

The Dye is Cast Genesis 37:12-36

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

They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes `this dreamer. 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." But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw 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. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

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

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

Introduction — Many threads are woven into the fabric of Joseph's story. At this point, these include a lurid family history, a father's favoritism, sibling hostility, his own self-centeredness, and of course the two dreams. Soon other threads will be added to the overall tapestry. But through it all is the hand of God working his loom so that, in spite of much evil, the finished product will reflect the pattern he has ordained from the beginning.

Nonetheless, this is a true story of real brothers in a very flawed family. And we will miss much of what God has for us if we only focus on divine providence. Therefore, we must allow all the events in Joseph's story to speak for themselves in their own narrative power. As we correctly understand them, you and I will learn many essential truths that are both theological and personal.

I. A Fateful Errand — This part of the story begins with Jacob sending Joseph on an errand to check on the wellbeing of the ten older sons. We are told that the brothers were near Shechem, scene of Dinah's rape and the subsequent massacre of its residents by those same men a few years earlier. So, it's no wonder that Jacob was concerned. At the same time, his passive cluelessness is shown by sending his teenage son all by himself into what turned out to be a viper's nest populated by none other than Joseph's own brothers!

The initial trip took him about five days. But when Joseph got to Shechem, his brothers were nowhere to be found. However, a local resident informed him that the men and their flock were probably near Dothan, another day's journey. So off Joseph goes, now wearing his coat of parental favoritism and delegated authority. Little did he know that the robe would not only fail to enhance his status, but would serve to finally ignite the explosion of hatred that had been building in the family for months.

II. The Volcano Erupts — From a distance, one of the brothers saw a figure coming toward them. Because of the shimmering coat, there was no mistaking who it was. Premeditated murder was immediately planned:

“They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. 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” (**vs. 18-20**).

But the initial plot was not to be. Reuben, the eldest brother, was temporarily away from the other nine. Somehow he learned of the plan and was outraged. Reuben had recently fallen out of his father’s favor because of the Bilhah affair and could not risk the the death of Jacob’s favorite son. So he, in a sense, came to the rescue.

The opening opening words of his message—“Let us not take his life”—were not a suggestion. It was a forceful and decisive command: “We shall not take his life” (**v. 21**). Also, his order to “Shed no blood” (**v. 22**) is in the second-person plural: “*You* shed no blood,” thus distancing himself from the very idea. Reuben’s order to throw Joseph into the pit unharmed would provide the opportunity for him to secretly return at night and rescue the younger brother.

The verbs of **verses 23-24** describe a brutal assault:

“So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.”

“The stripped him” is a term used to describe the skinning of animals (cf. **Lev. 1:6**). Like a pack of dogs, Joseph’s nine brothers jumped him, scratching and pulling off the despised coat along with everything else he had on. Then, they dumped Joseph like a corpse into a pit so deep and vertical that he was trapped and could not climb out.

Joseph lay bruised and bleeding on the rocky floor of the empty cistern. The brothers’ intent was for him starve to death. Though, technically speaking, they had complied with Reuben’s order to “shed no blood,” it was still an act of attempted homicide.

III. A Brother is Sold — Consider the callousness of **verse 25**: “Then they sat down to eat.” The nine must have worked up quite an appetite by assaulting their younger brother! It’s likely that the meal they consumed were delicacies Joseph had brought from their father (cf. **1 Sam. 17:17-18**). As for Joseph himself, the text tells us nothing. But twenty years later, now in Egypt, the brothers will report, “In truth we are guilty concerning [Joseph], in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen” (**42:21**). And so, Joseph’s brothers laughed, joked, and feasted while hearing his frantic cries in the background—and it haunted them for years to come.

The plan was for them to eat, move on, and leave Joseph down in the pit. But the hidden hand of God’s providence countered all that when a new element came into play:

“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. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 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. 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.”

The Ishmaelite traders were distant kinfolk, made up of Abraham’s descendants through Hagar (cf. **Gen. 25:1-2**) along with Midianites with whom the Israelites and intermarried.

Because of Reuben’s absence, Judah (the son number four) bypassed the violent duo of Simeon and Levi and took charge, offering an alternate plan of selling Joseph into slavery. We don’t know his motivation but, whatever it was, Joseph’s life was spared. It’s interesting that, from here on, Judah will play a more active role in family leadership. In fact, Jacob will eventually name him as the bearer of the messianic line (cf. **49:8-10**).

At the time, Egypt had a flourishing slave trade. So the Midianites saw a great business opportunity because of their new acquisition—likely doubling their twenty-shekel investment. As for Joseph, he was dragged naked from the pit and tethered to a beast of burden. That

way he could carry some of the freight. Thus began his long trek to a new land. Think of it: Joseph's day had begun with him as a robed prince. It ended in slavery. Thus, in twenty-four hours he had literally gone from riches to rags!

Joseph, certainly, had every reason to play the victim. He had done little if anything to deserve this treatment. How could his brothers, of all people, do this to him? And where was God? Why hadn't Joseph been warned, perhaps in another dream? Then he could have avoided this catastrophe. And why the appearance of the Egypt-bound Ishmaelites? Reuben might have rescued him if it weren't for those guys. We'll get back to the crucial choice Joseph made in a moment. But first, there is the issue of his family and how they handled this new turn of events.

IV. Father Knows Least — As the oldest brother, who had several flocks to manage, Reuben was naturally on the go. But his departure was only temporary, so a return at night to spirit Joseph away would have been easy. But when he did get back, what Reuben found was almost beyond his worst fears. Though Joseph might still be alive, the caravan had taken him away as a possession! The tearing of Reuben's clothes and loud exclamation reveal that, at least on some level, he really did care about Joseph as well as his father. But a rescue was no longer possible. His brothers' response was total silence.

There's much irony here. Take the robe, for example. Up till now, it has been at the heart of the story. As Walter Brueggemann puts it: "The robe began in deep *love*. Then it was torn in deep *hate*. Now it is the main tool for a deep *deception*." Hence, we read:

"Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. 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.' 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'" (**vs. 31-33**).

By the way, I find it interesting that later a different robe will be ripped off of Joseph by another adversary, Potiphar's wife.

The crushing force of Jacob's pain rained down on the man in three quick stages. First, he identified the robe as Joseph's. Second, he

accepted the deception that an animal had attacked his son. Third, he concluded that Joseph had died. Jacob's sorrow was total! And all the while, the ten brothers stood by feigning a grief of their own.

"Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 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" (**vs. 34-35**).

This chapter of Joseph's story ends in grief and hopelessness. However, we are given this hopeful hint of things to come: "Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard" (**v. 36**). The dye was now cast for a resurrection of sorts. At the very least, it will be one of the greatest turnarounds in biblical, if not human, history. Now, let's get back to Joseph's choice.

V. The Choice — Joseph was neither a robot nor an android. He lived life just as you and I do—with small and large choices to make, each of them informed by God's promises. As already noted, Joseph had ample reasons for self-pity, rage, rejection of God, and revenge. If anyone had cause to play the victim, it was Joseph. But as we will see, he *chose* to reject the captivity of self pity and victimhood.

Why? Here's the reason. God's covenant promise to his great-grandfather Abraham served as the bedrock of Joseph's very existence—and it continually served as his source of hope. We can be sure that, as a young man, Joseph had repeatedly heard of Abraham's word to Isaac: "The Lord will provide; God will find a way" (**Gen. 22:8**). It worked like an internal mantra; echoing and reechoing in Joseph's mind. But this same promise also extends to us: One way or another, the Lord will provide. In all things, God works for the ultimate good of those who love him (**Rom. 8:28**). All you and I must do is to remain faithful to him.

Like Joseph, each of us bear our own wounds. Some of them are fresh, others go back a very long time. Today's pop culture offers no help at all, with its stress on playing the victim. Of course, we must never minimize our actual wounds or deny their reality. In dealing with them, there must be sympathy, reparations, and rapprochement, if possible. But, at the same time, we must never allow victimhood to

either define or enslave us. That is neither healthy, productive, biblical, nor Christian. In short, the blame game is not the Lord's game plan for his people.

R.T. Kendall spells it out and offers an apt definition of what it means to be a Christian. He speaks of:

"One who takes the responsibility for his own sins and quits blaming his troubles on his parents or upon people or upon society. When that begins to happen and we begin to see that we have got to deal with ourselves, we are close to becoming a Christian. We must see that we have sinned before God. That is where we must come before we can ever be saved."

This is also how the Christian life is to be lived: taking proper responsibility without whining.

Joseph's life teaches us that this world is full of inequities, unfairness, and tragedies. But it also informs us of a great God who works in the midst of all that. As God's children, you and I are called to give everything to him—including the bitter experiences of both the past and the present. As believers, we have been set free from the bondage of sin and death (**Rom. 8:2**). We must, therefore, rest everything on him (including our own mistakes) and believe that, one way or another, we will be eternally victorious in Christ.

Paul ties it all together with his wonderful declaration of **Galatians 2:20**:

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me."