

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS CHAPTER 37

At this chapter begins the story of Joseph, who, in every subsequent chapter but one to the end of this book, makes the greatest figure. He was Jacob's eldest son by his beloved wife Rachel, born, as many eminent men were, of a mother that had been long barren. His story is so remarkably divided between his humiliation and his exaltation that we cannot avoid seeing something of Christ in it, who was first humbled and then exalted, and, in many instances, so as to answer the type of Joseph. It also shows the lot of Christians, who must through many tribulations enter into the kingdom. In this chapter we have,

I. The malice his brethren bore against him. They hated him,

1. Because he informed his father of their wickedness, [#Ge 37:1-2](#).
2. Because his father loved him, [#Ge 37:3-4](#).
3. Because he dreamed of his dominion over them, [#Ge 37:5-11](#).

II. The mischiefs his brethren designed and did to him.

1. The kind visit he made them gave an opportunity, [#Ge 37:12-17](#).
2. They designed to slay him, but determined to starve him, [#Ge 37:18-24](#).
3. They changed their purpose, and sold him for a slave, [#Ge 37:25-28](#).
4. They made their father believe that he was torn in pieces, [#Ge 37:29-35](#).
5. He was sold into Egypt to Potiphar, [#Ge 37:36](#).

And all this was working together for good.

Ver. 1.

Moses has no more to say of the Edomites, unless as they happen to fall in Israel's way; but now applies himself closely to the story of Jacob's family: *These are the generations of Jacob*. His is not a bare barren genealogy as that of Esau ([#Ge 36:1](#)), but a memorable useful history. Here is,

1. Jacob a sojourner with his father Isaac, who has yet living, [#Ge 37:1](#). We shall never be at home, till we come to heaven.
2. Joseph, a shepherd, *feeding the flock with his brethren*, [#Ge 37:2](#). Though he was his father's darling, yet he was not brought up in idleness or delicacy. Those do not truly love their children that do not inure them to business, and labour, and mortification. The fondling of children is with good reason commonly called the spoiling of them. Those that are trained up to do nothing are likely to be good for nothing.
3. Joseph beloved by his father ([#Ge 37:3](#)), partly for his dear mother's sake that was dead, and partly for his own sake, because he was the greatest comfort of his old age; probably he waited on him, and was more observant of him than the rest of his sons; he was the *son of the ancient* so some; that is, when he was a child, he was as grave and discreet as if he had been an old man, a child, but not childish. Jacob proclaimed his affection to him by dressing him finer than the rest of his children: He

made him a coat of divers colours, which probably was significant of further honours intended him. Note, Though those children are happy that have that in them which justly recommends them to their parents' particular love, yet it is the prudence of parents not to make a difference between one child and another, unless there be a great and manifest cause given for it by the children's dutifulness or undutifulness; paternal government must be impartial, and managed with a steady hand.

4. Joseph hated by his brethren,

(1.) Because his father loved him; when parents make a difference, children soon take notice of it, and it often occasions feuds and quarrels in families.

(2.) Because he *brought to his father their evil report*. Jacob's sons did that, when they were from under his eye, which they durst not have done if they had been at home with him; but Joseph gave his father an account of their bad carriage, that he might reprove and restrain them; not as a malicious tale-bearer, to sow discord, but as a faithful brother, who, when he durst not admonish them himself, represented their faults to one that had authority to admonish them. Note,

[1.] It is common for friendly monitors to be looked upon as enemies. Those that hate to be reformed hate those that would reform them, [#Pr 9:8](#).

[2.] It is common for those that are beloved of God to be hated by the world; whom Heaven blesses, hell curses. To those to whom God speaks comfortably wicked men will not speak peaceably. It is said here of Joseph, *the lad was with the sons of Bilhah*; some read it, and he was *servant to them*, they made him their drudge.

Ver. 5.

Here,

I. Joseph relates the prophetic dreams he had, [#Ge 37:6,7,9,10](#). Though he was now very young (about seventeen years old), yet he was pious and devout, and well-inclined, and this fitted him for God's gracious discoveries of himself to him. Joseph had a great deal of trouble before him, and therefore God gave him betimes this prospect of his advancement, to support and comfort him under the long and grievous troubles with which he was to be exercised. Thus Christ had a *joy set before him*, and so have Christians. Note, God has ways of preparing his people beforehand for the trials which they cannot foresee, but which he has an eye to in the comforts with which he furnishes them. His dreams were,

1. That his brethren's sheaves all bowed to his, intimating upon what occasion they should be brought to do homage to him, namely, in seeking to him for corn; their empty sheaves should bow to his full one.
2. That the sun, and moon, and eleven stars, did obeisance to him, [#Ge 37:9](#). Joseph was more of a prophet than a politician, else he would have kept this to himself, when he could not but know that his brethren did already hate him and that this would but the more exasperate them. But, if he told it in his simplicity, yet God directed it for the mortification of his brethren. Observe, Joseph dreamed of his preferment, but he did not dream of his imprisonment. Thus many young people, when they are setting out in the world, think of nothing but prosperity and pleasure, and never dream of trouble.

II. His brethren take it very ill, and are more and more enraged against him (#Ge 37:8): *Shalt thou indeed reign over us?* See here,

1. How truly they interpreted his dream, that he should reign over them. Those become the expositors of his dream who were enemies to the accomplishment of it, as in Gideon's story (#Jud 7:13,14); they perceived that he spoke of them, #Mt 21:45. The event exactly answered to this interpretation, #Ge 42:6, &c.
2. How scornfully they resented it:

"Shalt thou, who are but one, reign over us, who are many? Thou, who are the youngest, over us who are older?"

Note, The reign and dominion of Jesus Christ, our Joseph, have been, and are, despised and striven against by a carnal and unbelieving world, who cannot endure to think that this man should reign over them. The dominion also of the upright, in the morning of the resurrection, is thought of with the utmost disdain.

III. His father gives him a gentle rebuke for it, yet observes the saying, #Ge 37:10,11. Probably he checked him for it, to lessen the offence which his brethren would be apt to take at it; yet he took notice of it more than he seemed to do: he insinuated that it was but an idle dream, because his mother was brought in, who had been dead some time since; whereas *the sun, moon, and eleven stars*, signify no more than the whole family that should have a dependence upon him, and be glad to be beholden to him. Note: The faith of God's people in God's promises is often sorely shaken by their misunderstanding the promises and then suggesting the improbabilities that attend the performance; but God is doing his own work, and will do it, whether we understand him aright or no. Jacob, like Mary (#Lu 2:51), kept these things in his heart, and no doubt remembered them long afterwards, when the event answered to the prediction.

Ver. 12.

Here is,

I. The kind visit which Joseph, in obedience to his father's command, made to his brethren, who were feeding the flock at Shechem, many miles off. Some suggest that they went thither on purpose, expecting that Joseph would be sent to see them, and that then they should have an opportunity to do him a mischief. However, Joseph and his father had both of them more of the innocence of the dove than of the wisdom of the serpent, else he had never come thus into the hands of those that hated him: but God designed it all for good. See in Joseph an instance,

1. Of dutifulness to his father. Though he was his father's darling, yet he was made, and was willing to be, his father's servant. How readily does he wait his father's orders! *Here I am, #Ge 37:13.* Note, Those children that are best beloved by their parents should be most obedient to their parents; and then their love is well-bestowed and well-returned.
2. Of kindness to his brethren. Though he knew they hated him and envied him, yet he made no objections against his father's commands, either from the distance of the place or the danger of the journey, but cheerfully embraced the opportunity of showing his respect to his brethren. Note, It is a very good lesson, though it is learnt with difficulty and rarely practised, *to love those that hate us*; if our relations do not their duty to us, yet we must not be wanting in our duty to them. This is thank-worthy.

Joseph was sent by his father to Shechem, to see whether his brethren were well there, and whether the country had not risen upon them and destroyed them, in revenge of their barbarous murder of the Shechemites some years before. But Joseph, not finding them there, went to Dothan, which showed that he undertook this journey, not only in obedience to his father (for then he might have returned when he missed them at Shechem, having done what his father told him), but out of love to his brethren, and therefore he sought diligently till he found them. Thus, let brotherly love continue, and let us give proofs of it.

II. The bloody and malicious plot of his brethren against him, who rendered good for evil, and, for his love, were his adversaries. Observe,

1. How deliberate they were in the contrivance of this mischief: when they *saw him afar off, they conspired against him, #Ge 37:18*. It was not in a heat, or upon a sudden provocation, that they thought to slay him, but from malice prepense, and in cold blood. Note, Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer; for he will be one if he have an opportunity, #1Jo 3:15. Malice is a most mischievous thing, and is in danger of making bloody work where it is harboured and indulged. The more there is of a project and contrivance in a sin the worse it is; it is bad to do evil, but worse to devise it.
2. How cruel they were in their design; nothing less than his blood would satisfy them: *Come, and let us slay him, #Ge 37:20*. Note, The old enmity hunts for the precious life. It is the *blood-thirsty* that *hate the upright (#Pr 29:10)*, and it is the blood of the saints that the harlot is drunk with.
3. How scornfully they reproached him for his dreams (**#Ge 37:19**): *This dreamer cometh; and (#Ge 37:20), We shall see what will become of his dreams*. This shows what it was that fretted and enraged them. They could not endure to think of doing homage to him; this was what they were plotting to prevent by the murder of him. Note, Men that fret and rage at God's counsels are impiously aiming to defeat them; but they imagine a vain thing, #Ps 2:1-3. God's counsels will stand.
4. How they agreed to keep one another's counsel, and to cover the murder with a lie: *We will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him; whereas in thus consulting to devour him they proved themselves worse than the most evil beasts; for evil beasts prey not on those of their own kind, but they were tearing a piece of themselves*.

III. Reuben's project to deliver him, #Ge 37:21,22. Note, God can raise up friends for his people, even among their enemies; for he has all hearts in his hands. Reuben, of all the brothers, had most reason to be jealous of Joseph, for he was the first-born, and so entitled to those distinguishing favours which Jacob was conferring on Joseph; yet he proves his best friend. Reuben's temper seems to have been soft and effeminate, which had betrayed him to the sin of uncleanness; while the temper of the next two brothers, Simeon and Levi, was fierce, which betrayed them to the sin of murder, a sin which Reuben startled at the thought of. Note, Our natural constitution should be guarded against those sins to which it is most inclinable, and improved (as Reuben's here) against those sins to which it is most averse. Reuben made a proposal which they thought would effectually answer their intention of destroying Joseph, and yet which he designed should answer his intention of rescuing Joseph out of their hands and restoring him to his father, probably hoping thereby to recover his father's favour, which he had lately lost; but God overruled all to serve his own purpose of making Joseph an instrument to save much people alive. Joseph was here a type of Christ. Though he was the beloved Son of his Father, and hated by a wicked world, yet the Father sent him out of his bosom to visit us in

great humility and love. He came from heaven to earth, to seek and save us; yet then malicious plots were laid against him. He came to his own, and his own not only received him not, but conspired against him: *This is the heir, come let us kill him; Crucify him, crucify him.* This he submitted to, in pursuance of his design to redeem and save us.

Ver. 23.

We have here the execution of their plot against Joseph.

1. They stripped him, each striving to seize the envied coat of many colours, **#Ge 37:23**. Thus, in imagination, they degraded him from the birthright, of which perhaps this was the badge, grieving him, affronting their father, and making themselves sport, while they insulted over him.

"Now, Joseph, where is the fine coat?"

Thus our Lord Jesus was stripped of his seamless coat, and thus his suffering saints have first been industriously divested of their privileges and honours, and then made the off-scouring of all things.

2. They went about to starve him, throwing him into a dry pit, to perish there with hunger and cold, so cruel were their tender mercies, **#Ge 37:24**. Note, Where envy reigns pity is banished, and humanity itself is forgotten, **#Pr 27:4**. So full of deadly poison is malice that the more barbarous any thing is the more grateful it is. Now Joseph begged for his life, in *the anguish of his soul* (**#Ge 42:21**), entreated, by all imaginable endearments, that they would be content with his coat and spare his life. He pleads innocence, relation, affection, submission; he weeps and makes supplication, but all in vain. Reuben alone relents and intercedes for him, **#Ge 42:22**. But he cannot prevail to save Joseph from the horrible pit, in which they resolve he shall die by degrees, and be buried alive. Is this he to whom his brethren must do homage? Note, God's providences often seem to contradict his purposes, even then they are serving them, and working at a distance towards the accomplishment of them.
3. They slighted him when he was in distress, and were not grieved for the affliction of Joseph; for when he was pining away in the pit, bemoaning his own misery, and with a languishing cry calling to them for pity, they *sat down to eat bread*, **#Ge 37:25**.

(1.) They felt no remorse of conscience for the sin; if they had, it would have spoiled their appetite for their meat, and the relish of it. Note, A great force put upon conscience commonly stupefies it, and for the time deprives it both of sense and speech. Daring sinners are secure ones. But the consciences of Joseph's brethren, though asleep now, were roused long afterwards, **#Ge 42:21**.

(2.) They were now pleased to think how they were freed from the fear of their brother's dominion over them, and that, on the contrary, they had turned the wheel upon him. They made merry over him, as the persecutors over the two witnesses that had tormented them, **#Re 11:10**. Note, Those that oppose God's counsels may possibly prevail so far as to think they have gained their point, and yet be deceived.

4. They sold him. A caravan of merchants very opportunely passed by (Providence so ordering it), and Judah made the motion that they should sell Joseph to them, to be carried far enough off into Egypt, where, in all probability, he would be lost, and never heard of more.

(1.) Judah proposed it in compassion to Joseph (#Ge 37:26):

"What profit is it if we slay our brother? it will be less guilt, and more gain, to sell him."

Note, When we are tempted to sin, we should consider the unprofitableness of it. It is what there is nothing to be got by.

(2.) They acquiesced in it, because they thought that if he were sold for a slave he would never be a lord, if sold into Egypt he would never be their lord; yet all this was working towards it. Note, The wrath of man shall praise God, and the remainder of wrath he will restrain, #Ps 76:10. Joseph's brethren were wonderfully restrained from murdering him, and their selling him was as wonderfully turned to God's praise. As Joseph was sold by the contrivance of Judah for twenty pieces of silver, so was our Lord Jesus for thirty, and by one of the same name too, *Judas*. Reuben (it seems) had gone away from his brethren, when they sold Joseph, intending to come round some other way to the pit, and to help Joseph out of it, and return him safely to his father. This was a kind project, but, if it had taken effect, what had become of God's purpose concerning his preferment in Egypt?

Note, There are many devices in man's heart, many devices of the enemies of God's people to destroy them and of their friends to help them, which perhaps are both disappointed, as these were; but the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand. Reuben thought himself undone, because the child was sold: *I, whither shall I go?* #Ge 37:30. He being the eldest, his father would expect from him an account of Joseph; but, as it proved, they would all have been undone if he had not been sold.

#Ge 37:31-36

I. Joseph would soon be missed, great enquiry would be made for him, and therefore his brethren have a further design, to make the world believe that Joseph was torn in pieces by a wild beast; and this they did,

1. To clear themselves, that they might not be suspected to have done him any mischief.

Note, We have all learned of Adam to cover our transgression, #Job 31:33. When the devil has taught men to commit one sin, he then teaches them to conceal it with another, theft and murder with lying and perjury; but he that covers his sin shall not prosper long. Joseph's brethren kept their own and one another's counsel for some time, but their villany came to light at last, and it is here published to the world, and the remembrance of it transmitted to every age.

2. To grieve their good father. It seems designed by them on purpose to be revenged upon him for his distinguishing love of Joseph. It was contrived on purpose to create the utmost vexation to him. They sent him Joseph's coat of many colours, with one colour more than it had had, a bloody colour, #Ge 37:32. They pretended they had found it in the fields, and Jacob himself must be scornfully asked, *Is this thy son's coat?* Now the badge of his honour is the discovery of his fate; and it is rashly inferred from the bloody coat that *Joseph, without doubt, is rent in pieces*. Love is always apt to fear the worst concerning the person beloved; there is a love that casteth out fear, but that is a perfect love. Now let those that know the heart of a parent suppose the agonies of poor Jacob, and put their souls into his soul's stead. How strongly does he represent to himself the direful idea of Joseph's misery! Sleeping or waking, he imagines he sees the wild beast setting upon Joseph, thinks he hears his piteous shrieks when the lion roared against him, makes himself tremble and grow chill, many a time, when he fancies how the beast sucked his blood, tore

him limb from limb, and left no remains of him, but the coat of many colours, to carry the tidings. And no doubt it added no little to the grief that he had exposed him, by sending him, and sending him all alone, on this dangerous journey, which proved so fatal to him. This cuts him to the heart, and he is ready to look upon himself as an accessory to the death of his son. Now,

(1.) Endeavours were used to comfort him. His sons basely pretended to do it (#Ge 37:35); but miserable hypocritical comforters were they all. Had they really desired to comfort him, they might easily have done it, by telling him the truth,

"Joseph is alive, he is indeed sold into Egypt, but it will be an easy thing to send thither and ransom him."

This would have *loosened his sackcloth, and girded him with gladness* presently. I wonder their countenances did not betray their guilt, and with what face they could pretend to condole with Jacob on the death of Joseph, when they knew he was alive. Note, The heart is strangely hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. But,

(2.) It was all in vain: *Jacob refused to be comforted, #Ge 37:35*. He was an obstinate mourner, resolved to go down to the grave mourning. It was not a sudden transport of passion, like that of David, *Would God I had died for thee, my son, my son!* But, like Job, he hardened himself in sorrow. Note,

[1.] Great affection to any creature does not prepare for so much the greater affliction, when it is either removed from us or embittered to us. Inordinate love commonly ends in immoderate grief; as much as the sway of the pendulum throws one way, so much it will throw the other way.

[2.] Those consult neither the comfort of their souls nor the credit of their religion that are determined in their sorrow upon any occasion whatsoever. We must never say,

"We will go to our grave mourning,"

because we know not what joyful days Providence may yet reserve for us, and it is our wisdom and duty to accommodate ourselves to Providence.

[3.] We often perplex ourselves with imaginary troubles. We fancy things worse than they are, and then afflict ourselves more than we need. Sometimes there needs no more to comfort us than to undeceive us: it is good to hope the best.

II. The Ishmaelites and Midianites having bought Joseph only to make their market of him, here we have him sold again (with gain enough to the merchants, no doubt) to Potiphar, #Ge 37:36. Jacob was lamenting the loss of his life; had he known all he would have lamented, though not so passionately, the loss of liberty. Shall Jacob's freeborn son exchange the best robe of his family for the livery of an Egyptian lord, and all the marks of servitude? How soon was the land of Egypt made a house of bondage to the seed of Jacob! Note: It is the wisdom of parents not to bring up their children too delicately, because they know not to what hardships and mortifications Providence may reduce them before they die. Jacob little thought that ever his beloved Joseph would be thus bought and sold for a servant.