Joseph **Genesis 37:1-4**
Trinity CRC, June 22, 2025 Rev. Richard J. deLange
Joseph Summer Series intro; Teen Challenge presentation

37 [1]Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.
[2] This is the account of Jacob's family line.
Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.
[3] Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. [4] When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Congregation

What do you know about Joseph? Do you think about him as a prominent Bible figure? And what would you say needs to be noticed or highlighted from his life and his story? I don't know that I've ever thought too much about why God included the story of Joseph at the end of Genesis. I've read the Joseph story many times and there are great messages here but why such a long story compared to all the patriarchs in this book? Joseph is not really a central figure in the Bible like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. After Genesis, he only gets mentioned a few times. But he gets the biggest part of this book!

The Lord willing, over the summer months, Pastor Tomas and I will be answering questions about Joseph, looking at the captivating story of this spoiled Hebrew teenager turned ruler of Egypt through a long and wild series of events. We'll start today with a bit of an intro to the young man.

A Teenager

I want to start by noting that Joseph was once a teenager. That ties in nicely, doesn't it, with our presentation from TEEN Challenge! Anyway, we pick this story when Joseph is 17 years old. He's got his driver's license and his independence now. Just kidding. He's a high school dropout. No, that's not true either. Rather, it seems he's like most 17 year old boys in his time. He's doing what his father did, taking up the family business. He's a shepherd along with his father and brothers. He's a shepherd like his father Jacob, his grandfather Isaac and his great grandfather Abraham. Those guys are called The Patriarchs—the Fathers.

I wonder if Joseph ever had a longing to do something other than shepherding. I don't know if he spent time thinking about what he wants to be when he grows up. That's not really something kids back then did. You just follow in the family plan. We don't always realize today how blessed we are to pursue our personal passions and interests. That's a rather modern phenomenon and primarily in wealthier places.

Nonetheless, trying to figure out what God wants you to do is kind of tough when you're 17. It's good if you're even asking God what to do rather than just pushing ahead with what you want to do. But I'm pretty sure that Joseph never dreamed of the life he ended up living, neither the lows nor the highs. He probably just pictured himself being a shepherd. Perhaps because of his father's special favour, Joseph maybe thought he'd be the head or leader of the family business, even though he was the youngest at the time. We won't get into his dream in the coming section of the chapter other than to say that we know God gave him the dream of his brothers and parents bowing down to him. But in his 17 year old mind, I don't think he didn't imagine life much beyond where he was—in Canaan.

At what time he decided to trust God with his life, we can't say for certain. Given that life in Joseph's personal world as a Hebrew was not filled with a host of religious choices, it's possible that Joseph just took on the faith of his father and mother from a young age. Many of us do that too. As parents, you train your children in what you believe and when you live that out, your children catch the faith. As some say, "Faith is both taught and caught."

One thing we know is that Joseph's father Jacob, mentioned right in v.1, was following in his father's footsteps, was taking up the family calling and the family faith in God. V.1 reads,

> *Gen 37:1* *Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.*

Canaan is the promised land—promised by God. Abraham received the promise, he left the land for a time and then returned and settled there. The same thing happened to Jacob. Jacob returned and Esau, his brother, departed. The land, we read, was not big enough to hold both families and all their herds. The same thing happened with Abraham. The Lord was blessing his children repeatedly.

Now Joseph and his brothers are living in the land of their father, the land of Canaan, the promised land to the Patriarchs.

Think about this, young people. It's important to note for the sake of our youth here that Joseph—this young guy—gets a significant role in the story of God's work in this world. He had some good qualities which come to light in the following chapters; some say he was a mostly innocent child. But others argue that he also has bad qualities.

But think for a moment: why did God have a special plan for Joseph? In one sense, the plan of God for every life is special, unique and important. We can trust God with our lives. Even if we consider our life fairly ordinary or maybe even difficult, we can know that God is unfolding his plan for us. All we get to see is that young Joseph, despite the injustices he suffers, seems to have put his faith into practice which becomes clearer as the story unfolds. I think we can learn from that and take it to heart as a good life lesson.

Joseph took up the faith of his father Jacob that he learned at home and was applying it in the land of his father and forefathers. And he would apply it in his life later on in Egypt. It's what he knew and what guided him when the going got rough.

So, first of all, I think it's good to note that Joseph was a teenager through whom God was fulfilling his plan.

From a Complicated Family

Secondly, note that this teenager came from a complicated family.

Many of us, I think, can relate to that. Who has a perfect family? I have no complaints about the family I grew up in and no complaints about our own children. But is my family perfect? Absolutely not. I was the youngest of six kids. We had our squabbles, but we all love one another and still get along. My parents pointed me to Jesus in the best way they knew. My faith was taught but also caught by the genuine faith of my parents living it out and our family practising it. Even imperfect families can still be shaped by our faith in God.

Raising our own kids, Patsy and I tried to do even better than our parents. I don't know if we succeeded. But I know we failed at times or could have done better.

All parents realize at some point that even if they do things right with each of their own kids—textbook right—there's no guarantee that the child will receive it all well or understand and appreciate what you are doing. They could still blame you for doing things wrong and hurting them. They could reject your faith. And when you have any number of children—Jacob had at least 13—you realize that what works perfectly well for one child might not work for the next. They could even say it caused trauma. Maybe I'm overstating it a bit but parents with adult children know that it's not that far off. I'm not for a moment saying that having children is not a blessing. Children are great but that doesn't mean parenting isn't sometimes very challenging.

And as parents we need to be brutally honest about our own sinfulness and biases and the potential harm we cause to our families without even realizing it, which is clearly evident in our story today. Imagine being in Jacob's home.

Try to picture the pressures in the home where a man has 2 wives, one who he clearly loves more than the other. And he makes no secret about that. In addition, each wife has a servant—Bilhah and Zilphah mentioned in v.2—with whom Jacob also has children. So, he's got children from 4 different women. They're all living and working together. And he also makes no secret about the fact that his youngest son here (Benjamin comes later) is his favourite and even treats him special, causing resentment in the other sons. I can't imagine how much dysfunction there must have been. Jealousy and competitiveness. Anger. And our text even mentions that Joseph's brothers "hated him and could not speak a kind word to him" (v.2). That's pretty messed up, isn't it?

We don't want to make excuses for it. Instead, we should all aim to be the best people we can be, whether as parents or siblings or just people in general, young or old.

But for that to happen, we need to be leaning more and more into the power of Christ in us. Jacob had met with God and been spared by God numerous times. Certainly, he knew the love of God. Moreover, he had the promises of God to hold on to—the promise of a land and the promise to make him into a great nation for God's purposes.

As much as that's true, Jacob wasn't the best at living out his faith in God. He didn't love his family with the perfect love that God himself was showing to him. Instead, Jacob played favourites as a husband and father. He didn't seem to fully appreciate the blessing of all and of each of his children. Sure, he could wear his big family like a feather in his hat and strut around if he wanted to, noting that his quiver was full. However, by God's standards for a godly husband and father, Jacob missed the mark, as do we all in more ways than we might recognize.

And Joseph may not have been too much different. We can't be absolutely sure what it means in v.2 that Joseph brought a bad report to his father about his brothers. Was it a legitimate report of what his brothers were doing wrong? Or did he make it up as the spoiled "baby of the family" in order to keep his privileged position with his father? It isn't clear from the text. People try to make the case either way.

We'll have more time in the coming weeks to dissect some of Joseph's virtues and possible vices, his character strengths or his flaws as a brother. But those are not the point of this story.

We see for starters that this man comes from a messed-up family but that doesn't stop God from using him. I hope you've seen and heard from our Teen Challenge guest and the video as well that God is more powerful than our vices and he gets the glory for our virtues. Moreover, when we set our hearts on following him, he can turn our bad choices and experiences to his good purposes.

The Bible's story is that imperfect people are used by God for his perfect purposes. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were imperfect and the earlier chapters of Genesis don't hide their imperfection. It all builds on the fall of Adam and Eve and shows just how sin permeates our lives. *There is no one righteous, not even one*, as Romans tells us.

Endowed with God's Favour

What we need to see, finally today, is that God's favour makes all the difference, dear friends. It's not our giftedness or our skills that earn us God's favour. It's also not our obedience or good works that earn us God's favour; those things are the fruit of God's favour, not the reason for it.

It's this favour of God that is hinted at in our text too when we get to v.3 and instead of reading about Jacob, the verse calls him Israel. God had renamed Jacob to Israel. Jacob means deceiver but "The Hebrew name 'Israel' typically means 'one who wrestles with God' or 'God prevails'. This comes from the story of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel after he wrestled with an angel (representing

God) in a dream." As one writer put it, "The wrestling wasn't a distant struggle, but a part of his journey towards God, and the name Israel became a symbol of Jacob's ongoing relationship with the Divine." So, Jacob's struggle is marked by a desire to get nearer to God and his perseverance—marked by his wrestling—was blessed by God. You could say that it is by God's grace that Jacob learned to walk with God and trust the promise of God for the land.

Likewise, as we read through the coming chapters, we'll see how the Lord was with Joseph too. God always shows himself faithful and loving. God draws near to his children and blesses them. In chapter 39, as just one example, Joseph is in the house of Potiphar after being sold to him as a slave. But Genesis 39:2 says the Lord was with Joseph. That's a big deal!! And in v.3 it says Potiphar notices that the Lord is with Joseph and is blessing all Joseph does, giving him success. It is God's grace that works good in us and through us—even in the toughest of circumstances—so that we are a blessing in this world.

Ultimately, it is because of God's promises and his grace for sinners that Joseph is called by God to save his family—the nation of Israel—by going into Egypt. Even as he is a blessing to Egypt, God is preparing the way for him to save his family. God works through all the sin of Israel's family and specifically the trials endured by Joseph to bring about the deliverance of Israel as a nation. As Joseph would later say (in paraphrase), "God worked it all for good to bring about the salvation of his people."

That is how God worked then and has worked through the centuries to bring about the ultimate salvation. Not the salvation of one nation—Israel—from slavery under another; rather, the world's bondage to sin and Satan is redeemed fully and freely through Jesus alone. This is how Joseph points us to Jesus.

So, dear friends, as children, teenagers, and adults, as people from good families and those whose life feels more messed up, remember we are redeemed by Jesus. We all need that redemption equally. We all receive redemption from the same God who promised the Patriarchs the land of Canaan and brought it about through Joseph. For us, Joseph is a type of Christ, a model of something—SomeOne—better who was to come. Now we live in the certainty that Christ has come, the work of saving the world is complete. Our calling now is to follow him. Let us put our faith in him each and every day in joys and struggles. Trust his plan for our lives. Serve faithfully each day in his name. Live in the certainty that he is at work in you and through you, even when you might not know how. He does.

Amen.