

## **“Favored but Envied”**

**Genesis 37:1-11**

March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017

PCA Pastor Will Hesterberg shares a story about a Russian woman named Meera. Pastor Hesterberg was part of a small group going door to door sharing the gospel in Siberia in 1992. Upon meeting Meera, she invited the group in and began to pour out her life story. “I don’t understand why I’m still here.”

Born of German parents in the 1920s in Ukraine, Meera saw her father executed by Stalin’s troops as they tried to purge Ukraine of possible German sympathizers. Troops herded Meera, her mother and sisters, along with many others, to detention camps near Leningrad. There she lost track of her family.

Released from detention when the Nazis surrounded Leningrad during World War II, Meera survived the 900-day siege when 700,000 of the 1 million inhabitants died of starvation, diseases, and bombardment. She told us stories of risking her life to bring bread to others.

After the fall of Leningrad, Meera was given a choice – return to a detention camp or go by train to Siberia as an exile. She chose to go to Siberia, where she faced the challenge of surviving as a teenage girl, alone in a strange city. She soon met a young Russian man, whom she married, but who died a few years later, leaving her a son to raise by herself. “Why did I live and so many others died? Why did God let me live? Will and his team had an answer for her, but as they had another appointment, they asked her if they could return the next day. She said, “Please come back.”

Have you ever wondered, “*Why am I here? What is God doing in my life? Why are these things happening to me?*” Such questions spring up when we face difficult circumstances.

Certainly, Joseph could have asked such questions. Throughout his life, Jacob’s favored son Joseph, experienced betrayal, loss, physical abuse, temptation, false accusations, loneliness and disappointment. Yet, when given an opportunity to avenge himself for the pain he endured, Joseph chose instead to forgive his brothers who were the prime agents of his misery.

None of us is exempt from this situation. There are people in our lives we have difficulty getting along with or loving, and, naturally, we want to turn any hurt back on those who’ve shoveled it upon us. *But, is that the way of Christ? Is that how Jesus’ followers act?*

Today, we begin the last section of the Bible’s first book, Genesis. As we’ve seen, the story of Abraham is a long and important story. But the story of his great grandson, Joseph, equals Abraham’s in number of chapters (14 each), and excels it in length (by 25%).

As we read the first 11 verses, look how God orchestrated His plan for Joseph and His people.

### **Genesis 37:1-11:**

“Now Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>This *is* the history of Jacob.

Joseph, *being* seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers. And the lad *was* with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father.

<sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he *was* the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of *many* colors. <sup>4</sup> But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.

<sup>5</sup> Now Joseph had a dream, and he told *it* to his brothers; and they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup> So he said to them, “Please hear this dream which I have dreamed: <sup>7</sup> There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Then behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf.”

<sup>8</sup> And his brothers said to him, “Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

<sup>9</sup> Then he dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, “Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me.”

<sup>10</sup> So he told *it* to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, “What *is* this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?” <sup>11</sup> And his brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter *in mind*.”

You may have noticed we’ve skipped over **Genesis Chapter 36**. That chapter shows the family tree of Jacob’s twin, Esau. The chapter lists five sons of Esau, 27 chiefs, and 8 kings. Conversely, **Genesis 37:2** begins, “This is the history of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old...”

The late James Montgomery Boice poses an excellent question at this point, “*If we were to choose as the world chooses, which of us would not stand with the line of kings and the rising power of the Edomites?*” He answers, “Yet this is not where the hope of the human race lay. Let the world have its great chiefs and mighty kings. The choice of God was with the family of Jacob, and the hope of salvation of that family was with 17 year old Joseph. The chiefs of Edom were numerous and wealthy. Joseph was godly. The kings of Edom were powerful. Joseph had his eyes on the Lord.” (Boice, 865)

Where Joseph and his brothers are the main players mentioned in this chapter, let’s look for God working in these opening verses of the section.

The **First work of God** is found in the opening verse - “Now Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan.” “The land of Canaan” was the land God promised to give Abram 25 chapters ago. Back in **Genesis 12: 1 & 2**, we have this incredible promise of God:

“Now the LORD had said to Abram:

“Get out of your country,  
From your family  
And from your father’s house,  
To a land that I will show you.  
<sup>2</sup> I will make you a great nation;  
I will bless you  
And make your name great;  
And you shall be a blessing.”

So, despite the twists and turns, bad decisions, painful struggles and confusing circumstances, God brought the seed of Abram to the land of His promise. God is faithful; He never goes back on a promise; He never fails to deliver on what He has pledged; if God says it, then that settles it!

It's as good as done, though there may be a wait for Him to work in His timing, which is always perfect.

Christian friend, God has made many promises in His Word, the Bible. You've seen Him come through on many in your lifetime. And, as time goes on, you have the assurance that a faithful God will continue to keep His promises until the day of Christ Jesus. Among them:

God promises protection -- "I am your shield..." (**Genesis 15:1**)  
God promises provision -- "I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you..." (**Isaiah 41:10**)  
God promises to lead us -- "And when He brings out His own sheep, He goes before them..." (**John 10:4**)  
God promises us rest -- "Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (**Matthew 11:28**)  
God promises us cleansing -- "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (**1 John 1:9**)

The **second work of God** is found in the first half of verse 2 – “This *is* the history of Jacob. Joseph, *being* seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers.” God promised to make Abram into a great nation. In **Genesis 15:5**, we read God speaking to Abram – “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And (God) said to (Abram), “So shall your descendants be.” Then, after providing a sign of His promise (circumcision) in Genesis 17, we see God narrowing the promise of a family line in **Genesis 17:19** – “...Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, *and* with his descendants after him.”

Among those descendants to Abraham and Isaac was Joseph, Abraham's great grandson and Isaac's grandson. Here in **Genesis 37**, we see God's favor upon Joseph being worked out through difficult providences. There are no miracles taking place in the passage before us today; God did not suspend His natural laws to make things happen. Jacob's story here is about God's hidden, but sure way. God is involved in all the events of Joseph's life and directs things to their appointed end. God will providentially bring about Joseph's rejection by his brothers so that Joseph himself might ultimately be used to effect his people's salvation. (Hughes, 436-437)

The **third work of God** is revealed in 4 different instances of animosity between Joseph and his brothers. They are evident from the second half of verse 2 through verse 11. Let's look at those separately.

The **first instance** is in verse 2 – “And the lad (Joseph) *was* with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives;” Here the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah are referred to without name; we know them to be Dan and Naphtali (sons of Bilhah) and Gad and Asher (sons of Zilpah). It's quite a contrast, given what we know to this point about Jacob's partiality to Joseph. Here is the golden child – the first born of Rachel - working together with the four sons of Rachel's and Leah's handmaidens (secondary wives)!

As we've worked our way through the chapters highlighting Jacob, we've observed that Jacob was “head over heels” in love with Rachel, and he despised Leah; Jacob likely felt even less affection for the slave wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. Quite naturally, then, the four sons of Bilhah

and Zilpah probably had little regard for young Joseph. In fact, it's not hard to imagine Joseph filling the role of "tattle tale" with his brothers.

The leads us to the **second instance** which comes at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse – "and Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father." The *American Standard Version* refers to this "bad" report as an "evil" report, which more closely reflects the original adjective in the Hebrew tongue. Jacob blew the whistle to his father on his brothers' behavior.

Growing up across the country road from an aunt and uncle and four cousins, I was the subject of much more tattling to parents than necessary; after all, as the oldest child, it seemed all of my younger siblings were constantly threatening me with "I'm gonna tell Mom!" or my cousins threatening to tell my mom – as if they had any authority over me! *Who gave them that role, anyway?* (Probably my mom, as a way of keeping tabs on me!)

It could have been the case that Jacob told Joseph to bring such reports as necessary. Or, it could be that Joseph was a nark and had little affection for his brothers at that time (though he will show great affection for them later in the book). We simply don't know. But, God was using the incident to bring further animosity between Joseph and his brothers.

The **third** instance of animosity between Joseph and his brothers is revealed in verses 3 & 4, though the seeds of it were planted by Isaac and Rebekah when they showed greater love for one son over another (Isaac for Esau, and Rebekah for Jacob). In giving Joseph a special tunic, Jacob began planting seeds of resentment in the hearts of his other sons toward Joseph. Such favoritism by a father to elevate a son can be very destructive to family harmony.

But, it happens in the Church, too. Consider this actual story a pastor shared with his congregation some time ago.

"Remember last year when the Smith's came forward to join the church?" he asked. The congregation nodded; the Smiths were an influential family. "Well, the same day a young man also joined the church. I could tell he needed help—and we counseled him." No one nodded; no one seemed to remember.

"We worked with the Smiths, got them onto committees. They've been wonderful folks. The young man...well, we lost track. Until yesterday, that is, as I was preparing today's message on the Good Samaritan. I picked up the newspaper, and there was that young man's picture. He had shot and killed an elderly woman."

Chins dropped throughout the congregation. "I never followed up on that young man, so I'm the priest who saw the man in trouble and crossed to the other side of the road. I am a hypocrite." And how many others in the congregation were just as culpable?

More of that kind of sober honesty in the church would be healthy. We go after the attractive, those who seem to have it together, the influential. But, those who don't measure up, we neglect. To the poverty of the whole church.

To properly apply this brotherly animosity to our own lives, we must not intentionally mistreat others, and justify our sin by thinking God is using it for the good of the other person. No, to properly apply this point, we must own our sin, put it to death in our lives, and seek the

forgiveness of a Holy God and those we offend by our sin. Had Jacob done so, and Joseph, too, he may not have been elevated to the high office in Egypt by going through such suffering at the hands of the brothers he offended.

There is a **fourth** instance of the escalating hostility of Joseph's brothers to him. I refer to the matter of the two dreams in which God gave Joseph symbolic visions of his future.

In the first dream, Joseph saw himself as the stalk to which all the other stalks bowed. He shared that with his brothers (vs 5 & 8). This foreshadowed when Joseph became ruler of Egypt, and his brothers bowed down to him. The brothers hated Joseph all the more.

In the second dream, Joseph saw the sun, moon, and 11 stars bowing down to him (v. 9). This dream he shared with his brothers and his father. The 11 stars represent his 11 brothers; and the sun and moon represent Jacob and his late mother, Rachel. Joseph's family got the point; a younger brother would rule over the rest. Joseph's brothers envied him, and Jacob pondered it.

Christian friend – these four indications of hostility between Joseph and his brothers point out that we are – and will be – hated by the world for being different. And, we will be hated for being chosen of God. Jesus Himself said as much - “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before *it hated* you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (**John 15:18-19**)

Like Joseph in his day, we are favored, but envied. It is not something for which we ought to be ashamed; it ought to encourage us, as long as we are not the reason for the offense given.

Friend, if you are here today, and you do not follow Jesus, you are the antagonist to God's people. A holy God will not allow your hatred to continue to afflict His people. You will be the focus of God's wrath, and you will not be able to defend yourself. Turn from your sin before it is too late!

Back to Meera. When the team of Christians returned to her home the next day, they told her, “Meera, we know why you're still living, why you're still here. God's desire is that you know Jesus. Can we tell you about Him?” “Oh yes,” she replied. Meera was ready to hear, and after the team shared the gospel with her, she prayed to receive Jesus as Lord, and she began to live for Him.

Meera had discovered God's purpose in her life and the various parts now came together to make sense. All the various parts of our lives come together to Christ, too. God uses all the experiences we have to paint a picture of Christ in us as he did with Joseph.