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IF GOD IS SOVEREIGN,
WHY AM I IN THE PITS?

Genesis 37:1-36

by

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Genesis Lesson 64

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Genesis 37:1-36

It is impossible to live in this world and not be hurt by someone else's sin. You may have been verbally, physically, or sexually abused as a child. Many have been damaged by someone's drinking or drug abuse. If you're married, you've been hurt by your spouse. Your children may have rebelled and caused you deep pain. Most of us have been the victims of crime.

When you have been wounded by someone else's sin, you've probably wondered, "Where is God in all this? If God is all-powerful and loving, why is He allowing this terrible sin against me? If He is in control, why do wicked men literally get away with murder? If God is sovereign, why am I in the pits?"

Joseph could have asked that question. Due to his brothers' sin, he was literally in a pit. From there things didn't get better. His brothers didn't kill him, as they originally planned, but they did sell their 17-year-old brother into slavery in a foreign land. As that caravan made its way south toward Egypt, perhaps passing within a few miles of Joseph's home in Hebron, he must have been overwhelmed with grief and loneliness as he wondered if he would ever see his father again. He must have wrestled with fear, anger, and feelings of rejection as he thought about his brothers' cruelty toward him. He must have wondered, "If God is sovereign, why am I in the pits?"

It's interesting that God is not mentioned in Genesis 37. A skeptic might say, "See, God isn't there when you need Him. If He cared about you, He would stop sinful men from carrying out their terrible plans." But even though God is not mentioned by name, His sovereign providence runs like a strong river through this chapter, carrying even the sinful plans of man downstream in His overall purpose.

The basis for seeing God's sovereign hand behind the events of Genesis 37 is found in His earlier word to Abraham (Gen. 15:13-14, 16):

And God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions.... Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

God had this whole thing planned years before! Our next study in Genesis 38 will reveal why God wanted to get His people into Egypt: They were becoming thoroughly corrupt in Canaan. To preserve the nation from assimilation with the Canaanites, He put them into Egypt, where they became slaves for 400 years. This solidified them as a people under God and prepared them for conquering Canaan when the time for God's judgment was ripe. But the point is clear: God was sovereignly orchestrating all these events according to His eternal plan.

"But," you ask, "doesn't that make God responsible for man's sin?" The biblical answer is clearly, "No!" Men are responsible for their sin and yet God uses men and their sin to accomplish His sovereign purpose. George Bush (a 19th century commentator, not the former President) describes God's providence as "that overruling Power which is 'wonderful in counsel and mighty in operation'--which controls the free and voluntary action of intelligent creatures, even when prompted by a spirit of malevolence and rebellion, so as to render them subservient to the accomplishment of those very plans which they are intent upon defeating, while the guilt of the agents remains resting upon them in all its unabated aggravations" (*Notes on Genesis* [Klock & Klock reprint], 2:219).

There are many verses in the Bible that show that God is sovereign

even over men's sin, yet they are responsible for it (Jer. 8:10; 13:13; 19:3, 9, 15; 25:9; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28, plus many others). If it boggles your mind as to how God can grant man freedom of choice and yet turn man's sin so that it accomplishes the very thing they were trying to thwart, then join Paul in exclaiming, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Rom. 11:33). The bottom line of this marvelous story in Genesis 37 is,

Since God is sovereign over all, we can trust
Him even when things seem to go against us.

There are three main characters in this drama, each of whom demonstrate the sovereignty of God in spite of their sin or imperfection: Jacob, who is insensitive and foolish; Joseph, who is naive; and, Joseph's brothers, hardened in their sin. But the real central character is God, who is providentially at work behind the scenes.

1. God is sovereign even when parents are insensitive and foolish.

As we've already seen, Jacob wasn't the world's greatest father. He made many mistakes with his family. He allowed his wives to engage in a war over who could have the most children, thus creating a climate of rivalry in the family. He seemingly would have let Dinah marry the pagan who raped her. He didn't deal with the treachery and brutality of his sons after Dinah's rape. And here he is blind to his other sons' hatred toward Joseph, whom he openly favors. Otherwise, he wouldn't have sent Joseph into this dangerous situation. Jacob was an insensitive and foolish father.

Before we point our finger at Jacob, we need to realize how easily this sort of situation develops. Put it into modern terms: A couple has several children early in their marriage. Not having any experience at being parents, they're overly strict

and make a lot of mistakes. At that point in life they didn't have much money, so they couldn't do much for them financially. As teenagers, the kids begin to hang around with the wrong crowd. They do some things to get in trouble with the law. They balk at going to church with their parents. They gradually reject their parents' values and adopt the values of their friends.

Then, later in life, along comes the youngest of the family. He's a model child--loving, sensitive, obedient. He loves the Lord and wants to please his parents. He makes good grades in school and never gets in trouble. By this time, they've got a bit more money than when the older kids were growing up. So, for his sixteenth birthday, they buy him a new car. How will the older children respond to their goody-two-shoes brother?

That's what's happening here. Joseph's older brothers are a bunch of rowdy guys who slaughtered a whole village because one guy raped their sister. They don't fear God. They're just like the Canaanites around them. But Joseph was a good kid. Besides, he was the first son of Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, who had died in childbirth with Benjamin. Joseph was an obedient, responsible young man. You can't prove it, but Jacob may have put him in charge of his older brothers, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, in their duties over the flocks (implied in 37:2; see Bush, p. 220). His special coat (probably a long-sleeved, full-length coat) set Joseph apart as "Dad's favorite." It may have indicated that Jacob had chosen him as the heir, since Reuben had forfeited that privilege by his flagrant sin (35:22). His brothers hated that coat! The first thing they did when Joseph later came to check up on them was to strip it off him.

In the line of his duties, Joseph brought back a bad report about his brothers to their father (37:3). The sum of all this was that the brothers couldn't even speak peaceably to Joseph (37:4). And yet Jacob seems strangely blind to the depth of

hatred which his favoritism toward Joseph stirred up in his other sons.

Before we condemn Jacob, let's admit: It's easy for fathers, especially, to get out of touch with their children. You leave the house early in the morning and don't get home until dinner. After dinner, the kids are busy with homework and other things. You sit down with the paper or in front of the TV. And so it goes. Your kids are in their world, you're in yours. You've lost touch with the things that are shaping their lives. It's easy to be right where Jacob was, to be an insensitive parent!

But the point is, while Jacob was not right, and while we need to work at avoiding the same mistakes, God is still sovereign, even when parents are insensitive and foolish. Jacob should have been wise enough not to have shown favoritism to Joseph and to have protected him from this explosive situation. He wasn't, and he was responsible. But God was still in control.

Maybe your parents did (or now are doing) some dumb things toward you. You can get mad and bitter at them (or even at God) for all the wrong things they've done. You can blame them for not protecting you from things that damaged your life or for showing favoritism to your brothers and sisters or for being passive parents. Or you can trust that God has sovereignly put you in your family. Even though you don't understand everything, you can thank Him because you know that He will work all these bad things out for ultimate good. You can ask Him to take away your bitterness and make you the channel of His love.

But, *no matter what our family background or circumstances, we're responsible to obey the Lord.* Joseph's life shows that it is possible to obey the Lord, even when we're mistreated and others around us are disobedient. Even if you come from a rotten background, God expects you to deal with your sin by

confessing and forsaking it as you obey Him in response to His grace and love as shown to you in Christ. In this drama, God's sovereignty operates in a second area:

2. God is sovereign even when teenagers are naive.

Joseph had two dreams in which the obvious point was that he would be elevated above his brothers. He told his family about those dreams. Some think he was wrong to do this. I would say that he was naive. He was a 17-year-old who lacked the wisdom and maturity that come with a few more years of life. To have shared these dreams in confidence with his father or with a trusted older friend may have been wise. To share them with his brothers, who were already threatened by his favored position in the family, was naive and unwise.

Many times a person like Joseph, who is very competent (as his later history shows), threatens others without even knowing it. It doesn't seem that Joseph shared these dreams to get a reaction out of his brothers. He seems innocent of any wrong motives. Even as he goes to check on them out in the fields, you get the feeling that he didn't expect any trouble. He thought they would be glad to see him. He even wore that hated coat. If he'd had any sense at all he would have left the coat at home.

But I don't know any adult who can look back on his teenage years and say, "I didn't do anything dumb." We've all done stupid, immature, naive things in our younger days. It's part of growing up. Hopefully, if we have wise parents and listen to the counsel of older Christians, we'll minimize those youthful mistakes. But we all do a certain amount of stupid, naive things in our youth, in spite of wise counsel.

But God is sovereign even when teenagers are naive. I assume that God gave Joseph these dreams, since they were prophetically true. Why didn't God wait until later, when Joseph would have had the wisdom to keep his mouth shut? I

don't know. But I do know that Joseph's naivete didn't thwart God's sovereign plan. While we should seek to live wisely, when we don't, we can trust that God will overrule and use even the dumb things we did in our earlier years, if we will submit to Him.

There is a third group of characters who show that:

3. God is sovereign even when people are hardened in sin.

Here I'm focusing on Joseph's brothers. When Jacob foolishly sends Joseph to check up on them, he's tossing a match on an explosive situation. First you've got the darling of his father, a kid who shows up these worldly brothers with his sterling behavior. Then dad unwisely puts junior over his older brothers and gives him a coat to make it obvious. Then kid brother has the gall of reporting two dreams where his brothers bow down to him. You can see how the least little spark will set off the explosion that has been building in these brothers, whose tempers we already have seen after Dinah's rape.

So when they see Joseph coming at a distance (they could see that cursed coat!), they plot together to kill him and throw him into a pit and say that a wild beast must have devoured him. At this point Reuben, the oldest, intervenes and persuades his brothers not to shed blood, but just to throw Joseph into the pit. He planned to free him later and restore him to his father (37:22), perhaps as a way to get back on his dad's good side (after sleeping with his concubine). Once Joseph was in the pit, Reuben went off, perhaps to check on the flocks, while the rest of the brothers callously sat down to eat their lunch.

As they were munching their sandwiches and discussing whether to leave him to die in the pit or to finish him off themselves, a caravan of traders came along. (The terms Ishmaelite and Midianite seem to be overlapping or it was a

mixed group. In Judges 8:24, Midianites are called Ishmaelites.) Judah gets a brainstorm: "There's no profit for us if we let Joseph die in this pit. Let's sell him to these traders. That way we won't have the guilt of killing our own brother and we'll make a couple of shekels each besides." It strikes everyone as a great idea.

Isn't it amazing how we can salve our consciences against some terrible sin by rationalizing that at least it isn't as bad as it could have been? Compared to murdering your brother, selling him into slavery doesn't sound too bad. You can hear them saying, "It will be better for Joseph and better for us this way." Twenty years later, the brothers still vividly remember poor Joseph's pleading with them not to do this terrible thing (Gen. 42:21), but here they're rationalizing their sin by saying, "After all, he is our brother." Comparative morality is no morality at all!

Meanwhile, Reuben comes back to the pit, finds it empty, and panics. At this point we can discern his true motive in wanting to protect Joseph: He really was more concerned about protecting himself. As the oldest, he would have to answer to his father for whatever happened to his little brother. He was already in hot water with Jacob over the matter of sleeping with his concubine. He would have assumed that Joseph had escaped from the pit and fled for home, where he would tell Dad what happened. Joseph hadn't known that Reuben was planning to rescue him. Now Reuben would be in even more trouble! That's why, when he hears what his brothers did, Reuben is quick to agree to their scheme. If he really was concerned about his brother, he could have gone after the caravan and redeemed him.

These brothers were hardened not only toward Joseph, but also toward their father. The old man was devastated when he saw Joseph's bloodstained coat and assumed that he had been killed by a wild beast. Can't you picture them all gathered around the weeping man, patting him on the back, saying,

"There, there! It's going to be all right. Remember Romans 8:28, Dad!" How calloused can you get!

But still God was sovereign. You can see it in several points. First, Joseph did not find his brothers where they were supposed to be. As he wandered around in a field, a man "happened" to come along who knew where the brothers went, so Joseph was able to find them (37:15-17). Then, Joseph arrived just as this caravan came along, sparking Judah's idea, which got Joseph into Egypt. You can also see a hint of God's providence in the ironic boast of the brothers, "Then let us see what will become of his dreams!" (37:20). What became of his dreams is that they were precisely fulfilled! God had His hand on this whole process, in spite of the brothers' calloused sin, for which they were responsible. God sovereignly put Joseph into Potiphar's house and orchestrated the events that followed there, in spite of Potiphar's wife's sin against Joseph. God was sovereign in the timing of the cupbearer's remembering Joseph before Pharaoh.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of God's sovereign hand in these events is the remarkable parallel between Joseph's history and that of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as Joseph was loved by his father and sent to seek the welfare of his brethren, so Jesus was loved and sent by the Father. Just as Joseph's brothers hated him because he spoke the truth about their sin and he convicted them of sin by his righteous life, so with Jesus. Just as Joseph's brothers sold him for a few pieces of silver, so Jesus was betrayed for the same. Joseph's brothers sought to get rid of him so that he would not reign over them, but their action resulted in that becoming true. Their rejection of him resulted in his later becoming their savior from the famine. Even so, the Jewish leaders did not want Jesus to reign over them. But their killing Him resulted in His becoming the Savior of all men, exalted in His resurrection as Lord of all at the right hand of the Father, just as Joseph was second under Pharaoh.

Joseph easily could have thought, "If only I hadn't met that guy in the field, I wouldn't have found my brothers and all this wouldn't have happened!" But his wandering in the field and meeting that man weren't bad luck. Even though God is not mentioned in this chapter, He is obviously at work. Often when God is most silent, He is most present. Years later, Joseph could say to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result" (Gen. 50:20). We may see the reason for God's dealings after a few years, or maybe not until eternity. But, like Joseph, we need to trust God, even when we don't understand. The bottom line is, *We can trust God no matter what happens to us because His sovereign, loving hand is on us even in the little "happenstances" of life.*

CONCLUSION

A dad was holding his three-year-old securely in his arms as he stood in the shallow end of the pool. As the dad walked slowly toward the deep end, he gently chanted, "Deeper and deeper and deeper." As the water rose higher on the child, his face reflected more and more panic, and he clung all the more tightly to his father, whose feet easily touched the bottom. If the little boy had been able to analyze his situation, he would have realized that there was no reason to panic. The water's depth in *any* part of the pool was over his head. Even in the shallowest part, if his dad had not held him up, he would have drowned. His safety anywhere in that pool depended on his dad. So he should have been able to trust him in the deeper water just as easily as in the shallow. (*LEADERSHIP*, Winter, 1988.)

In various situations, we may feel that we're in over our head. A terrible tragedy hits us out of no where. We lose our job, someone dies, someone wrongs us, and we feel as if we're going to be swamped. But, the truth is, we've always been held up by the grace and love of our Heavenly Father. If He let us go, we'd drown even in the shallow end. If we're in deeper waters, we're still in His

strong arms. God is never out of His depth, and so we can trust Him even when the waters seem deeper than we've ever been before. If you're in the pits, remember, God is sovereign over all the details of your life. You can trust Him to work it all together for good! If you've never trusted Him before, why not begin now?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can a person from a terrible background overcome bitterness toward God, knowing that He allowed it to happen?
2. If even our sin can't thwart God's plan, then what's to keep a person from a careless attitude toward sin?
3. A father tells you that his child was molested and murdered and asks, "How can you expect me to believe in a good, all-powerful God?" What would you say?

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