. Jesus is the very son of God. He never sinned. He never did anything wrong. He was of infinite value because he was not just a man but he was the Son of God. He deserved nothing but worship and honor and glory. In the greatest sin and injustice to ever to be committed on the planet, Jesus was accused of sin he did not do. He was beaten beyond recognition. He died one of the most gruesome deaths known to man to pay for sin he did not commit. God is bigger than sin. He is bigger than everything that happens to us. God turned the greatest evil ever done in the world to the greatest good ever done in the world. Jesus' undeserved death was used by God to pay for our sin, to adopt us into his family, and to conquer Satan, sin and death once and for all.

This is why I love our great and mighty providential God. If he can take the sin done to Jesus and use it for such incredible good, and if he can take the sin done to Joseph and use it for incredible good, and if he can even take the sin done by his brothers and use it for good, that means he can take whatever sin is

done to us and whatever sin is done by us and twist it around for our good and his glory, and because of this we do not lose hope, no matter what we face. We are Christians. Our hope is not in ourselves. Our hope is not in our circumstances. Our hope is in our almighty providential God.



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