

**“THE REJECTED DELIVERER”**

Our passage begins with the tenth and final instance of the “generations” formula in the book of Genesis, marking out chapters 37-50 as the last section of the book. The main human character in this last section is often identified as Joseph, and it is true that Joseph plays a leading role in these chapters. However, as verse 2 tells us, this section of the book is not about just one of Jacob’s sons, but all of them. It is the book of the generations of Jacob. And while Joseph is very important in the story that unfolds here, the character who undergoes the greatest transformation in these chapters is Judah. We see the dark side of Judah’s character in this passage when he comes up with the idea of selling Joseph into slavery in order to make a few extra bucks. I suppose you could say that that isn’t quite as bad as outright murder, but it is still pretty bad. And just wait - it gets even worse, as we are going to see in the next chapter. But later on in the story, when the tables are turned on the brothers, Judah is the one who steps up and offers to sacrifice himself in order to spare his father any more pain. And at the end of the book, as Jacob is blessing his sons from his deathbed, he declares that Judah will be the ruler over the covenant people. And Jacob’s words were brought to fulfillment. The scepter was not removed from Judah, as his descendant David was set upon Israel’s throne, and as our Lord Jesus, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, has been exalted at God’s right hand. All of this to say that, as we begin our study of this final section in Genesis, we should keep an eye on Judah as much as we do on Joseph.

Today, though, our attention will be focused upon Joseph, because he is clearly the principle human character in this passage. Joseph is not perfect, but he is the most consistently admirable figure in the book of Genesis. And in the role that he plays in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation, he is clearly a type, or a foreshadowing, of Christ. God raised Joseph up to be the deliverer of his people, but the deliverance that he brought about only came after he was despised, rejected, and essentially done away with by his brothers. In this way, Joseph serves as a foreshadowing of the true Deliverer of God's people: Jesus Christ.

This passage can be broken down into two main sections: the first providing information about what it was that alienated the brothers from Joseph, and the second telling us what they did to Joseph because of their hatred of him. The story begins with Joseph's bad report to his father about his brothers. The Hebrew phrase translated as "bad report" can be understood in two ways. It could be saying simply that Joseph told his father about the bad things that his brothers were doing. Or, it could mean that Joseph's report was slanderous and perhaps even unfounded. If the latter interpretation is true, and this is supported by how the phrase is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, then Joseph is being presented as a sort of tattle tale. There may be something to that, but the context certainly gives us plenty of reasons to believe that Joseph's brothers were in fact doing something that was wrong. Knowing what we know of human nature, it very well could be that Joseph took pleasure in getting his brothers in trouble. Anyone who has children can testify to the likelihood of that. At the same time, though, knowing what we

know of Joseph's brothers, it seems very likely that they were also getting into trouble. Whatever the case might have been, one thing is very clear: Joseph's bad report caused his brothers to hate him even more. They hated him so much that they could not even speak peacefully to him. This is a family in desperate need of reconciliation. God will eventually bring that reconciliation about. But not before things get much, much worse.

We next learn that Jacob favored Joseph above all of his other brothers. Joseph was the second youngest of Jacob's twelve sons, with Benjamin being the youngest, born to Rachel just before she died. There was a history of favoritism in Jacob's family. His father Isaac had favored Esau over him, his mother had favored him over Esau, and Jacob himself had favored Rachel over Leah. You would think that Jacob would have learned from that, but he did not. Those instances of favoritism created a great deal of grief, but that did not prevent Jacob from announcing his preference of Joseph by giving him this special robe.

As if that were not enough fuel to add to the fire of the brothers' hatred, there was also the matter of Joseph's dreams. This is the first of three pairs of dreams in the Joseph story. This was an era of redemptive history in which the Lord revealed himself and his plans through dreams. It was, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, that time long ago when the Lord spoke to our fathers in many different ways. Dreams were frequently used as a means of divine revelation in Genesis. We do not know exactly how the people who received these revelatory dreams were able to differentiate them from ordinary dreams, but there was evidently something about them that made them stand out.

The fact that Joseph's dreams were divine revelation makes his brothers' response to his report of his dreams all the more serious. Joseph is a mediator of divine revelation here. The brothers were not merely rejecting him; they were rejecting God. We might fault Jacob for favoring one son over the others, but we cannot fault God for placing Joseph over his brothers. As we saw in the story of Jacob and Esau, God is free to choose one and reject the other. And while God is not rejecting Jacob's other sons here, he is placing Joseph over them.

This illustrates a reality that we are all keenly aware of. It is something that we see very clearly when we compare our lives to the lives of others. It is the undeniable fact that God does not treat everyone equally. Some people are given greater privileges, greater abilities, greater advantages, and greater opportunities than we are. Some people are outwardly blessed in greater ways than we are. This is a corollary of the doctrine of election. Just as God is completely free in determining who he will save, he is also free in determining all of the details of each person's life. There are times when this becomes hard for us to accept. But we have to guard against becoming bitter about it. For one thing, there is no point in becoming bitter. It serves no purpose, as the story of Joseph and his brothers illustrates for us. For another thing, being resentful over what other people have reveals our lack of trust in God. The Lord is wiser than we are. He knows what has to happen in each of our lives in order for his saving work to be carried out. And for this reason, each of us needs to learn to be content with what the Lord has allotted to us, and to trust that his providential ordering of our lives really is what is best.

This brings us to the second half of our passage: the account of Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt. It begins by telling us that Joseph's brothers were tending the flocks near Shechem. This comes as a bit of a surprise, since the last we heard of Shechem was the account of the massacre that was carried out there by Simeon and Levi. Why would the brothers go back to Shechem, a place where there could be the danger of retribution? We do not know why they went to Shechem. Whatever their reason, Jacob was concerned about them, and he decided to send Joseph to check up on them.

As Joseph drew near to the place where his brothers were located, they were able to identify him while he was still far off, because he was wearing that robe that they hated so much. And as they watched him approach, the murderous thoughts of their hearts began to spill forth into a murderous plot. Like Cain's hatred for Abel, they hated Joseph because he was accepted and they were not. And also like Cain, they were willing to let their hatred lead them to commit the crime of fratricide.

At least, that was how most of them felt as they saw Joseph approaching. Reuben, however, the eldest among the brothers, did not want to kill Joseph. Perhaps his conscience objected to such a wicked scheme. Or perhaps he saw this as an opportunity to regain his father's favor after he had slept with Jacob's concubine. Whatever his motives, Reuben was able to prevent his brothers from directly killing Joseph. Instead, they threw him into a pit, a cistern that would normally be filled with water, and they left him there.

The brothers' callousness is underscored by the fact that the first thing that they did after casting Joseph into the pit was to sit down and have something to eat. It is almost too hard to imagine that they could be this cold-hearted. In all likelihood, they were feasting on the food that Joseph had brought with him. And while we are not told anything further in this passage about how Joseph responded to such abuse, we learn later that he pleaded for his life. [42:21] But the brothers showed him no mercy. When the Ishmaelites passed by, they agreed to the plan suggested by Judah: "Let's sell him as a slave and make some profit off of this dreamer."

You can imagine what the brothers must have been thinking as they handed Joseph over and received their payment. So much for those dreams now. They thought they were getting rid of Joseph. They thought that their actions would make it utterly impossible for Joseph's dreams to be fulfilled. But they could not have been more wrong. It was their actions that brought about the eventual fulfillment of those dreams. Joseph will have more trials to endure in Egypt, but he will eventually be exalted, and his brothers will indeed bow before him.

The final element in the brothers' plot was to explain to their father why Joseph had not returned home. They told him that Joseph must have been killed by a wild animal, bringing his torn and bloodied cloak as evidence. There was great irony to this. Jacob had deceived his father by using his brother's cloak and some goatskins. And now his sons deceive him by using their brother's cloak and the blood of a goat.

This “news” was almost more than Jacob could bear. He was utterly devastated upon seeing Joseph’s cloak. His outward acts of mourning went far beyond the week or month that was the normal practice. There was no comforting him; there was no hope for Israel. Yet even as Moses tells about Jacob’s inconsolable sorrow, he also provides an epilogue that reveals that we have not heard the last of Joseph.

One of the themes that we have seen repeatedly in our study of Genesis is its emphasis upon how God is bringing about his plan of salvation through his dealings with a people who are undeniably sinful and weak. And we have a variation on that theme in this text about Joseph and his brothers. God chooses to exalt Joseph, even though he is the next to the youngest. Once again, God subverts the normal human custom by elevating the younger over the older. And while Joseph stands far above his brothers with respect to his moral character, he is hated and rejected by them. Yet it was through their rejection of him that the Lord made a way to deliver the covenant people during a time of famine. Joseph is a type of Christ. As Edmund Clowney writes, “God’s chosen Ruler is His Suffering Servant, betrayed by His brethren but raised up to fulfill God’s promises.” [*The Unfolding Mystery*, 84] This is a pattern that our God consistently follows as he carries out his saving purposes in this world. God chooses the weak, the low, and the despised, and he accomplishes his redemptive purposes through them. It was true in Joseph’s day; it was true in Christ’s day; and it is true in our day. And for this reason, a Christian should never fall into despair. Let us learn from Jacob. Even in

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Jacob's devastation, when he was refusing to be comforted, the Lord was at work over in Egypt, laying the groundwork for his plan to save his people.