Week 1: Genesis 37:1–11

Hook

Main Point: God has a plan for our lives, for our good.

The office building manager of a Manhattan high-rise in the 1950s had a real problem – the tenants complained of excessive waiting for the elevator. They waited for what felt like an eternity in the morning, during their lunch break, and when they were ready to leave for home at night. But what to do? Engineers studied the problem and came to the conclusion that the elevator speed could not be increased; the building manager was stuck. After a brainstorming session, the manager and his team proposed a hypothesis:

Perhaps the wait wasn’t too long, people were simply bored.

And so, in an era before eyes were glued to cell phones, the manager provided a simple and inexpensive diversion for those weary elevator patrons: floor to ceiling mirrors. Now the people could examine themselves and catch glimpses of other employees; and with that small adjustment, complaints plummeted to nearly zero.

This story appears in books and articles about organizational design. And whether the details are factual or fictional, the principle stands: How we wait can make all the difference.¹

Q: How do you pass the time as you wait in lines?

Q: What is the longest that you’ve waited in a line? Was it worth the wait?

Q: What are some things that you are waiting on, praying for, right now?
Q: What have you learned during seasons of waiting?

Transition: Today we will explore the beginning of Joseph’s journey- a dream, a glimpse of a future that God has for Joseph. Yet, as he is about to learn, Joseph’s journey will involve a lengthy wait.
Week 1: *Genesis 37:1–11*

**Book**

**Main Point:** God has a plan for our lives, for our good.

**Text Summary:** Joseph was the second youngest of the 12 sons of Jacob, the older son of Jacob’s beloved wife, Rachel. Joseph was his father’s favorite, and his older brothers hated him for it. When Joseph was 17, he had two different dreams, both of which symbolically foretold that his parents and all of his brothers would one day bow down to him. This made his brothers hate him even more. His father rebuked him, but kept the dream in mind.

*Genesis 37:1-2a [Read]*

**Talking Point 1:** God is the main character of the Bible.

Jacob and his sons lived in Canaan. Canaan was the Promised Land – the land that would become the inheritance of the descendants of Abraham – but the Canaanites still lived in the land (Gen. 12:6–7). So it might seem odd that it’s labeled “the land of his father’s sojournings” (v. 1). But Jacob and his family are still sojourners, as their fathers were before them. And by the end of Joseph’s story, the family of Abraham will move to Egypt. That promise of a land of their own was still yet to be fulfilled. They were still only “in the beginning.”

The phrase in verse 2a, “these are the generations of ...” is a formula that is repeated throughout Genesis to introduce each new section of the book. It is used 10 times (a symbolic number for totality): 1. the heavens and the earth, 2. Adam, 3. Noah, 4. Noah’s sons, 5. Shem, 6. Terah, 7. Ishmael, 8. Isaac, 9. Esau, 10. Jacob/Israel. Sometimes this phrase introduced a simple list of the sons of that person – a genealogy. Other times, it introduced a narrative about the sons of that person. This structure makes Genesis one big genealogy of God’s people, from Creation to Israel.

You’ll notice that Abraham and Joseph have the longest stories in Genesis and yet, there is no “generations of Abraham” or “generations of Joseph” listed in the 10. Some scholars believe this shows us that the true purpose of the biblical narratives isn’t to give us biographies of Old Testament saints, even though we often make them that. The Bible isn’t a collection of histories of people. It is the grand story of God’s work in human history. God is the main character of the biblical story.ii

Q: What would it have felt like for Abraham’s family to have been promised land and blessing by God, but not received it yet?
Q: God’s people would not receive the Promised Land, not actually conquer Canaan, until more than 500 years later – after 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, then wandering for 40 more years. What does this tell us about God’s promises and His plan for our lives?

Q: If your life were written about in the Bible, what would it say about how God has worked in your life?

**Genesis 37:2b–4 [Read]**

Talking Point 2: Jacob created a rivalry between his sons by playing favorites.

**Q: Have you ever been in a situation where someone showed blatant favoritism? How did it affect the rest of the people in the situation? How did it affect the group dynamics?**

Jacob had four wives – Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah. But Rachel was the one he really loved. He had been tricked into marrying Leah (Gen. 29:21–30). He only married Bilhah (Rachel’s maidservant) when Rachel couldn’t bear him children, and Zilpah when Leah got too old to bear any more children (30:3, 9). Only after 10 sons were born to the other three did God open Rachel’s womb and give her a son, Joseph, and much later, Benjamin.

Joseph was the older son of the only wife Jacob really loved, and “the son of his old age” (v. 3). By this point in the story, Rachel had died in childbirth, so Joseph and Benjamin would have been even more precious to Jacob (35:16–20). Jacob gave Joseph a special robe indicating that he was given some kind of authority over his brothers (v. 3).

Joseph brought a bad report of his brothers to their father (v. 2). Since the Scripture doesn’t say it was a false report, it’s safe to assume this bad report was warranted. Whether Joseph was arrogant or boastful about his father’s favor is unclear. Some think Joseph was bragging about his father’s favor and later his dreams, but the text doesn’t actually say that. It’s likely that Joseph was just doing his job by reporting to their father, but it made them hate him even more (vv. 12–14).

Though the point of this story isn’t that we shouldn’t play favorites as parents, it is still true. Jacob created animosity between Joseph and the other brothers by lavishing attention on him. Even if Joseph was mature beyond his years and deserved a position of authority over his brothers, that doesn’t mean Israel should have loved him more than the others.

In Jacob’s defense, their whole family dynamic was skewed from the beginning, with Jacob being tricked into marrying someone he didn’t love, and then marrying the one he did love, then marrying their maidservants just for childbearing purposes. But Jacob didn’t try to make it better, either. Jacob was not shy about his preference for Rachel. Rachel and Leah hated each
other, and who even knows how the maidservants felt. The whole situation was a recipe for disaster. So, whether you think Joseph was arrogant or innocent, he was flat-out in a bad situation.

Q: How does Jacob’s favoritism contrast with how God loves His children? (see Rom. 2:11; Deut. 10:17; Acts 10:34)

Q: Put yourself in Joseph’s shoes. How would you feel in his situation? Would you share the bad report with your father or keep it to yourself? Why or why not?

Q: As a church family, how can we stay unified and not let rivalry or playing favorites or cliques creep into our church?

**Genesis 37:5–11 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** God has a bigger plan, and He is working all things out for good.

**Q: How does God communicate to believers? What is God’s primary mode of communication?**

God’s speaking to people in dreams is quite rare in the Bible; there are only a little more than 20 significant supernatural dreams recorded in Scripture, six of which happen in the story of Joseph.

In Scripture, God used dreams to:

- tell people where to go or not go (e.g., Gen. 31:10; Matt. 2:12,13)
- warn global leaders of future events (e.g., Gen. 41; Dan. 2,4)
- provide revelation to His prophets (e.g., Num. 12:6)
- warn certain significant people against certain decisions (e.g., Matt. 1:20; 27:19)

It might be easy to assume that dreams are focused simply on an individual. However, none of the dreams listed in the references above were purely about one person. Instead, they were more concerned with God’s plan. The Scripture shows us that God used dreams to *reveal* His plan, *further* His plan, or put His people in places of influence for His plan.

We don’t have to speculate about what these two dreams meant; the story tells us. One day, the rest of the family will bow down before Joseph (Gen. 42:6). Though Joseph goes through horrible ups and downs, by the end of his story, he has risen to a place of great power. He is the right-hand man of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, the biggest superpower in the world at the time. But Joseph’s rise to power isn’t about himself. It’s about preserving God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants and saving the world. Starting here, with these first dreams,
every step of Joseph’s journey is leading him to the point where he is able to rescue his family, all of Egypt and anyone else who comes there for food.

This theme of God’s preserving human life is pervasive throughout Genesis. When Adam and Eve sinned, instead of giving them the wages of sin (death), He preserved their lives. When God destroyed the earth in the great flood, He preserved the life of Noah and his family. In our passage today, God again preserves human life, this time through Joseph. This is a significant part of God’s redemptive history. Even when God had every right to wipe mankind off the face of the earth, He chose to preserve life, to reconnect with His people and even to make a covenant with them. In each story, God chooses one faithful person through whom to preserve life.

Our passage today is the beginning of a long road for Joseph, a road of deep valleys and high mountains – from prison to palace. But through it all, Joseph holds on to trust in God, that He will work it out for good in the end.

Does that mean that if you or I are going through a “pit” time right now, we should just hold on, because eventually God will give us a position of authority over our enemies? No, Joseph’s exact promise doesn’t translate to our lives directly. And their bowing down to Joseph wasn’t about his getting revenge or vindication. It was about God’s working everything for good (Rom. 8:28).

“Good” is a tough concept here, one that is easily misunderstood. Are good things just the things that make us happy? The things that make us feel good? Anyone who has ever passed the stage of the “terrible 2’s” has learned that there are some things that we don’t like that are good for us – broccoli, exercise, screen-time limits, math…. Why? Because those “hard” things or “bad” things make us stronger, make us a better person, make us more disciplined or smarter or healthier. God’s purpose for our lives is not to make us happy, but to make us more like Jesus. Whatever will work toward that goal is for our good.

Mature individuals will not only make themselves exercise, but they will delight in exercise (even if it’s painful) because they understand the effect of it; they understand how it is working for their good. The same is true in our spiritual lives. There are difficult things in life that are working for our good. We may not understand them, maybe not even in this lifetime, but if we know that God is good and that He is sovereign, we must trust that He has our lives in the palm of His hand, and that all things are working for good.

At the end of this story, Joseph says to his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (50:20). God is so sovereign and so good, that He can even take something that someone purposely meant for harm and work it for good. But look at the rest of the verse.
Genesis 50:20 [Read]

Q: What “good” is Joseph talking about here?

He doesn’t say, “You meant this for evil, but God meant it for good, to make me second in command of Pharaoh’s kingdom. Look at how God blessed me and rewarded me and made it good for me.” No, his response was, God meant it for good, “to preserve many people alive.” This is a man who understands what God’s definition of good is. It’s not about God’s doing good for him. It wasn’t about him; it was about God and God’s people. And, in the Big Picture, it was about God’s plan, God’s purpose, God’s covenant with Israel. If Joseph had never gone to Egypt, his family – Israel, God’s people – would have died in the famine. God worked it all together to fulfill His purpose in keeping His people alive. So that through them, He could save the whole world.

Q: Have you ever seen God make something good out of a bad situation? What happened? How did the people in the situation respond?

Q: Has God ever used a difficult situation to grow you spiritually? To grow your trust in Him, to make you more kind or empathetic, or grow you in some other way? If you feel comfortable, share your story with the group.
**Week 1: Genesis 37:1–11**

**Took**

**Main Point:** God has a plan for our lives, for our good.

There is a whole industry centered on improving your experience as you wait in lines. And why not? After all, some people spend a year or two of their lives simply waiting in lines. Studies have shown that how people feel as they wait in line often matters more than how long they wait. Disney seems to grasp this concept well, including anticipated wait times at the beginnings of theme park lines to manage expectations and implementing entertainment elements to make the wait more palatable. From movie props to interactive animatronics, the lines have become attractions in themselves! Even as we wait and pray for difficult situations to change, or a promise to be fulfilled, may we remember what God can do with us right now. That he can use all things, even difficult things, even the wait, for our good.

**Q:** During seasons when you are waiting to see “good” come out of difficult situations, how would you define “waiting well”?

**Q:** In your time of waiting, how has God been transforming you to be more like Jesus?

**Q:** Break into small groups and share something that you’re waiting on. Pray for one another that you would bring glory to God during this time of waiting.

**CHALLENGES:**

**THINK:** *How is God using your “pits” for good?* All of us have difficult times in life. Life is full of upside-downs for everyone. But the amazing thing about God is that He can take our misery and turn it into ministry. He can use everything in our lives for good – for us and for the whole world. Be creative in thinking about the difficult things you are dealing with: How can God use them for good?

**PRAY:** *For trust* – That God will build your trust in Him through difficult times. That even when you cannot see much hope, that you would rest in God’s plan. That you can trust Him to turn it all into good.

**ACT:** *Share with others how God is growing you.* Think about the people in your life with whom you normally share your struggles. Whom do you typically vent to? This week when you interact with those folks, share with them the good things that God is doing in your life. If
you’ve been venting about a particular struggle, be sure to share what you’ve been learning and the blessings that you’ve received through a difficult time.

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iii The Hebrew is uncertain, because this is the only place that word is used and it is translated differently in different manuscripts - it either means robe of many colors or robe with long sleeves (ESV footnote)


