Week 2: Genesis 37:12-36

Hook

Main Point: God is with us in the pits of our lives, training us to lean on Him.

When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up? Below is a list of the most in-demand careers, according to a 2017 survey of more than 1,000 boys and girls under the age of 12:
Break your class into groups of four to seven and ask them to share their childhood dream jobs with one another. After a few moments, ask a representative from each group to share the most interesting dream job with the class as a whole, without sharing which group member desired that job. Challenge the class to guess which small-group member wanted the job that was shared.

**Q: What drew you to your childhood dream job?**

**Q: What career path did you pursue in your youth? How many different jobs have you held since you entered the workforce?**

**Q: Looking back, what career moves were unexpected, and perhaps unwanted at the time, but turned out to be beneficial in the long term?**

**Transition:** Joseph knew that God had something big for him, but it’s unlikely that he could have predicted that his journey and preparation for things to come would start with a pit.
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Book

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Text Summary: 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. 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 [Read]

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 and while there, the prince of Shechem took Jacob’s daughter Dinah and “lay with her and humiliated her” (34:2).

Enraged by the prince’s actions, two of Jacob’s sons (Simeon and Levi) killed every male in the city (34:25), a solid 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.

Genesis 37:18-28 [Read]

Talking Point 1: It is hard to stand up for what is right in a crowd that is determined to do evil.

As a group, all of Joseph’s older brothers (except Reuben) decided to kill Joseph and throw him into one of the pits (v. 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 (v. 21). Judah doesn’t seem to have a problem with killing Joseph (v. 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 (Ex. 21:32).

Q: These are the patriarchs of the tribes of Israel, God’s chosen people. What does this say about with whom God chooses to make a covenant?
Q: Have you ever been in a mob mentality situation, where you suddenly found yourself participating in something that you knew you shouldn’t be doing? How can we stop ourselves from going along with the crowd in those situations?

Q: Why is it so hard to stand up for what is right when everyone else around you wants to do evil?

The Hebrew word here for “pit” is actually “cistern” (v. 19, 22, 24, 28, 29). A cistern was built to collect rainwater. It could be dry, as it was in this story (v. 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” v. 22), Joseph would have likely died of starvation and/or dehydration instead.

Of course, Reuben was secretly suggesting it so he could go back later, rescue Joseph and take him back to their father (v. 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.

Q: What else could Reuben have chosen to do instead?

Q: As the oldest brother, why didn’t Reuben simply say, “No, I’m the oldest. We’re not doing this.” What does this say about his character?

Q: What does this say about their family dynamics? What light might it shed on why Simeon and Levi slaughtered the men of Shechem either behind his back or without his knowledge?

LOOK BACK at verse 20.

When the brothers were talking about killing Joseph, they said, “Then we will see what will become of his dreams” (v. 20). Yes, this shows their jealousy and 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.

Being sold into slavery by your brothers is obviously a terrible thing to have happen. But this is how God gets Joseph to Egypt (v. 28). God can and will use even the evil of your enemies to bring about His good plan.

Q: What kind of hope can this give us in difficult times, knowing that God’s plan cannot be thwarted? How does this hope affect the way you pray for your present and your future?
Talking Point 2: If we aren’t willing to come clean about our sins, we have to keep sinning to cover them up.

When Reuben returned and saw Joseph gone, he realized that his attempt to do the right thing wasn’t enough (v. 29). His question, “where shall I go?” is referring to this feeling that he can’t go back home to his father without Joseph (v. 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 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 (Gen. 35:22).

It was a well-known practice in ancient Near Eastern culture that the eldest son would inherit the concubines of his father (God’s Law does not support polygamy or having concubines at all). Later, we see Absalom doing this same thing to assert his place as heir to the throne of David (2 Sam. 16:22). Reuben was trying to assert his own status as the true heir of Jacob, rather than Joseph.

The whole ancient world considered sleeping with another man’s wife a grave sin, a crime punishable by death according to God’s Law and the culture of the time (Deut. 22:22). Yet Jacob had not punished Reuben for it at all that Scripture records (Gen. 35:22). So Reuben was likely skating on thin ice with his father.

Q: Why do you think Reuben would go along with the lie that an animal had killed Joseph? What was his motivation? What could he have done instead?

Q: How can we have the courage and the strength to stand up for what is right even when everyone else around us is doing wrong?

Note: Sheol was a general term for the afterlife.

The fact that Reuben went along with this lie instead of telling Jacob what really happened says a lot about his character (vv. 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 could have even spun the story in his favor, making himself out to be the innocent one. Even the hero. But an elaborate lie was easier and it was better for his competition for head of the family. It kept his father from being mad at him, and it kept Reuben at the top.

So the brothers told a lie to cover up what they had done. 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 year on Joseph’s birthday. Every time they ate Joseph’s favorite meal. 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.

Though we may be tempted to see Reuben as the hero of this chapter—because he didn’t allow his brothers to kill Joseph—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. Reuben is certainly not a character to be emulated.

Q: If you are in a situation where sin seems to be snowballing, what should you do? If you have any examples of when this has happened to you, please share if you feel comfortable.

Q: Why is it important to confess when we have wronged someone?

Talking Point 3: God is with us in the pits of our lives, training us to lean on Him.

Up until this point, we have been primarily talking about the brothers. Let’s move on to Joseph. What is going on with him while all of this is happening? The text doesn’t say anything about how Joseph is feeling, what he is doing, or what is going through his head while he sits in that pit (vv. 23–28).

But what the Scripture does tell us is what God is doing while Joseph is in the pit. In the very last verse of this chapter (v. 36), Genesis reminds us that God has His hand on Joseph. 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 moving and working to get Joseph where He needs Him to be … for just the right time. God is working all things out for good.

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 (50:20).
God was with him when he was in slavery at Potiphar’s house (39:2). God was with him when he was in prison (39:21). Through all of these difficult things, God was teaching Joseph to trust in Him, to lean on Him, to hope in Him.

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. As Paul wrote in Romans:

> [We know] 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. —Rom. 5:3b–5

God was using this difficult time in Joseph’s life to build endurance, character and hope in Him so God could use him in a mighty way. At the bottom of that cistern, Joseph couldn’t depend on his brothers. He couldn’t depend on his father. He couldn’t even depend on his own strength. He could only trust in God. When we hit rock bottom, the only place to look is up.
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Took

Main Point: God is with us in the pits of our lives, training us to lean on Him.

In his book, You’ll Get Through This, Max Lucado writes poetically about the story of Joseph to encourage all of us that even if things are hard now, even if we are stuck in a pit, we will get through it. And God desires bring us out stronger in the end. Lucado writes:

You’ll get through this. It won’t be painless. It won’t be quick. But God will use this mess for good. In the meantime, don’t be foolish or naïve. But don’t despair either. With God’s help you will get through this.... You’ll get through this. You fear you won’t. We all do. We fear that the depression will never lift, the yelling will never stop, the pain will never leave. Here in the pits, surrounded by steep walls and angry brothers, we wonder, Will this gray sky ever brighten? This load ever lighten? We feel stuck, trapped, locked in. Predestined for failure. Will we ever exit this pit?

Yes! Deliverance is to the Bible what jazz music is to Mardi Gras: bold, brassy, and everywhere.

Out of the lion’s den for Daniel, the prison for Peter, the whale’s belly for Jonah, Goliath’s shadow for David, the storm for the disciples, disease for the lepers, doubt for Thomas, the grave for Lazarus, and the shackles for Paul. God gets us through stuff. Through the Red Sea onto dry ground (Exodus 14:22), through the wilderness (Deuteronomy 29:5), through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4), and through the deep sea (77:19). Through is a favorite word of God’s:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. (Isaiah 43:2) ...

[Joseph] never gave up. Bitterness never staked its claim. Anger never metastasized into hatred. His heart never hardened; his resolve never vanished. He not only survived; he thrived.... In God’s hands, intended evil becomes eventual good.... Don’t equate the presence of God with a good mood or a pleasant temperament. God is near whether you are happy or not.
Q: What challenges has God brought you through? How did He use this to grow you?

Q: During dark times, what tools or methods do you find helpful to remember God’s presence and love for you?

Q: Who in your life needs encouragement this week? What is one concrete way in which you can remind them that God cares for them and has a purpose and plan for them?

CHALLENGES:

THINK: *How can you stand up for what is right in a world of evil?* Today we saw a sharp contrast between Joseph, who was willing to do the right thing even though it made his brothers mad, and Reuben, who wasn’t. Who do you want to be? A Joseph or a Reuben? How can you have the strength to stand up for what is right?

PRAY: *For Courage and integrity* – That God will give you the strength and the courage to stand up for what is right no matter what everyone around you is doing.

READ: *2 Corinthians 12:9–10, 1 Peter 5:7, and Philippians 4:6–7.* When we are weak, Christ can be strong in us because we lean on Him. When we are worried or doubt or fear, if we bring that to the Lord in prayer, He will fill us with His peace. When you are struggling, when things feel out of control, when you are in a pit, don’t worry about it; pray about it.

PRAY: *For trust and peace* – That God will teach you to cast your burdens upon Him. That He will teach you to come to Him in prayer and trust Him when things feel out of control. Bring your worries to Him and receive His supernatural peace.

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v Max Lucado, *You’ll Get Through This* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 3, 8-9, 28.