

RUF Bible Study – The Gospel in Genesis

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Genesis 37 – Joseph, his coat, his brothers and his sale price²

37:1 Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.

2 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. 3 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. 4 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.

5 Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. 6 He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: 7 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." 8 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.

9 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." 10 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?" 11 And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 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." 14 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. 15 And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" 16 "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." 17 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.

18 They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer.

20 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." 21 But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 22 And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; cast 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. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. 24 And they took him and cast him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25 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. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 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. 28 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.

29 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes 30 and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?" 31 Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. 32 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." 33 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." 34 Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 35 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. 36 Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

This semester we'll be looking at the end of Genesis, which is the story of Joseph. You'll remember that Genesis, as the first book of the Bible, recounts for the church the beginning of not only the world, but of God's people. There are four great events and four great men in Genesis – Creation, the Fall, the Flood and the Tower of Babel; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph³. The four events only comprise the first eleven chapters, while the narrative of these families take up from chapter twelve on.

God has decided to tell us about himself and his workings through recounting the stories of these families. I believe that we also must realize that the first chapters of the book aren't intended to be a scientific textbook on the precise details, but a manifesto to Israel of where they came from and why that matters. I certainly believe it is to be taken literally (God created a real man named Adam before whom no man existed, for example), but we must restrain ourselves from going farther than the text allows (how long it took to create the world, for example). There are some things we just can't understand (where dinosaurs fit in, for example).

The last chapters focus on the role of Joseph in the family of Jacob. Our text opens this way: "37:1 Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob." So in talking about Joseph, we have to remember that we're really talking about Jacob. And I'll contend something else – we're *really* talking about Judah. We'll explore that further as we go.

Now let's set the stage for Joseph for a moment, then we'll dive into the text and then pull back to see what we've learned. Joseph is seventeen when this narrative begins. His father we already know – Jacob. His mother? Rachel. You'll recall that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, her sister and worked fourteen years to get her. You'll remember that Rachel didn't get off to a great start in bearing children, but finally did have Joseph, and Jacob absolutely adored him.

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² Sources: Waltke, Kidner, Wenham, Alter, Calvin, Gibson, DeGraaf, Rayburn (pastor of Faith Tacoma Presbyterian Church – Tacoma, Washington), Keller (pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York).

³ We could include Adam and Noah, but they're really subsumed under the events. However, I'm growing in my conviction that Adam is the most important Genesis figure and perhaps even the most important OT one as well. He makes everything go as far as the doctrine of man, imago dei and what Jesus had to do.

Joseph would have been a young child, but old enough to remember when Jacob had taken his large family and run away from Rachel and Leah's father, Laban. He would have remembered the encounter with Jacob's brother, his uncle Esau, and asked his father why he was limping out to meet him. He would have listened in awe as his father told him about wrestling with the Lord. Only a few years previous to this story, as a teenager, Joseph would have been there or at least heard about his brothers murdering the whole city of Shechem out of a misplaced revenge for their sister, Dinah. And he may have been at her side when his mother, Rachel, died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin.

So our story begins, but it doesn't begin too well for Joseph. We're told that Joseph is out with his half brothers, and he comes back to give his father a bad report. It very well could be that this was Joseph's responsibility and that he was telling the truth. Or it might be he exaggerated what happened to get his brothers in trouble. Regardless, no one likes a tattle tale.

When I was second grade, I called a girl a name, a bad name. Scott Adams heard me, told on me, got me into trouble, and I was sent to the principal's office. Even though he reported true facts, I think he should have kept his stupid mouth shut! (I ran away from school, was brought back by my traitorous parents and was spanked by the principal and suspended for two days. They say it's "still on my transcript").

This may have been Joseph's role. It could be that Jacob had designated him his heir after the Shechem debacle. Reuben certainly had forfeited his place, and Jacob could no longer trust his sons to keep their cool and do their jobs. So he may have put Joseph there as his eyes and ears. "Based on their previous behavior, it is likely the brothers were doing wrong, from which Joseph should rightly distance himself; however, Proverbs counsels that one should draw a veil over the transgressions of others (Prov. 10:12, 11:12-13, 12:23)."⁴

We know that this bad report didn't go over very well (much like my response to Scott Adams' report), and the author explains why. *3 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.*

Jacob loved Joseph more than any other of his sons. That sort of sentence gives me the chills. It's just not right. This is the real "Mom always liked you best" Smothers Brothers skit. But you could see how this might happen, right? When you consider the different mothers of these children, and how Joseph was the first born of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, it becomes clear why Joseph might be favored, and we can't really blame him for it.

Jacob had given him a robe, a sign of prestige and favor. "Many-colored" goes back to the LXX and Vulgate translations. We might say "special tunic."⁵ Regardless, you might picture these children opening presents under the tree. Here's a book for you Dan. And some new underwear for you, Naphtali. Oh, and we got you a screwdriver, Reuben. Wait! There's one more! Oh, I hope you like it Joseph. It's a coat, a special coat, one woven of the finest materials, one that will set you apart from all the other boys. Try it on. Very nice...

And the others burn with jealousy. They're furious. *4 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.*

I wonder who you relate to best in the story thus far. Were you a favored child? Or do you think your parents treated the others better than you? Did you get compared to your siblings positively or negatively? Or maybe you were in the "popular" crowd in high school, allowed to get away with anything because you were smart and funny and cool. Or picked on? These sorts of things affect us, don't they?

And they show God's family as dysfunctional. If you look over at Genesis 36, you see Esau's descendants just clicking along, becoming kings and rulers and doing very fine. No problems there. But Jacob's family is messy from the beginning. Craig Dunham and I were thinking of essays for a new book, and he suggested doing one on "Family." I thought about that, and thought... And couldn't come up with a family in the Bible that was presented positively other than Mary, Joseph and Jesus and we certainly don't get much of that. It seems like the less the Bible says about a family, the better off it is. The more we read, the worse it gets.

We all come from screwed up families. We all have messed up parents. Some are worse than others, to be sure, and we should try to be the best, most loving parents possible when it's our turn, but we have to realize something right away – our kids, like us, should be in counseling. They'll have issues. Some of those issues will spring from our faults, weaknesses and sins. Others of them will be from their own faults, weaknesses and sins, or how they have interpreted the data of their lives.

Jacob should have put the kids in a van and gone to the local family counselor to work out this mess. But he didn't.

When we continue, we next read of Joseph's two dreams. Here's an idea – when you have a dream that might make others furious, you could keep it to yourself. Not Joseph. He blabs his dream to his family. This wasn't the sort of dream where you need a dream book to figure it out. Not too much subtly here. They get it right away: *8 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.*

Joseph has another very similar dream, with another very similar result. In thinking about this, we're glad Joseph shared, because that allows us to know his thoughts and wonder if these are God's thoughts or not. Pretend you don't know what will happen. You would wonder if these dreams will become reality, or if they will be utterly dashed. We don't know enough about Joseph to know if his dreams might be trustworthy or not. We do know that God sometimes has spoken through dreams. At the first of Genesis (chapters 1-11), God shows up in theophany, in real presence. In chapters 12-35, he communicates in dreams, so we're prepared for this. But this is the transition for his working primarily through providence.

⁴ Waltke, 499

⁵ This phrase occurs another time in 1 Sam. 13:18-19.

Joseph's dreams are saying that he will rule over his brothers. That doesn't sit well with them, understandably so, but what if these dreams were from God and they were true? Would that be so terrible? Yes and no. No because, well, they're from God. But yes, because God is thus saying that he doesn't treat everyone the same. He gives to some more than he gives to others. He gives intellect, beauty, position and power, charisma and style in differing proportions to his people. This is another form of election that we don't often think of. Are you okay with that? Probably not.

The narrative continues after that decently long introduction. Jacob wants to send Joseph to where his brothers are shepherding the flock near Shechem (notice the Shechem connection here from Gen. 34 – I wonder what Shechem was like these days). Could Jacob be any more oblivious to the dynamics of his family? Good grief.

So there goes Joseph on about a fifty mile trek, but he can't find them. He asks a stranger, who gets him going in the right direction, over to Dothan. What if that man hadn't been there? What if Joseph had walked straight there? What if he'd been delayed a few hours longer? God works through providence, through seemingly insignificant conversations such as these.

As Joseph approaches, his brothers can tell who he is. He must have his coat on, a blaring sign of his presence and of everything they despise about him. The brothers aren't too happy to see him: *18 They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20 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."*

Not exactly the welcome I'm looking for from my family. You can hear the taunting nature of their plot. "Let's see what becomes of his dreams IF HE'S DEAD." But first-born Reuben steps in, offering another plan of just putting him in a pit – and he thinks to himself that he'll come a little later and rescue him. They agree with that, capture Joseph, make sure to get the coat off right away and throw him in the cistern, an empty pit used to hold water, which makes an excellent prison cell when empty.

Talk about your blanks. The narrative quickly jumps to a horrific thought: *25 Then they sat down to eat.*

In 42:21 we read of what was happening: *In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen.*

They've just thrown their half brother into a pit, and he's pleading with them to stop, asking why they're doing this, and they're eating falafels right next to him. Such an awful betrayal.

But then a new plan takes place, and a caravan (probably the Ishmaelites and Midianites are the same people) comes up. Judah has an idea – why not sell Joseph?! Then we can get rid of him and make money. Twenty shekels of silver later, Joseph is gone, never to be heard from (those dreams!) or seen (that coat!) again. So they figure. And why wouldn't they?

Reuben missed the whole thing, somehow. He'd turned his back for just a minute and bam, Joseph got sold right out from under his nose. It's probably best that Joseph hadn't known of Reuben's "plan," since good intentions doesn't ever get anyone out of being sold by slavery. Reuben should have directly stood up to his brothers, but he was too cowardly to do so.

He feels awful about it, but they continue to hatch their plan to deceive their father. They take Joseph's robe, smear it with blood and take it to Jacob. They don't have to say anything – he draws his own conclusion, making up the whole story in his mind about how it went down. Jacob goes into serious mourning, saying he's going down to the depths of Sheol or Hell for his son. If you remember what we've already read in Genesis, you'll recall that Jacob and his mother deceived Isaac with goat skins and Esau's clothing. Now he's deceived with goat's blood and his son's cloak. The other brothers, however, seem rather unconcerned. They certainly aren't too broken up about it.

And, in a throwaway line at the end of the chapter, we find out that the Midianites were merely a clearing house for slaves. They sold Joseph to a man name Potiphar, who was an officer of Pharaoh in Egypt.

What are we to do with the story? Let's look at three things: sin, God's presence and grace.

Sin

This passage, like the whole Bible forces us to deal with something we don't normally like. The Bible can be read, and is normally read, as a moralistic book. In this well-meaning schema, you would read this story and say to yourself – what sin can I avoid? What promises can I claim? What examples are there to follow? And you would certainly focus on Joseph and say to yourself, I must try to be like Joseph. He is good. I want to be good. I want to be like Joseph. Several of the commentators fawn over Joseph, claiming that he does nothing wrong in his whole story, that he is morally good and right. Is that true?

This sort of thinking creeps up all the time. In the classical Christian school Julie and I are involved in starting, some of the teachers want to introduce "character training." How does one do that? You teach a principle – say punctuality – and you give incentives for obeying and punishments (or nothing) for disobeying. It's so simple.

Wrong. Read the Bible. Read the narratives of the Bible and start searching for good people. The Bible is certainly concerned about our character, and we certainly are judged according to what we do and don't do. But the Bible is not at all concerned with conservative religious behavior. It is not a book about fundamentalism. This family, this is THE family of Genesis. These are the people of God. These kids were home schooled. They were family-centric in their thinking. They didn't have the internet. They knew the teachings of God.

Look at how incredibly messed up it is. Jacob favors his son. Jacob seems to have never recovered from the favoritism shown to his brother Esau over him. Isaac loved Esau more, and that set off a life for Jacob where he pursued relationships to make him feel better about himself. If I could just have *her*, I'll be happy and worth something. If I could just be loved by *him*, everything will be okay. Now it's affecting his children, as of course it does.

The brothers are easy to see. Through the relationship problems of Jacob with his wives and children, these men hate each other. They conspire to kill one of their own. Reuben stinks at leading; he's far too weak and passive here. Judah takes control and works things for evil, not for good..

And Joseph looks to be a little weasel as well. The text indicates that his "bad reports" may have been false reports. Or they may have been exaggerated. He also wants the spotlight. He doesn't keep his dreams to himself because they're so great for him and bad for the others. He grates on them, annoys them. He's a punk.

Do you see how sin works? I went to Oregon for a wedding last Oregon and flew right past Mt. St. Helens.⁶ If you had taken a picture of Mt. St. Helens on May 17, 1980, you would have enjoyed its picturesque scenery and majestic lines. You'd have been awed by its permanence and stateliness. And you'd have been utterly deceived. The next day, the "mountain," which was actually a volcano, exploded with a force registering 5.1 on the Richter scale. It devastated 210 acres of forest and the mountain caved in on itself.

Sin erupts. It hides inside of us and comes out in our relationships and actions. I have realized that one of my biggest problems is I'm incredibly angry. I'm not entirely sure where all of my anger comes from, but it blows up at various times and places – playing sports, dealing with my kids, having someone not like what I'm doing. This threatens to destroy me with its force.

I'm reading *My Faith So Far* by Patton Dodd, and he's recounting his spiritual journey. He went from drinking, drugs and sex in high school to becoming a Christian. First step after his conversion was to only listen to Christian music. Then we started going to church three times a week, praying for hours, studying for more hours. But he'd slip up. He'd get high. He's lust. He'd put in a secular band's music. What did he do when he messed up? He redoubled his efforts to be good. More prayer. More church. More study. And finally, desperate to be as good as possible, he enrolled at Oral Roberts University. Surely there he'd find the happiness he was looking for.

But, though I haven't gotten past there in the book, I'm going to guess he's not going to find it. We're all at this place, aren't we? Why are we so bad? What do we do about it?

If you're a Christian, you need to look at yourself. Are you trying to cover you sin with all this stuff? With the right way to do this or that, with the right way to think this or that? With the perfect model of dating or studying or witnessing or quiet times? I'll bet it's not working if you're honest with yourself. Why not? Have you stopped to consider that question?

If you're not a Christian, you may either be honest with yourself and know that you're not a good person or you may be fooling yourself into thinking you are. What do you do when you screw up? What do you think about yourself when you hurt others, when you're over-angry? We call this "sin." What do you call it?

Having recognized that neither traditional religion nor pure spiritual discipline are the answers, let's hold that question there for a moment.

The Presence of God

While we're looking at our sin, it's common to ask another question – where is God in all of this? I mean, he could keep this from happening, right? It's within his power to stop this situation from occurring, right?

Some of us have a vague notion that God isn't around, and it doesn't have to do with suffering at all. I pulled the following from a blog of someone I know:⁷

Dear God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit, aka "The Trinity",

Remember me? You placed me in a wonderful loving upper-middle-class white American family with parents who took me to church and talked about you at dinner and basically made it easy to believe in You. Thanks for the placement--it's worked out pretty well for me.

Later on, You led me (or I led myself, due to the proliferation of cute nice guys at the meetings) to Campus Crusade for Christ in college where I met my husband. (That's turned out pretty well, too. I like him.)

I'm writing because I miss You. And that is weird for me to say because I don't really know who I'm missing. Am I missing Church, complete with soul-stirring music, a moving message from a respected spiritual leader, and potluck lunches full of food and laughter (aka "community")? Yes, that's part of it.

Am I missing "quiet times," where I disciplined myself to sit and read the Bible, maybe take some notes and write in a journal, and try to pray? Often it seemed like a royal waste of time. Other times were definitely worth it, when I felt the warmth of Your presence and said "Amen" feeling like a better person. Yes, I'm missing that too, I think. Both of those longings make me think this spiritual-life-thing is a yin-yang type of idea. Inner life and outer life. Extroversion and introversion. Noise and solitude. Action and stillness. I know I need community with other humans to experience You--the gift of being cared for and to care for others. I think the times I have felt Your nearness the strongest have been in the company of those I love. But I miss being alone with You, too, which is odd to think about. I hate being alone. But somehow I wasn't. I think You said You were sending Your Spirit (bless Her) to be our companion after You left this earth many years ago. I believe in Her and still believe She is around. I guess I don't quiet myself enough to invite Her over for company. Why would She want to hang out somewhere She's ignored? So I guess I'm apologizing.

I could use some help navigating my way through adulthood. It's really different from being a kid and being a student. I'd

⁶ Illustration from Tim Keller. For great pictures and information go to: <http://www.olywa.net/radu/valerie/StHelens.html>

⁷ I figure it's a blog. It's public. It's on the internet. It's okay to share.

like to make a difference in this world, not just consume and consume. I know that's Your plan, or will, or whatever. I miss You, like I said. Looking forward to a reunion, whatever that may look like.

I'd really like to thank You for my beautiful baby boy--I know I'll learn more about You from him than anyone. I may not know much about You (especially compared with what I used to "know") but I do believe that You are good and that You care about me as a person.

With humility, X

This lady is missing the presence of God and nothing at all that I can discern is troubling her. No suffering. She's obviously confused about a lot of things, but we won't go into all of them. She wants God, but doesn't know where to find him/it/her.

Perhaps we can relate to her, but where is God in the suffering of the world? Where was God with the tsunami a few weeks ago? Where was God with the murder victims this past week? The rape victims last semester?

This has been a serious objection to God for ages. God has to be all powerful or all good. If you look at evil, you have to conclude that he is either powerful but not good or good but not powerful.

But I contend to you that this is not so. He is all powerful and all good. And he's also far beyond us. His ways are not our ways, Isaiah writes. God does something amazing time and time again – he uses our sin to accomplish his purposes. Look at Genesis 37 and think about this. I've encouraged you to refrain from thinking of the end of the book, but we need to do that now. What happens in the end? Joseph has to be set up as one of the key figures in the Egyptian empire so that he can institute a famine relief program and thereby save not only the Egyptian people, but his own people. So, if that doesn't happen, Egypt, Joseph and the people of God die.

But we have a serious problem here. Jacob's family is a bunch of nobodies. They're semi-nomadic people, totally a few dozen in population. These are not the kind of movers and shakers that will influence the world.

Ah. So... a lot of things have to happen. The brothers go out after this dream, filled with hate. Jacob is oblivious to this and sends Joseph after them. If Jacob doesn't send Joseph, everyone dies. He arrives where they're supposed to be, but they're not there. He runs into a man who just so happened to have heard about the brothers going to Dothan. If that man hadn't heard that information and if Joseph hadn't bumped into him, everyone dies. Joseph arrives and gets thrown into the pit. If the original plan to kill him gets implemented, everyone dies. Reuben doesn't save him, but if he had like he'd meant to, everyone dies. He isn't left in the pit to rot away, but is sold into slavery. If this exact group of people don't come by at this exact time, everyone dies.

Do you get the picture? Wouldn't you say that God is orchestrating the events here? And yet, no mention of God is made in this chapter of Scripture. Not one.

God is in control of everything that ever happens. He's not only in control of the "spiritual events" like conversion and healing and prayer. He's in control of it all. That's frustrating to us because we can't see what he's doing. But we have to trust him. We have to trust that he will use even our pain and suffering for the good; not only for his glory, which is certain, but for the good of people.

Do you believe that? You will be put in situations and circumstances where this belief will be sorely tested. Some of you have already had hard times in your life, but I guarantee there are more difficult times ahead. You will feel lost and alone. You will feel abandoned and left for dead. You will struggle with hope, feeling overcome with despair. Remember Joseph's story. Remember the unseen presence of God directing and superintending everything that happens. That should give you hope.

The presence of God in your life, if you are a Christian, should give you great hope. In essence, we're saying that you cannot mess up your life ultimately. He is there. He is guiding you. His silence is not absence. Seek what he's doing through prayer, relationships and the church. But hold what you think he's doing loosely. The brothers were sure Joseph's dream would never, ever turn out. They were wrong. Joseph was sure that it would, but he didn't expect the pathway to be so awful. It was.

If you aren't a Christian, you should consider that your vague notion of fate and serendipity might actually be rooted here. Perhaps, just maybe there is a God and he is in control and he is at work even now.

Grace

Now let's look at what we can do with the sin and suffering of this passage, for that is what we're looking for. This is answering the question, how can we change?

Here's one solution – the angel from heaven. You've thought of this right? Why couldn't an angel come down and start fixing people. Jacob, you show too many favorites and need to repent of your bad relationships. Brothers, whoa, where do we start? Okay, here we go.... And Joseph, you have to deal with your problems if you're ever going to be a great leader and serve your family. This just isn't going to work.

But you know this as well as I do – that doesn't change people. Information doesn't change people, relationship does. They have to have relationships that bear out grace for them to see grace. People are blinded by their sin and you just can't very often sit down and type an email and expect someone to change his ways.

Last semester, one of you was suffering. And he felt I was to blame for his suffering. He thought he had some good cause to think so, and he sent me a diatribe email detailing his case against me. I didn't have time to answer fully his charges, so I sent a few thoughts and then ended with something to the effect of: I am for you. I like you very much. I think God is at work in your life and see great things ahead for you. I want this to work out for you. I am not against you, though it may feel that way right now.

I expected to then in a later email to get into his case. But I was surprised when, almost immediately, he wrote back and said that he was okay now. The whole thing was over. Completely diffused. In looking back at it, I think he wanted to know that he was loved and accepted. And he was. I wish I could remember this principle more. I wish we all could. We need to listen to and be there with people. One of the most common ways we work out our sin, which we talked about above, is in our relationships with others. We don't only see the effects of our sin, but we see the occurrences of grace and truth when we are with others. This is why community is so important, why the church is necessary and why we must pursue each other if we truly wish to grow in Christ (and one of the things the woman above is missing out on).

But that's not all. I want you to see the craziness of grace. Grace does two other things. One is that it overturns the patterns of the world. You see, in order for redemption to happen here, Joseph, as we've said, has to be placed as the leader. His dream about this sets the stage for what transpires. But his dream is subversive to the natural order of things. The younger serving the older? No way. This is not the way things work. In this culture, and in many cultures still today, the elders are always honored and served. Not only the parents, but the firstborn son – this is the principal of primogeniture. And yet God continually and consistently overturns this principal. It's like he delights in it. He's messing with their culture. It's so inflammatory that it makes the brothers boil over with rage. And it's the way God works.

We need to see that grace is not the normal way of our culture. Asking for forgiveness isn't normal. Looking into your past to discover where your anger, lust, impatience, control issues, etc come from is not normal. If you don't want to pursue God, if you don't want to pursue grace, then all you have to do is... nothing. The natural order of things, the second of law thermodynamics, the law of entropy says that things will go from order to disorder. The grace way of things is to overturn that law and to make the world a better place.

But here's the crazy thing about that grace law. It seems so opposite precisely because of this – it actually involves pain and suffering. The way to get out from and through pain and suffering is to go through it. Makes no sense. But that is how God has set it up. For the family structure and nature of Christianity to exist, Joseph has to be stripped and put into a pit and sold into slavery. Otherwise, no redemption. For their personal lives, each of the members of this family has to go through this – otherwise none of them will see the depravity of their heart and need for grace.

Someone else had this happen. Someone else was betrayed by his closest compatriots for pieces of silver. He was stripped of everything he had, not only physically naked but spiritually as well. He cried out and no one heard. But here's the difference between Jesus and Joseph. Joseph had all this happen to him, but Jesus did it for you willingly. He understood the grace principle that suffering has to happen for good to come, and he went into the worst death ever imagined, the pain and torment, but also the complete abandonment by his father – for you. He did it for you.

And that makes a difference. Most of us try to live good lives so that we'll be accepted. But the Bible's message, taught to us here and everywhere else is that we have to be accepted in order to live good lives. You have to know that the Father loves you, he died for you, and he has given you a coat of many colors to show you how delighted he is with you. When you know that, you are able to withstand suffering. To die to sin. To embrace death even. As George Herbert wrote, "I live to shew his power, who once did bring // My *joyes* to *weep*, and now my *griefs* to *sing*." To pick up our crosses and follow him.

JOSEPH'S COAT.

WOUNDED I sing, tormented I indite,
Thrown down I fall into a bed, and rest :
Sorrow hath chang'd its note : such is his will
Who changeth all things, as him pleaseth best.
For well he knows, if but one grief and smart
Among my many had his full career,
Sure it would carrie with it ev'n my heart,
And both would run until they found a biere
To fetch the bodie ; both being due to grief.
But he hath spoil'd the race ; and giv'n to anguish
One of Joyes coats, ticing it with relief
To linger in me, and together languish.
I live to shew his power, who once did bring
My *joyes* to *weep*, and now my *griefs* to *sing*.

- George Herbert (1593-1633)