

**Genesis 37:1-11, No. 60**  
**“God Playing Favorites”**

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We begin this morning the last chapter of the Book of Genesis, at least according to the book’s original organization. It is the *toledot* or family history of Jacob, which, as we now know, will be an account, not of Jacob’s life, but of the life of his sons. Before we read the first paragraph of the text, I want to make a few remarks in the way of introducing the entire section which, beginning here, takes us to the end of the Book.

It is no surprise really that the family history of Jacob should be as long as it is, by far the longest chapter in Genesis. In one way or another Jacob occupies half of the book of Genesis; from 25:21 to 50:14. He is Israel after all, the direct ancestor of the nation of Israel, the father of the twelve sons from whom would come the twelve tribes, who would of course be the original readers of the Book of Genesis. It is natural that attention is focused on the origins of their national history.

Like most readers of the Bible I grew up thinking of this material as primarily the story of Joseph. Obviously in a certain way that is what it is. But years ago I was convinced, both by lectures of Dr. Bruce Waltke and then a sermon he preached in this pulpit that Joseph was not the first hero of this story. God, of course, is the true hero; but, even among the sons of Jacob, Joseph is not the pivotal character. Joseph does not change substantially in the history; he is a more static figure. We are not given an account of his life in the sort of psychological detail that is given regarding another. He begins as something of a brat; a brash youth and unwise. But, by and large, as a grown man he is and remains a noble character throughout. The developing character, the transformed character, the most interesting character, the character who is reshaped powerfully and wonderfully by the grace of God is Judah, which explains not only why there is a separate chapter (38) devoted to Judah before we pick up the story of Joseph in Egypt, but also why, in chapter 49 Jacob bestows upon his son Judah the greatest of his blessings. The King, the King of Kings, will come from Judah, because Judah – who is at first in this history a cruel, selfish, and immoral man – became, by the grace of God, a man, the only man perhaps among the twelve sons of Jacob, worthy to be a king in the Lord’s own kingdom. *A man who was caught and exposed as a terrible father, a cruel man, and a sexual sinner – the story of our Genesis chapter 38 – would become the progenitor of the Savior of the world!* Among all the twelve sons, it will be Judah who will bear the seed of Abraham through whom all the nations of the world will be blessed. Of course, this has been a theme in the material so far and will continue to be throughout the Bible. Sin is a fact of life even in the kingdom of God but God’s grace can recover the sinner and then use mightily even great sinners who repent. Think of David and of Peter as classic examples, though they are hardly the only ones.

It was in a sermon he preached in this church years ago when I was on vacation that Dr. Waltke brilliantly and persuasively argued this point. And I felt, after hearing that sermon on tape, that I had a completely new and altogether more wonderful understanding of this history than ever I had before. Of course, Dr. Waltke told the entire story in a single sermon, ranging over the whole of these fourteen chapters. We will put it together more slowly, piece by piece. Interestingly, since learning all of this, I’ve sought to find this outlook, on the final section of Genesis in older

commentators, but, so far as I can tell, this was a point generally missed in biblical study until recently.

The story is, of course, not only about the transformation of Judah. It is the story of all of Jacob's twelve sons. They begin as a dysfunctional family, riven by jealousy and hatred; but as events proceed Joseph is used by God to reconcile them to one another. The story begins with the brothers' infamous betrayal of one of their own and ends with Joseph providing them the opportunity to atone for their sin and expunge its guilt. *The final chapter of Genesis tells the story of how a hate-filled family of twelve sons became, through divine grace and forgiveness, the kingdom of God.* It is, next to the story of the Apostle Paul, the grandest story of redemption in Holy Scripture.

Once more, of course, we have divine grace accomplishing the salvation of men and God keeping covenant with his people in spite of, in defiance of their sin and ingratitude. The story begins, not now with Jacob stealing the blessing from Esau and his Father, but with the covenant family torn apart by internecine conflict – we are back to Cain and Abel –; it continues with intermarriage with the Canaanites – Judah will marry a Canaanite woman as Esau had done – but it ends with the family reconciled, purified, and preserved in safety in Egypt. We have here, as before, the whole sordid story of sin but at the end the proof that where sin abounded, God's grace abounded much more.

### Text Comment

- v. 1 That actually is the final verse or statement of the *toledot* of Isaac, the chapter preceding. Now comes the chapter heading of the final chapter, "These are the generation of Jacob."
- v.2 "Brothers" is going to be the *leitwort* or key word in this chapter. It occurs 21 times in the chapter! [Waltke, 498] Its presence is an instance of dramatic irony, for though these men are brothers in an outward way, they are the furthest thing from brothers inwardly and spiritually. And right away the point is made that Joseph was a young man. He was far from the eldest son; he was the last son to be born but one. All through this history we have seen God overruling the laws and customs of the ancient world, and, in particular, the law of primogeniture. Isaac was preferred over Ishmael though he was younger, Jacob over Esau though he was younger, and now the son with the least claim is preferred over all the rest. This is a study in divine election. Inheritance in the Kingdom of God does not depend on worldly or natural considerations, but upon the good pleasure and the election of God.

By the way, Joseph lived seventeen years with Jacob his father. We learn in 47:28 that Jacob lived with Joseph the last seventeen years of his life in Egypt.

Joseph's bad report reflects badly on all of them: the brothers because there were bad things to say; Joseph because he chose to say them. We already know that the sons of Leah were not close to their father; Jacob had alienated them by his favoritism for the sons of his favorite wife Rachel. The resentment ran deep. It seems likely that when Joseph told on them to his father, his father took Joseph's side, and the brothers hated Joseph all the more for it. Even if Joseph's report were entirely fair, love draws a veil over the transgressions of others. You may have to rebuke your brother, but you don't have to talk about him to others.

Joseph, at seventeen, was a tattler. That should not surprise us. Jacob obviously spoiled him and favored him publicly over his brothers. What son would not turn into something of a brat under such circumstances?

For whatever reason, Joseph seems to have fraternized with Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. [Sarna, 255]

- v.3 Whether the particular term used means many-colored, or richly ornamented, or, even, a long robe reaching to the ankles and wrists is uncertain. But, however understood, the robe was a public mark of Jacob's greater affection for Joseph and, no doubt, his desire that Joseph would someday receive his blessing and rule the family. He has caused all sorts of trouble already by his favoritism, but Jacob still seems clueless, unaware of the damage he was doing to his family. It does not surprise us that the brothers hated Joseph even more after their father lavished this gift on him. Here is your Father's Day lesson, gentlemen, don't be as stupid a father as Jacob was! Don't exasperate your children as Paul puts it.
- v.4 The alienation was now so deep that Joseph's brothers couldn't speak civilly to him.
- v.8 The brothers had no difficulty interpreting the dream! Of course, it doesn't speak well of Joseph that he rushed to tell it to his brothers.
- v.9 The repetition of the dream in a different form is a typical sign of its certainty whether in Genesis (41:32) or in Daniel. But it also adds the idea that father and mother will bow down as well.
- v.11 That was too much even for his doting father. He who himself years before overthrew primogeniture by deceit and theft, now resents the idea that his young son will rule over him as well as his brothers. But, to his credit, he didn't dismiss the dream as the brothers did. He knew revelation when he saw and heard it. And kept the matter in his mind.

Before we consider the text we have just read, one more observation regarding the entire history that begins with this chapter. In the final chapter of Genesis we move away from direct communication from God to man. Here there will be no visions – Joseph receives a dream but God does not speak to him – and no theophanies or appearances of God to anyone. Now we find ourselves in the same world you and I inhabit; the world of God's providence. It is absolutely clear that God stands behind the scenes orchestrating events, but he remains hidden. He does not in any obvious way insert himself into the story. God never openly intervenes in the life of any of the characters in this drama. All of that makes this history the more immediately relevant to us, for God does not openly intervene in our lives either, though we believe him to be absolutely in control of events. This is the biblical doctrine of divine providence. [Sarna, 254] Joseph will later tell his brothers that everything that happened was the plan of God, but they knew that and we know it only by faith.

The entire story of the twelve sons and their animosity and eventual reconciliation begins with God himself making a clear distinction between Joseph and the other brothers. That is the significance of the dream. All of what is to transpire, the kidnapping of Joseph, his being sold as a slave into Egypt, his rise to power there, his deliverance of his family from famine, their eventual reconciliation and

settlement in Egypt – all of this is God’s doing, however much God uses the passions, even sinful passions, the choices, even sinful choices, the acts, even sinful acts of these men to bring his will to pass. Divine sovereignty is writ large over this entire history, but God uses providential means to bring his purposes to pass.

The two dreams given to Joseph here at the outset tell us that God already knows how the story is going to turn out. Indeed, if the dream were from God, and Joseph’s brothers have no particular reason to doubt that it was – Jacob didn’t -- then, in rejecting Joseph, the brothers were also rejecting God’s will. But reject it as they may, they cannot escape it. God’s plan will come to pass; his purposes will be carried out. We know that because we know how the story ends. But we know it here at the outset because God told Joseph what was to come. His brothers *will* bow down to him.

Election, both small and great, is everywhere in this story. And here we have it small. Here is God making individual distinctions, even between his own children. It is Joseph who will become the grand vizier of Egypt, not Reuben, the eldest of the twelve, not Judah, who will at the end of the story be the spiritual leader of the family.

And here is a fact of life, and one that we all struggle with in one way or another as the brothers struggled with it. *God does not treat us all the same.* He does not give us all the same things. He does not favor us all with the same blessings. Some Christians are smarter than others, better looking, more athletic, more successful financially, married to lovelier wives or more impressive husbands, some have better jobs than others, some higher achieving children, some have better health or live longer lives. Some people seem to step from one triumph to another, and others seem never to be able to escape the long reach of trouble, only sometimes of their own making. And, even among Christians, some people seem to find certain virtues so natural, so easy to put on and to practice. Some have so much more self-discipline than others, so much more sweet-spiritedness, so much more ease and skill at spiritual speech or some other Christian work. We stumble along trying to do even the simplest thing at least poorly, and here is a brother or sister flying high above us. What was God thinking? *It isn’t fair!*

Samuel Eliot Morison, the American historian and essayist, put it this way. Life is like a card game. God deals the deck. He gives to some a strong hand, he gives to others a weak hand, but everyone is required to play by the same rules. It is a hard truth, but truth it is and we can observe it not only in the Bible but everywhere we look in life. A man can squander a good hand, of course. And a man can sometimes play a poor hand very well and make more of it than one would have thought possible. But if a great hand is played very well, it is unbeatable. And Joseph was dealt a *great* hand. He will play it well, as we will see, but God dealt him a great hand. And it was a better hand than the others were dealt in many ways. They never rose to prominence, power, and luxury in the Egyptian court. But God took Joseph there.

But you know and I know how hard it can be to take when we see others holding better hands than have been dealt to us. I remember a friend of mine, happy in the service of the church, a very committed Christian, who is such still today, who was just eaten alive by jealousy when men came to his church who were more gifted than he and came gradually to displace him as a Sunday School teacher. Just as Jacob preferred Joseph and that fact infuriated his brothers, so the congregation preferred these other men and that infuriated him. The fact is the new men were better teachers and

people naturally flocked to their classes. But, like Joseph's brothers, he could barely disguise his animosity, his resentment, and finally left the church as a result. But, as here, *it was God who made that distinction*. It was God who, in that particular way, set those other men above him.

There are three antidotes, all found in this short piece of history we read this morning, with which to counter this resentment we feel at what seems to us to be God's preference for others, his favoring others above us. *Remember, it is this understandable resentment that sets this entire history in motion*. The Bible talks about the root of bitterness that destroys many. A great many could have been destroyed by this root of bitterness had God not intervened in the most dramatic way with his grace and power and love. How are we to avoid such bitterness taking root in our hearts? Let me propose these ways.

*First, there is the recognition of its futility*. As we read in this history, for all their anger, for all their hatred, for all their resentment of Joseph, even for the terrible crime they will commit against him, Joseph's brothers utterly failed to frustrate God's plan to give to Joseph a supreme position in the family. *In fact everything they did, every evil motivation and every evil act only served to fulfill God's plan*. It is never wise to argue with God; never wise to imagine that we can undo what he has done. It is a simple point, but much of biblical wisdom is a case of accepting the obvious and not struggling against what God has done. Their struggle did the brothers no good. It never does. They thought they would sell Joseph into slavery – "Now let's see if anyone bow's down to him!" – but God made him Prime Minister of Egypt and they would eventually all bow down to him in the most abject way. Had these men an ounce of real faith they would have known better than to imagine they could undo what God had done.

*Second, and more important still, we must learn to see our resentment of the favor God seems to show others as a lack of faith in God's goodness and faithfulness*. The fact is, all of this that so offended the brothers at first, turned out to everyone's satisfaction and blessing at the end. The family was saved from famine, the brothers were reconciled and came at last to have a true brotherhood that had always escaped them before. And that is not all. The brilliantly luminous fact of this history is that for all of Joseph's eventual preeminence over his brothers, for all the ways in which these early dreams of his brothers bowing down to him were to come true, it was not Joseph who became the hero of this history. The one whom God favored above all, was the one who finally, first among all the brothers, who though he had stumbled terribly morally and spiritually, confessed his sin and his guilt and acknowledged his need for God's mercy. This was Judah, who was just as angry at Joseph's preferment as any other brother. It wasn't Judah who tried to rescue Joseph from his brothers' hands; that was Reuben. It was Judah, in fact, who in chapter 38 is going to be exposed in all his immorality, the seediness of his life. Genesis 38 is one of the most sordid chapters in the Bible and it is all about Judah and what he did in defiance of his place in the covenant family of God.

But, at the end, it is to Judah that Jacob will make the promise of the seed and the king. Jacob, who so preferred Joseph to his other sons, and who wanted him to rule over the family, will, with his own mouth, give his greatest blessing to Judah. Ephraim and Manasseh - Joseph's sons - would become tribes in Israel, but they would be destroyed, never to be heard from again in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Judah's descendants, by the hundreds of millions and billions, are with us today. Jesus Christ himself, our Redeemer, will be forever known as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah!

Here too, the first are last and the last are first. How foolish his anger at Joseph must have seemed to Judah later, when he was in his right mind; how red faced he must have been thinking back over what he had thought and what he had done. And how much pain and sorrow Judah caused because he did not trust God to be as faithful to him as he would be to Joseph. He would learn to know better.

*Third, and finally, we must recognize that the way in which the Lord gives to others what he has not given to us, is one of the principal opportunities of our lives to demonstrate that we have learned the principle of grace.* “What do you have that you have not received?” Paul would later ask. If God wishes to give to one of his children something he has not given to others, what is that to you? Everything he gives you he gives you in defiance of the fact that you do not deserve *anything* from him except punishment. And who are you to tell the Almighty and your Heavenly Father how to run his own family?

Now we have the advantage of Judah’s experience. We know that Judah will finally be worthy to be thought of as a king and the ancestor of the king of kings precisely because he finally came to understand that he had no claim on the goodness of the Lord, that he deserved nothing but judgment, and that the fact that God should forgive him and receive him and grant him a share forever in his family is a blessing so indescribably immense as to make a high place in the Egyptian court a mere bagatelle by comparison. In other words, when Judah learned that giving way to a Sunday School teacher with greater gifts, cheerfully acknowledging God’s greater gifts to someone else, is a far greater thing than teaching a popular Sunday school class, at that point he became a model Christian man, God’s man.

And, we can go one step further. If, in fact, the supreme virtue of life in covenant with God is this true humility of faith that counts on God’s mercy and acknowledges from the heart one’s utter dependence upon God’s grace, then can we any longer believe that Joseph, for all his success in life and for the ways in which he was favored over his brothers, actually had the better life. If true humility before God is what God loves and loves to reward, is it not inevitably true that those with less have the advantage over those with more? Did not Christ himself say that it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle? And God made Joseph very rich. He did well, Joseph did, but not as well as Judah, as Genesis 49 makes clear. It was Judah who was chosen to bear the seed, Judah whose name became the most celebrated of the twelve sons of Jacob, Judah, the name from which the word Jew comes.

Years ago I read in a sermon of Alexander Whyte of one Mr. Castlelaw, the minister of Stewarton in Scotland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was not much of a preacher himself and he knew it. So he encouraged his congregation to attend services at a nearby parish where the preacher was much better than he. He would bring other better preachers to his own church – and accompanied them back and forth singing psalms along the way. You’d have to be a preacher to know why Alexander Whyte said of this Mr. Castlelaw that while his name was written in water on earth it is written in letters of gold in heaven. His was true Christian greatness; his was the heroism of true faith and true godliness and true Christlikeness! [Whyte, *Samuel Rutherford*, 61] God measures things very differently than we usually do. You can be sure of that!

So learn the lesson that it cost Judah so much pain and shame to learn. Put on humility before God and man. And if others have been given more than you, rejoice that God has made the way to true humility somewhat easier for you by keeping you lower rather than raising you higher. Listen to some of the wisest men who ever lived tell you the same thing:

“Desire to be unknown.” Thomas a Kempis

“O teach me to love to be concealed.” Jeremy Taylor

“Be ambitious to be unknown.” Archbishop Leighton

“If you ask me what the first thing in religion is, I should reply: the first, second, and third thing is humility.” Augustine

“There is not a humble heart in all the world that the high God is not dwelling in.”

Alexander Moody Stuart

“Without humility, all our other virtues are but vices.” Pascal

If God wished to exalt Joseph, that was God’s doing and it is our duty to acknowledge that it is his right to do so and to adore the wisdom and sovereignty of God. Let us worry rather only about whether we ourselves have taken the gospel as truly to heart as we should, as we must. And let us remember the great lesson we are here being taught: that it is only the man or the woman who takes the gospel to heart, who lives and breathes, who eats and drinks the grace and mercy and forgiveness of God, it is only he or she who receives the prize at the end of the day!