

Joseph Sold As a Slave by His Own Brothers

Genesis 37:25-36

Genesis 37:25-36 - *“And they sat down to eat a meal. Then they lifted their eyes and looked, and there was a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead with their camels, bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry them down to Egypt. ²⁶ So Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother and our flesh.” And his brothers listened. ²⁸ Then Midianite traders passed by; so the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.*

²⁹ Then Reuben returned to the pit, and indeed Joseph was not in the pit; and he tore his clothes. ³⁰ And he returned to his brothers and said, “The lad is no more; and I, where shall I go?”

³¹ So they took Joseph’s tunic, killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the tunic in the blood. ³² Then they sent the tunic of many colors, and they brought it to their father and said, “We have found this. Do you know whether it is your son’s tunic or not?”

³³ And he recognized it and said, “It is my son’s tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces.” ³⁴ Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, “For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning.” Thus his father wept for him.

³⁶ Now the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guard.”

Background Notes

Except for Reuben, the oldest brother, and Benjamin, who was too young at the time, all of Joseph’s brothers wanted to kill him because of their jealousy and hatred for him. Reuben fully intended to rescue Joseph out of the pit where they had thrown him, but while Reuben was away from the scene, other events took place. A band of Ishmaelites or Midianite traders “happened” to pass by.

The fact that they are called both Ishmaelites and Midianites throughout this section is not a contradiction in the Bible. Remember, both Ishmael and Midian were sons of Abraham (Genesis 16 & Genesis 25). Their descendants settled to the east, and there was some intermingling and some intermarriage. So this group of traders could be called Ishmaelites or Midianites, as the terms can be used somewhat interchangeably. In any case, there is no contradiction or error in the Bible here.

In verse 25 we read that these traders were coming from Gilead, an area east of the Jordan River. They were on their way to Egypt bearing spices, balm, and myrrh. The balm was used for medicinal purposes, and the myrrh was used in the Egyptian embalming process. These traders “just happened” to be passing by at this point.

Judah persuaded his brothers to sell Joseph to the traders, who could sell him as a slave in Egypt. So instead of killing him, the brothers could get rid of him - and make some money, too! The brothers assumed that Joseph would probably die in Egypt, but at least they would not be *directly* guilty of his blood.

So they sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver, the going rate for slaves in those days. This reminds us of our Lord, who was betrayed for the price of a slave by one of his own “band of brothers,” his disciples. Joseph’s brothers then deceived their father Jacob into thinking that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. The brothers thought that the “Joseph case” was closed - but the story was not over yet!

Doctrinal Points

1. “All things work together for good to those who love God.”

Where do we see the truth of Romans 8:28 taught in this chapter? It’s all the way through the chapter! Notice that Romans 8:28 doesn’t say, “All things are good” - it says that God ***works all things together for good*** – in the lives of those who love Him. There’s not much that’s “good” in Genesis 37. It wasn’t good that Joseph’s brothers hated him and that they wanted to kill him. It wasn’t good that they sold Joseph as a slave. But God took all these unhappy events and *worked them together for good*.

There is no such thing as events “just happening” in God’s universe! **God was in complete control of all the events in Joseph’s life!** God controlled the fact that the Ishmaelite traders came along at just this point. God was in control when the Midianites sold Joseph to Potiphar, a high-ranking Egyptian official. Because Joseph loved God, and thus was obedient to Him, God was working all these negative events together for His good purposes in Joseph’s life.

The greatest demonstration of this doctrinal point, of course, was in the life of our Lord Jesus. Again, we see the parallel between Joseph and Christ. The fact that our Lord’s own people did not receive Him was not good. The fact that He was betrayed for the price of a slave was not good. The fact that He scourged and condemned to die was not good. But Hebrews 12:2 says, *Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross.*” God was in control through all of these awful events. He worked them all together for the most amazing good - His plan for the salvation of mankind! Our salvation was worked out through all of these awful events. In ***all things***, God works for the good of those who love Him.

Are bad things happening in your life right now? I think we all can identify here. Things don't go smoothly all the time. Bad things happen, and they're not easy to handle. But take heart! You can be sure that if you love God, all these things will work together for your ultimate good.

2. "Whatever a man sows, that will he also reap."

The truth of Galatians 6:7 is taught in the brothers' lives, and in Jacob's life. The brothers would reap what they sowed in the years to come. Their descendants would be slaves in Egypt for many long and bitter years. And even though Joseph would eventually have the opportunity to forgive his brothers, the "reaping" of a guilty conscience began right then.

Look at what the brothers said in the future, in Genesis 42:21: *"Then they said to one another, 'We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us.'" How many nights did those brothers lie awake, haunted by the memory of young Joseph's desperate cries of anguish and pleading? Whatever a man sows that will he also reap.*

This divine principle also worked itself out in the life of Jacob. Jacob's own sons deceived him, using the blood of a killed goat. Why did God allow this to happen? Do you remember that Jacob had used the skin of a killed goat to deceive his own father Isaac into thinking that he was Esau? Now the tables were turned! Jacob was still reaping what he had sown so many years before. Whatever a man sows, that will he also reap.

God has created a moral universe. We cannot get away with wrongdoing. Whether it is a nation or an individual, whether it is non-Christian or a Christian - God's moral laws cannot be broken without consequences.

This doctrinal point has an application for each one of us. It works in both a positive way and a negative way. As Galatians 6:8 says, *"For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life."* Joseph is an example of positive sowing, and he reaped in a positive way. His brothers are an example of negative sowing, and they reaped what they sowed.

So the question for us is, "What and how are we sowing in our lives right now?" Remember, whatever a man sows, that will he also reap.

Practical Application

You can rejoice, even when your world falls apart.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says, *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*

Can you really rejoice always? Can you really give thanks in everything, even when your world is falling apart? Yes – if you are a believer! How is the believer able to do this? Because of knowing and internalizing our first doctrinal point: *“All things work together for good to those who love God.” (Romans 8:28)*

Now this doesn't mean that we're happy when our world falls apart. We don't say, “Praise the Lord! I'm so happy that my world is falling apart.” Of course not! Happiness and joy are not the same thing. We can rejoice even when we are unhappy - even when we are going through times of sorrow and grief, and even when our world is falling apart. Why? Because we know that God is in full control, and we can be confident that He is working things together for our ultimate good. Romans 8:29 reveals that **His ultimate good is to make us more like Jesus!**

In Genesis 37, Joseph's world fell apart. Think of Joseph pleading with his brothers not to leave him in the pit - but his cries of anguish were ignored. Think of Joseph being taken by strangers - far away from his life of privilege, and everything he had ever known. Think of Joseph being becoming a slave in a strange land - where he did not even speak the language. However, from the rest of the story of Joseph, we know that Joseph rose above his circumstances, because he recognized that God was in control.

In Genesis 37, Jacob's world also fell apart - but what a contrast! Look at Jacob's reaction when his world fell apart. He tore his clothes and put on sackcloth. He wept and mourned and refused to be comforted. *“And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, “For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning.” Thus his father wept for him” (v35).* Jacob failed to recognize the providence of God in all the events of our lives.

Just this past week, I received an end-of-the-year form letter from Robert Foster, the author of “The Challenge,” a bi-weekly devotional letter. He said: “Past, present, and future, the goodness of the Lord. This past year has been one of both opportunities and challenges. My stepmother died in March. My only sister, Kathryn, passed away in April with cancer, and my wife Marian went to be with the Lord in August. As I shared with you then, *“The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him.”(Nahum 1:7)*”

Robert Foster is a believer who is rising above very difficult circumstances, and he is able to rejoice even when his world is falling apart.

Today Margie and I will be going to go to a local hospital to visit a young woman who is dying of cancer. Diane probably has just a few weeks to live, but she is rising above the pain and the great earthly disappointment of her present circumstances. She is rejoicing in the Lord! Humanly speaking, her world is “falling apart” - but she is rejoicing because she knows that God is in full control, and that He is working all of it together for her good. And His ultimate good in her life is to make her more like Jesus!

It is not easy, but you can rejoice even when your world falls apart.