

THE LONG SLEEVED COAT

Genesis 37 & 39
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...so Jacob/Israel came home to Canaan and settled there and prospered. Eventually he faded into the background and now the story turns to his children. The focus shifts from Israel the man, to Israel the people.

"This," says the second verse of the 37th chapter of Genesis, "is the story of the family of Jacob." And the most prominent member of that family will be Joseph, the only child of Jacob/Israel's beloved Rachel and the youngest of his offspring – eleven sons and one daughter...so far.

THE BELOVED DREAMER

As we know, any good story must revolve around some kind of conflict and our Genesis storyteller wastes no time introducing conflict into his narrative. In fact, begins by raising several conflicts that deserve our attention.

First, we are told that Joseph, being the youngest of the children when this story takes place, is a teenager. Seventeen years old, in fact, and that he is a tattler. He has gone out to where some of his older brothers are supposed to tending sheep and he has brought back a bad report to their father. Whether or not the report is deserved, we are not told, but this does inject a little bit of enmity into the sibling relationship.

Secondly, we are told that Joseph was Jacob/Israel's favorite child because he was the youngest – the child of his old age – and, we can surmise, because he was the child of Rachel, his favorite wife.

Thirdly, we are told that Jacob – as clueless as ever where human relationships are concerned – was less than discreet when it came to showing and demonstrating his favoritism. In fact, so much did he love Joseph that he had a special cloak made for him. The cloak is described in Hebrew as having long sleeves. In Latin and Greek as having many colors. Either way, it was the kind of cloak worn by wealthy people who did not have to do physical labor.

Joseph, in other words, was spoiled and something of a slacker – so much so that his brothers hated him and could not bring themselves to speak to him in a civil tone.

And, as if all that isn't enough, Joseph seems to be as clueless as his father when it comes to dealing with other people.

Dreams are going to play an important role in this story and it starts with two dreams that Joseph had.

In the first one he and his brothers were binding sheaves of wheat in the field when his sheaf jumped up and stood upright and all the other sheaves – the ones his brothers made – came over and bowed down to his sheaf.

In the second dream, the sun, the moon and eleven stars were bowing down before him.

Being clueless, he told his brothers of these dreams and they interpreted them to mean that all of them, including their father and Joseph's mother, were supposed to bow down and worship him because he was or would be superior to them in some way. Needless to say, they weren't pleased. In fact, we are told that they hated him all the more.

BAD THINGS

Sometime later the brothers have taken their flocks down to Shechem to the lush free range pasture land, there, and Jacob/Israel has not heard from them for a while so he decides to send Joseph to find out how they are doing and bring back word.

When Joseph gets to Shechem he is told that the brothers have moved on, about fifty miles to the northeast to a place called Dotham, so Joseph heads that way to find them.

The brothers see him coming from far off and their hatred of him is kindled anew. They plot to kill him and soak his cloak in the blood of an animal. They will take the cloak back to their father as proof that Joseph has been killed by some wild animal while on his way to find them.

Ruben, the oldest of the brothers, doesn't like the idea. He intercedes on Joseph's behalf. "Since he is our own flesh and blood it would not be right for us to spill his blood," he tells them. Instead, let's throw him down into this pit and leave him there to die. They all agree that this would be a good idea. Technically, his death would not be their fault. He would die from the effects of nature – thirst or starvation – and not by their hands. (I know, it's a thin technicality but a distinction which they seemed to think was important.) Ruben, we are told, plans to come back and pull Joseph out of the pit at a later time and send him on his way back home.

So when Joseph arrives they strip him of his cloak and throw him in the pit. (It's the dry season and there is no water in it.) And then they go back to their base camp and eat lunch.

While they are eating a caravan of nomadic traders happens by and the story gets a little confusing. The caravan is first described as Ishmaelites and, then, later referred to as Midianites. Some scholars explain this seeming contradiction as a case of sloppy editing by the redactors who collected these stories and put them together during the Babylonian captivity. Obviously, some oral traditions said Midianites and others said Ishmaelites. Other scholars (and I find this explanation more compelling) point out that Ishmaelite was a term used to describe all Arabs. The Midianites

were one group of Arabs who lived in the region of Midian just north of the Red Sea. So it was possible that they were both, members of the Midianite clan of Ishmaelites.

Midianites were nomads who herded sheep and goats in small groups or camps during the dry season and came together into tribes or clans during the lambing or wet season. Here we find them on their way to Egypt to trade in the rare spices that are used in embalming – a science which the Egyptians have mastered.

Judah, one of the older brothers, says, “Hey, look. If we kill Joseph or let him die, what profit is there in that? Why not sell him to the Midianites as a slave and let them take him off to Egypt and sell him there. He’ll be out of our hair and as good as dead and we won’t be murderers.”

They all agree that this is a good plan and they sell their little brother to the Arabs for twenty pieces of silver. And they, the Midianites, took Joseph to Egypt.

Ruben was not present when all this took place so when he came back to free Joseph from the pit he was surprised to find him gone. “He tore his clothes and cried, ‘The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?’” Then, apparently, he joined in the plot to trick Jacob/Israel.

They slaughtered a goat and took Joseph’s cloak and smeared goat blood on it. Then they took it back to Jacob and showed it to him and watched as his heart broke for Joseph, the child who had given him so much comfort in his old age. He tore his clothing and threw ashes on his head and put on sack cloth and wept and refused to be consoled even though Dinah, his daughter and her sisters in law did all they could think of to comfort him.

“I will die grieving my son,” he said. “I will go to the realm of the dead with a broken heart.”

Meanwhile, the Midianites took Joseph to Egypt and sold him as a slave to a man named Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s personal bodyguard.

INTERLUDE: JUDAH AND TAMAR

Interestingly, the storyteller interrupts the story of Joseph at this point to tell us the story of Joseph’s older brother, Judah his best friend, Hirah the Adulamite, and Judah’s daughter-in-law, Tamar. This story takes up all of chapter 38.

Tamar married Judah’s oldest son, Er. A short time later Er died, without producing an heir. (Er’s heir?)

So, in keeping with the ancient practice of Levirate marriage, it fell to Er’s younger brother, Onan to marry Tamar and produce with her an heir for his older brother, Er. Onan wasn’t happy about that arrangement for a whole bunch of reasons that are too long and complex to go into, here, so he used an ancient form of birth control which angered God so God killed him. (No, really, that’s what it says!)

So now, it fell to the youngest brother, Shelah (pronounced shay-LAH) to marry her and father a child with her but Judah realized that men who married Tamar tended to die young so he tells her that Shelah is much too young to get married. Go live with your father, he says, and I’ll call you when the boy is of marrying age.

So she does but he doesn’t. Years pass and no call from Judah and Tamar is getting impatient and her biological clock is ticking so she hatches a plan to get pregnant by one of her late husband’s relatives whether they want to help or not.

But that’s another story, one we don’t have time for today, so I commend it to your reading when you get home.

For now, let’s get back to Joseph. Genesis, Chapter 39.

IN THE HOUSE OF POTIPHAR

Up to now, God has not received so much as a mention in this story. That is about to change.

The Midianites sold Joseph to Potiphar, a high ranking official in Pharaoh’s court and the captain of the Pharaoh’s personal bodyguard.

And now God enters the action big time. In verse 2 of chapter 39 we read this: “The Lord was with Joseph and he became a successful man.” He had the Midas touch. Everything he touched turned to gold for his master, Potiphar. So successful was he that Potiphar made him his chief steward – the guy in charge of investments, sort of his own personal accountant and stock broker and financial adviser -- and the Egyptian got richer and richer, thanks to Joseph.

Now, let me pause, here, just to point out something that is obvious but that usually gets passed over when we read this story because it just doesn’t sit well with our 21st century American values.

Go back to verse 2 again and listen carefully to what it says: “The Lord was with Joseph and he became a successful man.” Do you hear that? It doesn’t say he was a FREE man. It says that he was a successful man. He was a slave and, yet, he was a successful man. He could not come and go as he pleased but he was a successful man. He was owned by another and, yet, he was a successful man.

We Americans are so understandably in love with freedom that we often forget that it is not always, in fact, it is rarely held up as a value in the witness of scripture. Freedom is a luxury in the Bible. Freedom is a gift that is sometimes granted in the Bible. But freedom is rarely a value to be sought at all costs.

Joseph was not a free man, and yet, he was a successful man. In the first epistle of Peter and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, slaves are told that they can be faithful and successful Christians even while they are still slaves. In fact, Paul admonishes Christian slaves to obey their masters.

The only freedom that is valued in the New Testament is that freedom which comes from enslaving ourselves to Jesus Christ. For Paul, it is only when we are 100 percent responsible that we are 100 percent free.

Paul would have understood the words of Tiro, Cicero's slave, when, upon being freed by his master he said, "Though once I was a free man, I did not know the meaning of freedom until I was Cicero's slave."

If we define success in terms of money or possessions and we define freedom in terms of being or doing whatever we want whenever we want, then we will never be successful because there is always something else we don't have. And we will never be free because being alive and being human means being limited in what we can be and do.

But if we define success as being people of faith who live in an abiding relationship with God, then we will know true success and true freedom in ways that the world does not know.

Now, on with our story...

Joseph was so successful that Potiphar, his master, didn't have to worry about anything. In fact, we are told, the only decision that he had to make every day was what to have for dinner. Everything was going just peachy, thank you.

Enter Potiphar's wife.

Now Joseph was handsome and good looking, we are told in verse six. Handsome **AND** good looking. Both. I suppose the story teller didn't want us to miss that so he gave it a double tap. Joseph was both handsome and good looking.

This handsomeness and good-lookingness did not go unnoticed by Potiphar's wife and, one day she sidled up to Joseph when the master was out of the house and did that Mrs. Robinson thing: "Joseph," she said, "Sleep with me." Not mincing any words or allowing for any confusion on his part she said it right out like that.

Joseph pointed out to Mrs. Potiphar that the old boy trusted him implicitly. Look, he said. Potiphar has turned over every single thing in this household to me. Anything I want I can have. There is only one thing that is off limits and that is yourself because you are his wife. To betray the man who has put so much in my care would be a great wickedness not to mention a sin. So thanks, but no thanks.

Mrs. Potiphar wasn't about to let it go at that, however. She hounded him day and night.

One day she decided that oral arguments weren't getting her anywhere so she just threw herself at him. Grabbed his sleeve and tried to drag him into the bedroom but he slipped out of the jacket and fled the house. Now Mrs. Potiphar was not used to being refused the things she wanted and she screamed in frustration.

The other servants, hearing her scream, came running to her and when they got there they saw Joseph's jacket lying there on the floor.

Mrs. Potiphar was a quick thinker and she wasn't above playing the race card. Joseph, she said, that HEBREW servant that my husband has brought into our house, tried to rape me. When I screamed he ran out and left his jacket. See, here it is!

When Potiphar came home she was stuck with her story so she had to pursue it. Joseph, your little HEBREW, servant tried to rape me. What are you going to do about it?

Potiphar threw Joseph into the prison, the area, we are told, where the king's prisoners were kept.

But...

But the Lord was with Joseph, the story teller tells us, and "he showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the jailer."

Once again, Joseph became successful, even in the prison. Before long he had things organized and cleaned and polished and supplied and running in a greased groove. In fact, so good was he at what he did, the head jailer just kind of turned the whole prison over to Joseph and "whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper."

WHERE GOD'S FLOWERS FLOURISH

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers...and he flourished.

He was sent to prison on a false accusation...and he flourished. Curious, isn't it?

For years I was told that in Russia it was illegal to be a Christian. You could be put in prison for being a Christian. Christians cowered in fear and denied their faith for fear of their government.

And then the Berlin Wall came down and Russia changed and Christians began coming out of the woodwork. All those years we thought the Communists had crushed and smothered to death the Christian church, it had been thriving in secret, meeting in peoples' homes, in barns, in small groups. Marrying, baptizing, receiving Holy Communion, singing hymns and taking care of each other.

When the Nazis tried to limit the number of churches in Germany to the one that agreed with them, they made all other churches illegal. And, yet, in the German resistance there thrived and grew a secret Church called the Confessing

Church of Germany. They even had a secret, underground seminary, led by Detrich Bonhoeffer, that trained their pastors.

When various Roman emperors, from time to time, outlawed Christianity, Christianity didn't go away. In fact, it grew. Christians met in the catacombs and in homes, in secret enclaves in the forests, and in small, rural communities. No matter how many Christians were martyred or jailed there always seemed to be more ready to take their place. Indeed, Christianity seems to grow best and fastest in those places most hostile to it. And, conversely, it seems to grow slowest, or even wither away in those climates most hospitable.

Rodney Stark is one of our most prominent sociologists of religion and a renowned historian as well. And he points out in more than one of his books, that Christianity is all but dead in those European countries where the government has identified itself as an ally of the church. England, France, Germany, even Italy all call themselves Christian countries but compare church attendance in those countries with that in the United States where church and state are separate entities:

USA	44%
United Kingdom	10%
Belgium	7 %
France	12%
Denmark	5 %
Norway	2 %
Italy	31%

See, there are two kinds of people in the world.

There are the majority, what we call "God's People." Most of these folks consider themselves believers after one fashion or another. They often refer to themselves as "spiritual but not religious." They may even consider themselves members of a church. They just don't participate much in that church of which they are a "member." They go when it is convenient and necessary and they don't go if it is inconvenient. They expect the church to make membership easy for them and they expect the culture, even the government, to support their religious point of view. God loves these folks unconditionally but their love of God is conditional.

If persecution or difficulty or even inconvenience raises its head, they do not go to church at all.

Then there are those who make up the minority. These we call the "People of God." God loves them, too.

They are believers of the word AND doers of the word. They don't think of themselves as church members so much as members of a faith community and, it is in that faith community, that family, that they thrive best of all. They live their faith in good times and bad, when it is easy and when it is hard, when they have the answers and when they don't. They ask nothing of the culture or the government. They understand that we live our faith the best when living our faith is hard.

The People of God understand that in freedom or in slavery, in prison or on the street, God is always with us, leading us, assuring us, and challenging us to be the People of God – everywhere, always.

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In Romans 8:28 Paul says: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God..." How is that different from "all things are good?" How do you see Paul's idea being worked out in Joseph's story?
2. Look up the word "integrity." How does this word apply to Joseph?
3. Isaac was tricked by his son, Jacob. Now Jacob is tricked by his sons. What goes around comes around, huh? What other repeating themes do you see in this story? The importance of a piece of clothing is one. Do you see any others?
4. Lying vs. truth telling is an important theme in this story. Where do you see lies being told and where truth? What does the text seem to be telling us about both of these things. Compare what Potiphar's wife does to Joseph with what Queen Esther does to Haman (Esther 7: 5 ff.). How are they different and similar?
5. Discuss the difference in "God's People" and "The People of God." Who would you say is someone you have known who was a "People of God" person? What made him/her that? Describe him or her and what makes you think of him/her as a person of God.

