

all for good
the story of Joseph in Genesis



Genesis 37b

Introduction

- Jacob sent Joseph on a several days' journey to check on his brothers.
- His brothers saw this as an opportunity to get rid of Joseph and conspired to kill him.
- Reuben, the oldest, told them to throw him into a pit instead, reasoning that he would come back later to rescue Joseph.
- While Reuben was gone, Judah, the fourth oldest, convinced the others to sell Joseph into slavery instead.

Introduction

- When Reuben returned, he was upset and worried, but he agreed to lie to their father and lead him to believe that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.
- Jacob committed to mourning Joseph for the rest of his life.
- Joseph was taken to Egypt to the house of Potiphar, a captain of the guard of Pharaoh.

Genesis 37:12-17

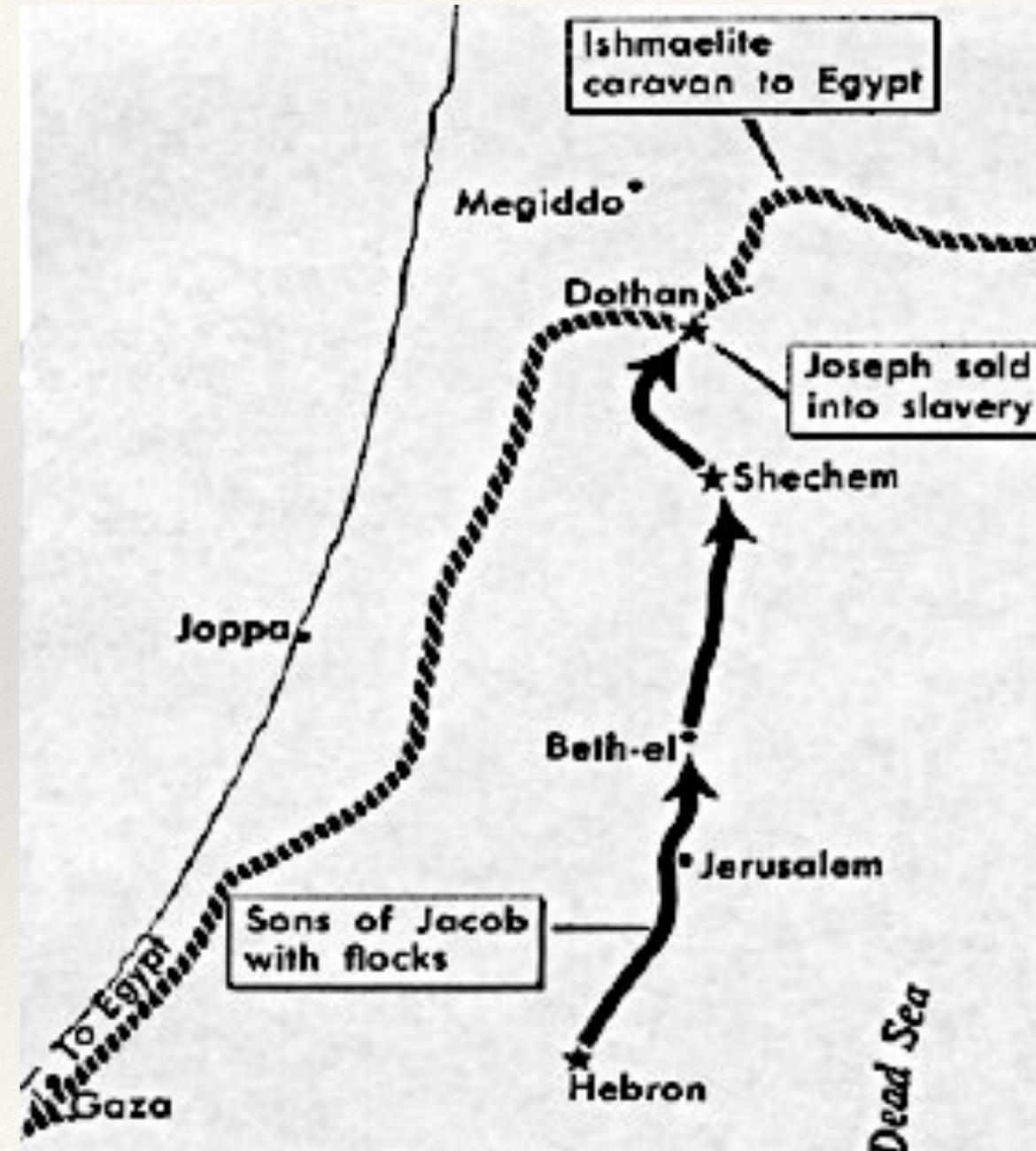
Shechem and Jacob's Sons

- Once again, we see Jacob put Joseph in a position of authority over his brothers.
- Joseph went to look for his brothers in Shechem (a city 60 miles away), a city that held a dark past for Jacob and his family.
- They had lived in Shechem previously.
- While there, the prince of Shechem took Jacob's daughter Dinah and "lay with her and humiliated her" (Genesis 34:2).

Shechem and Jacob's Sons

- Enraged by the prince's actions, two of Jacob's sons (Simeon and Levi) killed every male in the city (Genesis 34:25).
- This may be the reason as to why Jacob would want Joseph to check on the brothers as they allowed their sheep to graze in Shechem.
- Further, this might be the very reason the brothers chose to move the flock from Shechem to Dothan.

Shechem and Dothan



Genesis 37:18-28

The brothers' plan

- As a group, all of Joseph's older brothers (except Reuben) decided to kill Joseph and throw him into one of the pits (verse 20).
- The text doesn't specify which of the brothers first came up with the idea, but it sounds as though all of them were on board except for Reuben (verse 21).
- Judah doesn't seem to have a problem with killing Joseph (verse 26).
- He just told the brothers he had a better idea—a way they could profit from the situation financially. Their transaction garnered them 20 shekels, two-thirds the cost of a slave (Exodus 21:32).

The brothers' plan

- The Hebrew word here for “pit” is actually “cistern.”
- A cistern was built to collect rainwater. It could be dry, as it was in this story (verse 24). But when the rains came, these pits would fill up with water.
- When Reuben suggested not killing Joseph, just throwing him into the pit, the brothers would have thought that would still mean his death.
- But instead of killing him by their own hands (“shed no blood” verse 22), Joseph would have likely died of starvation and / or dehydration instead.

The brothers' plan

- Of course, Reuben was secretly suggesting it so he could go back later, rescue Joseph and take him back to their father (verse 22).
- Reuben wanted to do the right thing, but he didn't have the courage to stand up to the rest of the brothers as Joseph had done in last week's lesson.
- He was only willing to do the right thing in secret.

Joseph's Dreams

- When the brothers were talking about killing Joseph, they said, “Then we will see what will become of his dreams” (verse 20).
- This shows their motivation for why they wanted to kill him, but it is also a nod to our overall theme, that God is working all things for good.
- The text is reminding us of Joseph's dreams here, and showing us that God has a plan and a purpose that cannot be thwarted.
- The brothers are trying to stop the future of the dreams from becoming a reality, but God will make it so.

Genesis 37:29-36

Reuben's Response

- When Reuben returned and saw Joseph gone, he realized that his attempt to do the right thing wasn't enough (verse 29).
- His question, "where shall I go?" is referring to this feeling that he can't go back home to his father without Joseph (verse 30).
- Reuben seems to be motivated primarily by fear of his father, of what will happen to him when he returns without Joseph.
- Reuben was the oldest, so his father would hold him accountable for whatever happened while they were gone.

Reuben's Response

- Reuben and his dad already have a strained relationship – Reuben had slept with Jacob's concubine Bilhah – an act of betrayal and potentially an attempt to challenge his father's authority and grasp for power (Genesis 35:22).
- It was a well-known practice in ancient Near Eastern culture that the eldest son would inherit the concubines of his father (the Bible does not support polygamy or having concubines at all).
- Reuben was trying to assert his own status as the true heir of Jacob, rather than Joseph.

Reuben's Response

- The whole ancient world considered sleeping with another man's wife a grave sin.
- It was a crime punishable by death according to OT law and the culture of the time (Deuteronomy 22:22).
- However, Jacob had not punished Reuben for it. At least that is all that Scripture records (Genesis 35:22).
- So Reuben was in a tenuous situation with his father.

Reuben's Response

- The fact that Reuben went along with this lie instead of telling Jacob what really happened says a lot about his character (verses 31–33).
- He could have done the right thing. If he had told Jacob what happened, of course Jacob would have been angry, but he would have been able to try to find Joseph and buy him back out of slavery.
- It wouldn't have been the way he planned, but he still could have given his father back his son.

Reuben's Response

- Reuben could have even spun the story in his favor, making himself out to be the innocent one. It kept his father from being mad at him, and it kept Reuben at the top.
- Sin always snowballs on top of itself until we come clean. If you lie about it, you have to keep lying. Imagine all of the times the brothers would have had to keep lying throughout the rest of Jacob's life.
- Every time anyone told a story about Joseph or mentioned his name, they would have to retell the lie. Sin begets sin until we confess.

Reuben's Response

- It may be tempting to see Reuben as the hero of this chapter (because he didn't allow his brothers to kill Joseph).
- But this story does nothing but emphasize Reuben's weakness of character:
- He didn't stand up to the rest of the brothers fully; he participated in what they did by helping them lie to cover it up; and his desire to do the right thing wasn't even motivated by love for Joseph or Jacob, but rather by fear of Jacob and self-centeredness about his own place in the family.

Genesis 37:23-28

Joseph in the Pit

- What about Joseph? The text doesn't say anything about how he is feeling, what he is doing, or what is going through his head while he sits in that pit.
- The Bible does tell us what God is doing while Joseph is in the pit. In the very last verse of this chapter (verse 36).
- He is moving him closer and closer to his divine destiny, even in slavery. He not only went to Egypt, he went to the house of the captain of the guard, an officer of Pharaoh.
- God is working all things out for good.

Joseph in the Pit

- While we don't know what Joseph was doing in that pit, we do know that through every "pit" (this first literal one and then every low point of his life thereafter) God was with him. God was preparing him for his ultimate destiny to save his family and the whole nation of Egypt (Genesis 50:20).
- God was with him when he was in slavery at Potiphar's house (Genesis 39:2). God was with him when he was in prison (Genesis 39:21).
- Through all of these difficult things, God was teaching Joseph to trust in Him, to lean on Him, to hope in Him.

Application

- Have you ever experienced a time when you had to lean on someone else for help?
- Difficult situations force us to lean on other people. When we have no other option, when we are too weak to do it on our own, we have to lean on others.
- The same is true of our relationship with God. Often, it is when we are weak that we really learn to lean on God, when we realize how much we really need Him.
- Difficult times present us with the opportunity to grow in our faith.

Application

“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

Romans 5:3-5