

CCLEB SERMON

NOTES



SUNDAY JANUARY 18, 2026
GENESIS 37:1-36

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WHAT ARE YOU DOING, GOD?!



Have you ever been faced with really hard things, or very unexpected changes, and can't see the good that can result from it and ever wondered "God, What are you doing?!"

We are starting the last section of Genesis about Joseph. And while these stories primarily evolve around Joseph, Judah, the fourth born son of Jacob, is the one who emerges from within the story of Joseph as the most important character. And Judah emerges for one main reason, and you'll just have to wait to find out why.

Now last week we left the book of Genesis with Esau the brother of Jacob, assuming the identity of Edom. Edom rejected God and rejected his family, and rejected the covenant, and rejected the land of the covenant, in essence rejecting his identity as Esau and became Edom. At the end of chapter 36 Edom was living "in the land" in the wilderness east of southern Canaan. And Edom's descendants, the Edomites, were an advancing society that went from clans - to tribes - to cities - all centered around power and protection and self-reliance. But that is not what Jacob and his family the Israelites were doing. In contrast to Edom's advancing society... Jacob and the Israelites were headed to slavery in Egypt - for 430 years. God what are you doing?

We are going to read the first part of the chapter and as we read it use the question - "God, What are you doing?!" as a lens to see this passage. **Genesis 37:1-17**.

On Friday October 11th 2024, I was sitting at my desk at home prepping for Sunday's teaching and my niece called me from Spain. And she called to tell me that my 56 year old brother Craig, her dad, died unexpectedly that morning. I was home alone at the time, I made it out to the living room still on the phone before collapsing to the floor in sobs. My world stopped. My brother had died. It was really hard, very unexpected, and I couldn't see the good that could result from it. "God what are you doing?!" A year and a half later, and still quite sad, I don't have the answer to that question.

In **chapter 37**.. a whole family experiences loss. Jacob loses his youngest son, Joseph's brothers lose the brother they hated, and Joseph loses his family and home, his privileged life and his freedom. God what are you doing?!

Now if we are going to answer the question “God What are you doing?” for Joseph then it has to be answered through the context of what we already know from our Genesis studies. So far in Genesis, the LORD has been involved in every generation from Adam to Jacob. The LORD’s desire in all those generations was to have a relationship with his chosen creation - mankind, and that relationship would be marked by the LORD’s covenant faithfulness and mankind’s responding to the LORD’s covenant faithfulness with trust. Yet in each generation mankind had to learn to trust the LORD, and every generation learned that through hard seasons. Sometimes we call that the “school of hard knocks”. But what they learned and what we have the privilege of witnessing in their lives, is that God was always faithful. Always. This story is about God’s covenant faithfulness.

Now if God was always faithful, always, from Adam to Jacob Jacob, then we can expect that the LORD will be faithful in the story of Joseph too. And, if God was always faithful from Adam to Joseph - the whole book of Genesis, we can expect the LORD to be faithful in our lives as well.

So let's see if we can spot indicators that God is up to something in this story of Joseph that will show his covenant faithfulness.

In **Genesis 37:1** we see that in contrast to Jacob’s brother Edom, and Edom’s advancing society - Jacob is still living in the land of Canaan as a foreigner - essentially moving his flocks and clan wherever there is pasture and water. But the key word in **verse 1** here is foreigner. This was the land that God had called Abraham too, and the land promised to Abraham Isaac and Jacob in the covenant, yet here Jacob is a foreigner. We know from Israel’s history this land will become their land but not yet. And on reflecting on that it seems that whatever God is up to, God wants Jacob and the Israelites to be foreigners in the land at least for a season. It's interesting isn't it? God wants them to be foreigners for a season?

Several thousand years later, the same bible that contains Genesis has a letter we call Hebrews. And in **Hebrews 11:13** we see that this quality of God’s children being foreigners is much broader than just describing Jacob’s family in **Genesis 37:1**. So if it was true for Jacob in that season of life, and it was true for the Hebrews in their season of life, then it seems that God wants his children to not have an identity based on where they live, but rather an identity based on their relationship with God.

WHY FOREIGNERS?

God wants his children to have an identity based on the relationship with him.

So Jacob and his family are living as foreigners in Canaan and in **verse 2** jumps into the life of Jacob’s young teenager Joseph. In Hebrew there is a word in this verse describing Joseph that is often translated as “lad or youth” whose root words include “to shake off”/ “overthrow”/ and “roaring”. Some translators suggest the picture of a young lion shaking his mane and roaring. That really describes a seventeen year old teen doesn't it?

“Seventeen” - what might you expect from a seventeen year old who is the youngest son? I know what I was like at 17.. I certainly tried out my roar a few times.

Now what we will see in this story is that Joseph is presented as an immature, self absorbed, self righteous, know it all, with lots of grandiose thinking, who is also naive, and the end of **verse 2** informs us that Joseph is also a tattletale who uses information about his brothers to his advantage. Joseph sees his brothers acting improperly - probably some form of evil - and reports that back to dad. What does Joseph gain by that? Self-elevation - Joseph elevated himself above the behaviors of his brothers by giving a bad report about his brothers to his father. They look bad, he looks good.

Now we know that Joseph's mom Rachel was Jacob's favorite - Jacob's first love. And Rachel's son Joseph is also Jacob's favorite and the text tells us that Joseph "loved" Joseph more than his brothers, and Jacob publicly displays this favoritism by giving Joseph a beautiful robe in **verse 3**. A set of clothing was worth a lot of money already, but to have a special robe had value and significance beyond money.

The exact description of Joseph's robe is uncertain, the traditional interpretation of "multicolored" is unlikely because of the extreme expense of dyes. More likely the robe is multiple panels or patterns of different fabrics, with ornate hems etc. Some translations say variegated. But the most important detail was the robe's length on the arms and legs. One of the root words used to describe Joseph's robe here indicates extremities... so the robe was long to the ankles and long sleeved.

There is much archeological evidence from ancient Mesopotamia - the Akkadians, Sumerians, etc.. that only elites, officials, priests wore long robes, while shepherds, soldiers and laborers and slaves, wore short sleeve garments.



Biblical commentary from elsewhere in the OT tells us that these robes symbolically differentiated the wearer of the robe from the general public. Whoever wore these robes had an elevated position and status. In the horrible story of the rape of Tamar in **2 Samuel 13:18-19**. Tamar has one of these robes. In Tamar's story the "Beautiful robe" is the same in Hebrew that describes Joseph's robe **Genesis 37**. Tamar rips the long sleeve robe which seems to proclaim to the public that because of the shameful acts of her brother she is no longer the elevated virgin daughter of the king with status, but now has been reduced to a lower status. In her case, sex-slave. Interesting that both Joseph's and Tamar's robes get destroyed, and both Joseph and Tamar are treated as slaves.

As one would expect then, Joseph with his robe that elevated his status from his brothers, is not liked by his brothers as we see in **verse 4** where it says they "hated" him and could not speak a kind word to him. So **verse 4-8** is a progression of the brothers' hatred towards Joseph - as it says in **verse 8**, after Joseph tells them of his first dream that the brothers "hated him all the more".

"Hate" in Hebrew is more concrete than how we think of it. It carries the meaning of "rejection" - as in they rejected Joseph and his favored position with their dad.

Well Joseph's first dream insults his brothers, and it is followed by a second dream which adds his mother and father to the insult and of course Jacob responds. Think that through, if my 28 year old son told me I was going to literally bow to him he would probably hear my laughter the whole way from Ohio.

So Jacob sends Joseph to go see how his brothers are doing with the flock. Two interesting things here. First we know from later on in the text - Joseph is wearing his special robe. Picture a shepherd boy walking through the fields with his special robe. And second the brothers are with the flocks back near Shechem - the same Shechem where the second and third brother, Simeon and Levi, had deceived the local men and ended up killing all the men after the rape of their sister Dinah. So Shechem is not a good place for these brothers- so why did they go back there? I don't know! But the name Shechem in this story creates a foreshadow that something bad or evil is about to happen involving the same brothers.

So Joseph, again wearing his coat that gives him elevated status, goes looking for his brother near Shechem and a seemingly random no-name man sends Joseph in the right direction towards Dothan. It may seem random and by chance that there was a person there to give Joseph directions. However - every part of this story is providential. Let me show you. Joseph just happens to run into a man who had been close enough in proximity to Joseph's brothers to hear them say they were going to Dothan. Right! And this "Dothan" דֹּתָן means "place of judgment or place of decision". It is at Dothan that Joseph's brothers "judge" Joseph as worthy of death. But God, who is in all the details, causes their judgment to fail and God's plan to prevail.

DOTHAN דֹּתָן

Place of judgment or place of decision.



One more small lesson in this about God's providence, the man from Shechem who gave directions is a model for all of us. His name is never given, he never gets credit for being part of Joseph's story and Joseph finding his brothers. And he probably never learns how God had him there in that exact spot and time to use him.

Here is the truth, God uses people in his plans who are willing to be nameless and willing to be used in seemingly little ways and never know it. He was just giving directions. And God used him.

Back to our story - so the brothers have all this emotion of hatred and jealousy towards Joseph and of course then they respond the way they do when Joseph shows up. Caution for all of us: Hatred and jealousy are strong emotions that birth bad choices.

Hatred and jealousy
birth bad choices.

And of all the brothers that are involved in this story note here in the rest of the chapter that in addition to Joseph, only Reuben, the first born, and Judah the fourth born, are named. As I said in the beginning.. Over the next fourteen chapters Judah is the one who emerges from within the story of Joseph as the most important character.

Now in light of that, as we read this next section note Reuben and Judah and the roles they play. **Genesis 37:18- 28**. So the brothers see Joseph the dreamer in the distance and plan to kill him and blame it on wild animals but in **verse 21** Reuben steps in to rescue Joseph but he fails.

This is Reuben the oldest, who has the birthright, meaning he is responsible for the family after Jacob. And Reuben is the one who tried to usurp his father's role as family leader by sleeping with his father's wife in **Genesis 35:22**. The same one. And now here Reuben knows that killing Joseph the Dreamer is wrong and tries to rescue Joseph through deceiving his own brothers. Note this is more deception that we have seen in every generation from Adam & Eve till now. But Reuben's plan doesn't go the way he wants. The brothers listen to Reuben - strip Joseph of his long sleeved robe - sign of rejection - and throw him in a dry pit, and then in **verse 25** they go have a meal.

But while they are eating.. they see a caravan of Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt to trade in healing products. Ishmaelites are the descendants of Ishmael the son of Abraham and Egyptian slave Hagar - Abraham's 2nd wife. Ishmael was the brother's great uncle. These Ishmaelites would have been like second cousins. And Judah the fourth born, having seen the Ishmaelites, speaks up with a different plan of Joseph. Judah suggests selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites for profit. Questionable values? Yes, just wait till next week. And yet, Judah is the brother who I said emerges from within the story of Joseph as the most important character.

Then in **verse 28** we see another group, the Midianite traders and guess what? The Midianites are also family... the Midianites are the descendants of Abraham through his marriage to his third wife Keturah in **Genesis 25**. So more cousins. Everyone involved here are descendants of 2nd or 3rd wives except Joseph. Are you getting a picture of how ugly of a family mess the selling of Joseph is? The Midianites pull Joseph from the pit, and the Jacob's sons sell him to the Ishmaelites - all three family groups involved. I wonder if there was slave bidding for Joseph between the Midianites and the Ishmaelites? 20 shekels is two years pay for a shepherd. And the Ishmaelites took Joseph to Egypt. Note the sequence of being brought down -humbled - for Joseph. Strip him of his robe - throw in a pit - send down to Egypt. This is a series of humiliations. Could it get worse?

Now as the meaning of the name "Dothan" that meant "place of Judgment" or "place of decision" foreshadowed Joseph's brother's judgement on Joseph which came true at Dothan, so also does the meaning of the name Egypt foreshadows what Joseph experiences. Egypt in Hebrew is Misrayim and it carries the sense of constraint, confinement, oppression and affliction - which is what happened to Joseph and later Jacob's descendants.

"EGYPT" IN HEBREW IS:
"MISRAYIM" מִצְרַיִם

Misrayim: constraint,
confinement, oppression
and affliction

Now we tend to focus on what happens to Joseph in this story, but let's focus for a moment on Reuben and Judah, the only other brothers named here. Reuben had a plan to save Joseph's life and return him home to Jacob. But while Reuben's plan started off good, the other brothers were on board, that plan didn't work. Which means then, Reuben the firstborn, the one who is responsible by order of birthright, failed.

Judah, now being contrasted to Reuben, launched a plan to sell Joseph. And that is the plan that ended up saving Joseph's life, and if you jump ten chapters ahead, it's the plan that saved all of their lives in the end. Interesting that it is Judah's plan - intended for evil, that God uses to save the Israelites. Well Reuben in **verse 29** comes back to the pit, finds Joseph missing, and tears his own robe or garments. Tearing your own robe is a symbolic gesture of intense grief.

Interesting there is a lot of emphasis on clothing and robes in this story - Joseph's special long sleeve robe - which get stripped off by his brothers, and then Reuben's shepherding garments that Reuben tears in grief, and note here in the next section, there is more about robes and garments.

Genesis 37:30-35

Jacob is deceived by his sons, including Reuben the first born, and Judah who emerges from within the story of Joseph as the most important character. Both of these brothers are involved in the deception of their father. And what they used for the deception is a Joseph's robe, his garment, and goat blood. Now pause there, where else have we seen "clothing and goat" used for deception with Jacob?

Genesis 27:14-15.

So when Jacob deceived his father Isaac into giving Jacob the firstborn blessing, Jacob used goats and clothes in the deception. And likewise in the story of Joseph in **Genesis 37:31-32**, when Jacob himself is deceived by his own sons, Jacob's sons use goat and clothing to deceive Jacob. Genesis has so many repeating stories. Now we have seen deception return to the deceiver before. Why? As Jacob was repeatedly deceived by Laban earlier on and now by his own sons, one could say the deception returned to the deceiver for the deceiver's transformation to righteous living... meaning so Jacob could learn from it.

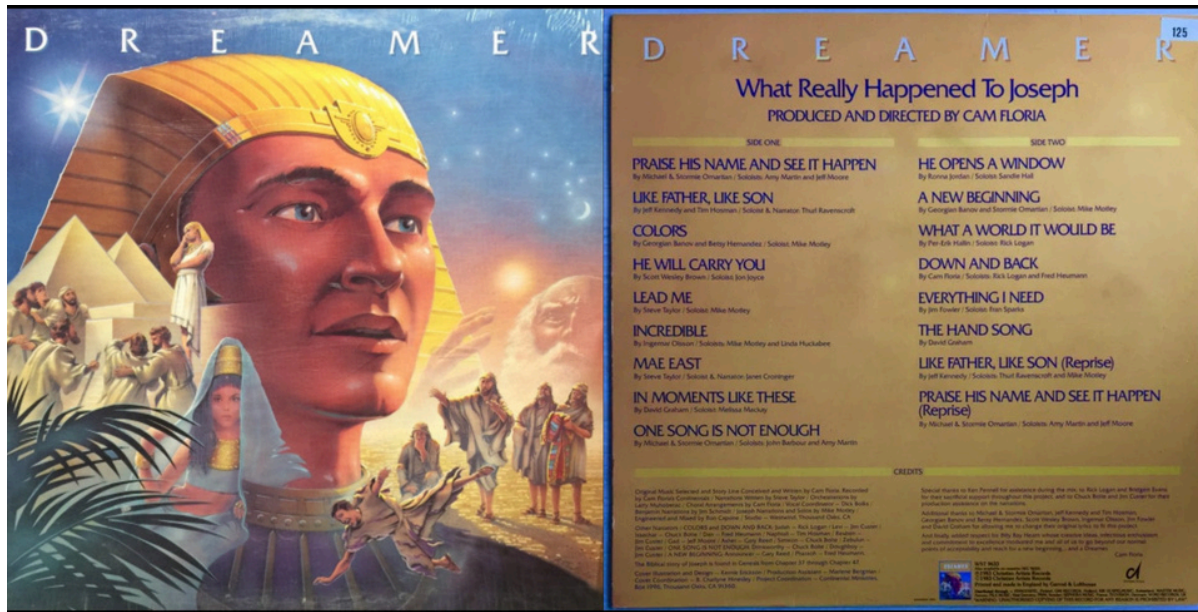
Perhaps this is part of the ongoing grief we see from Jacob in **verse 34**... that he is now broken further from his own choices. We saw Jacob weeping regarding what his choices cost him, when he met Rachel at the well in **Genesis 29:11**. We saw Jacob weeping on his Esau's neck **Genesis 33:4** when they were reunited after twenty years... again look what his deception had cost Jacob. And now in **Genesis 37:34** Jacob is mourning deeply. Broken-ness. The deception returned to the deceiver for the deceiver's transformation.

In **verse 36** this part of the narrative ends by telling us that at the same time Reuben and Judah and the sons were deceiving Jacob, Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, a high official in Egypt. I can't wait to tell you about Potiphar in **chapter 39**. But next week is all about Judah. And guess what we will see? More deception, but not just deception, deception returning to the deceiver for his own transformation.

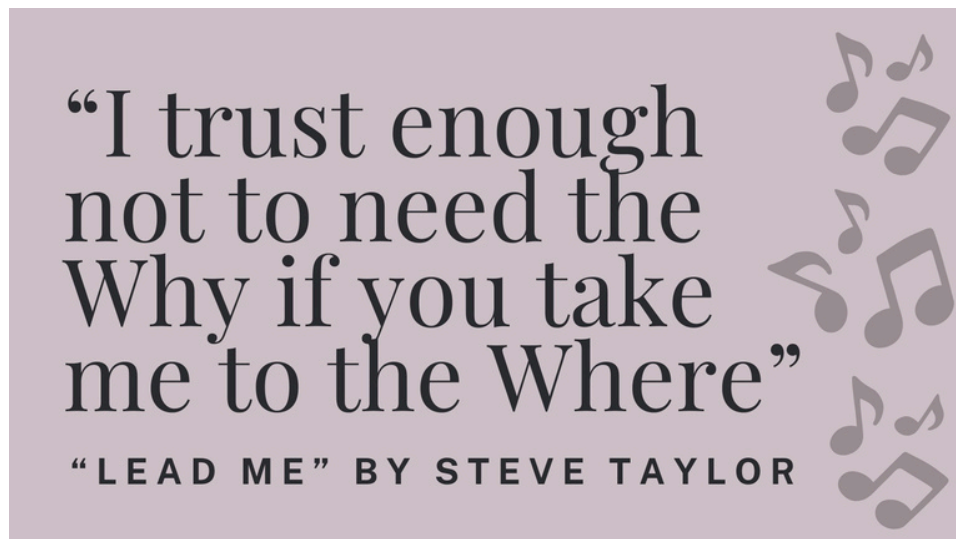
Now considering this chapter, there is no resolution in this chapter is there? Judah loses a son, evil brothers lose their brother by their choice, Joseph loses his family, and home land and freedom. Deception results in so much pain for everyone involved. And we get to the end of **Chapter 37** and nothing is resolved.. actually it only gets worse! So let's go back to our question "God what are you doing?!"

I don't know that in this life I will ever have the answer to that question related to my brother's death. But I do know that I have peace about that question. And with that peace I no longer need that answer. How did that peace happen?

In 1983 the Continental singers released a musical called DREAMER. It is the musical narration of the life of Joseph.. I discovered it as a teen, loved it, and played it for my own kids all the time. This album was playing before the service as you walked in.



In one of the songs about Joseph called “Lead Me” it has these lyrics, “I trust enough not to need the Why if you take me to the Where”



Here is the answer to how I have peace: We can ask God the “Why?” questions, we can ask God the “What are you doing?” questions - but if we are going to have peace about what is happening in our lives, it's not going to be because we figure out the why or the what! Rather we have peace because of surrendering the need for knowing why or what to God, which creates space for us to trust in the LORD's covenant faithfulness - his plan, his time, his way. Trust that God will take care of you through what you are experiencing. And that is about your own transformation.

Philippians 4:6-7

BONUS

CONTENT:

Genesis 37:10. Was Rachel still alive? The text seems to suggest that Jacob saying “will your mother and I...” indicate that Rachel was still alive, which means this story started before Benjamin was born. Now as you know these two dreams are prophetic - and the “eleven stars - brothers, and the moon and sun”, will bow to Joseph. All of that comes true in later chapters except Joseph’s mother Rachel who has already passed. This leads me to suspect that “sun and moon” is symbolic only of reverse order of the parent level bowing to the offspring level” when it should be the opposite. So is Rachel alive at the time of this story? Perhaps, but....

Genesis 37:10 Pairs of dreams - they come in twos. Joseph had two dreams; there are two dreams later in prison, one from the Cupbearer, and one from the chief Baker, and then later Pharaoh has two dreams. All of them come true. So why pairs of two? I have no idea.

Genesis 37:29 Why was Reuben surprised? There is much discussion about why Reuben didn’t know about the sale of Joseph to the Israelites. Where was he, where did he go? Some suggest that the brothers including Reuben were having a meal away from the pit where Joseph was. When the Midianites came by, they saw the stripped boy in the pit, pulled him out and made a quick profit by selling him to the Ishmaelites, unbeknownst to Reuben. Thus it was the Midianites who sold Joseph into slavery. The problem with that interpretation is that Joseph says twice later on in **Genesis 45:5** and **Genesis 50:20** that his brothers sold him into slavery. I think it is better to interpret that Reuben had stepped away for a time in which the sale happened without him knowing. What was he doing? I have no idea!

Joseph’ story points to Jesus. That is called “Typological forecasting” of Jesus. Here are the ways that appears.

1. **Genesis 37:3** Joseph is the uniquely beloved son of the father. **Matthew 3:17**
2. **Genesis 37:13-14** Joseph is sent by the Father to the brothers. **John 5:36-38 & 6:38**
3. **Genesis 37:4 & 37:8** Joseph is rejected by his own brothers. **John 1:11**
4. **Genesis 37:5-11** Joseph was hated because of divine revelation. **John 10:36, Mark 14:62**
5. **Genesis 37:19** Joseph was mocked as a dreamer. **Luke 23:35, Matthew 27:29**
6. **Genesis 37:18** They plotted to kill Joseph. **John 11:53**
7. **Genesis 37:24** Joseph was thrown into a pit. Descent precedes exaltation. **Matthew 12:40, Psalm 88**
8. **Genesis 37:23** Joseph was stripped of his garment. **Matthew 27:28, John 19:23**
9. **Genesis 37:28** Joseph was sold for silver. **Matthew 26:14-15**
10. **Genesis 37:28** Joseph was handed over to Gentiles. **Matthew 20:19**
11. **Genesis 37** Joseph is silent in his mistreatment. **Isaiah 53:7, Matthew 27:12-14**
12. **Genesis 37:33-35** The father grieves the dead son. **Matthew 27:46, John 19:30**