

Where is God in Dysfunction? (Gen 37)

TRANSITION: Some of you are here today and you've SEEN dysfunction at different time and in different ways. Others of you here today have EXPERIENCED dysfunction – in your family, at your workplace, with group of friends, maybe even in yourself.

TENSION: What is God doing in the dysfunction? Why are all these bad things happening? Isn't God in control? Is he incompetent? Can't he see? Doesn't he care? Where is God when we mess up, when others wound us, or when life falls apart?

TEXT: Gen 37 can help us answer that question, because even a few thousand years ago there was severe dysfunction, even in the family through which God would bring Jesus.

CONTEXT: Joseph's story is about more than just Joseph.

Not just mining for moral lessons from Joseph - you will miss the bigger point (small story pointing to a bigger story). Big God Story - Creation / Fall / Redemption / Restoration

(Question) How did God's people end up in Egyptian slavery? Gen 15:13-14 Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. The importance of the Joseph story lies in the fact that it initiates the chain of events that leads to Egypt; it is the prelude to the drama of oppression and redemption that constitutes the overriding motif of biblical theology.

(Question) How was the messianic line preserved (through a worldwide) famine? 37:1 Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojourning's, in the land of Canaan. 2 These are the generations of Jacob. (i.e.: this is the account of Jacob's line) Joseph...as the leading character of this account – but he's not the hero, he doesn't save them, God does, Joseph is simply the tool/means/instrument God uses to save his people and accomplish his plan.

If you're trying to mine moral lessons in Ch 37 you will be hard pressed because there's nothing but moral decline here – you're going to see a weak and wounded family, full of conflict – (I call it, "The Dumpster Fire of Dysfunction" where's the HOPE in this chapter?) Supposed to just sit in it, see ourselves and feel the ugly and the ick and the hopelessness of it all and ask where is God in this dumpster fire of dysfunction?

JACOB – (favoritism, inconsistency, idolatry, insecurity)

37:3 Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors.

Robe – patches or strips / colors = costly / long-sleeved = not working (rulers) / Red Ferrari

Why favoritism? Daddy wounds / created insecurity / looking for unconditional, love, affection, and acceptance, which he tried to find in Rachael – "if I had her that would fix my life, my heart, my wound." She died after finally giving him two sons, the older of which was Joseph. Jacob's dysfunction was favoritism that was ultimately a result of father's wound and subsequent idolatry of Rachel and then of Joseph. This idolatry poisons the whole family system.

JOSEPH (17 years old)

37:2 And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. (made up / falsified / lied)

Told dreams and said you will all bow down to me. (Jacob had to rebuke him)

Wore the coat - Was at home while brothers were out working

“Joseph is depicted as morally good, but immature and bratty. His tattling, boasting, and robe parading inflames his brothers’ hatred against him” Pride / ego / vanity / hubristic.

BROTHERS – irony with 21 uses of “brother” - supposed to see unity / see the opposite.

37:4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. 37:8 So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. 37:11 brothers were jealous of him. “Like a VOLCANO, hate is the lava growing inside of them that’s going to explode and destroy the family, can sit dormant for year put the pressure inside is real - these hidden depths of brokenness and dysfunction must be dealt with.

37:18-20 They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.” (only way to fix in is kill what’s out?)

“Dreamer” misses the irony – sarcastic = dream-addict, dream-lord, master dreamer.

“Kill him” - connotes ruthless violence, same verb that is used when Cain slays Abel.

“Throw / toss” - bury in a grave but hurried and careless.

Progression / Escalation of Sin - bad report / favoritism / jealousy / checking on --> murder.

37:23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. 24 And they took him and threw him into a pit (cistern). The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 25 Then they sat down to EAT. callous / desensitized to evil.

Joseph was no silent participant in his own misfortune but pleaded to be released.

Gen 42:21 Then they said to one another, “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen.”

REUBEN oldest brother / the leader (Usurper, Failure, Taker, Cowardly, Sly, Use Others)

37:21-22 But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father Reuben is a passive leader, cowardice, sly vs standing up.

Why the father? Reuben has been out of favor with father ever since he went and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah (35:22). Challenge authority of his father's, and a symbolic usurpation of his father's position within the family and a power play to secure future inheritance and influence – didn’t accomplish what he wanted/hoped!

His secret plan is foiled, and now he must face his father. He considers this turn of events as tantamount to his own demise, lit., “as for me, where shall I go (37:3)?”

JUDAH (will rise to prominence / carry the messianic line / dysfunctional mess right now)

37:26 Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. 28 Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

Biblical precedent of innocent blood cries out from the ground for vengeance.

If wanting to get rid of Joseph, might offer him for free to the Ishmaelites.

Selfish, greedy and a seared conscience thinks selling his brother for silver (capital offense) it better than murder, since “He is our brother, our own flesh” (self-interest, no integrity).

Result - Gen 37:31-33 Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not.” And he identified it and said, “It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” It is ironic that Jacob deceived Isaac by covering himself with the skin of a goat is now deceived by a covering dipped in the blood of a goat.

34 Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus, his father wept for him. Typically, a period of mourning would be appointed but in Jacob’s mind he will never cease to mourn until the day of his death.

Where is God and what is He doing in the midst of dysfunction?

God is NOT MENTIONED ONCE in the entire chapter. No one refers to him, talks to him, seems completely absent in such awful, depraved group of people.

Does God just turn and run? Abandon them and us?

When you get your act together, I’ll step back in?

No - He is silently working and purposing every free will choice (including the sin, evil and dysfunction) to secure their rescue and His intended outcome. He is sovereign at work, weaving a story of redemption, WORKING SALVATION

If Jacob didn’t show favoritism – Joseph wouldn’t have made it to Egypt used by God to save the family from famine. If the brother’s didn’t get jealous (J not to Egypt), If Jacob doesn’t send Joe to check / If brother’s had stayed in Shechem / If “a man” hadn’t told Joe where bros went, If Dothan wasn’t on trade route / If the traders hadn’t come by / If they would have killed him / If Reuben had stepped in / If Reuben rescue plan worked / If Reuben wasn’t gone / If Judah hadn’t been greedy / if traded to anyone else in Egypt...

No mention of God, but he’s in every detail working things for their salvation.

God could have got Joe to Egypt a million other ways, but this is how He chose to do it.

Genesis 37 shows us that when life is messy—when we’ve blown it, when others have hurt us, or when circumstances feel unfair or unbearable—God is not absent - he’s present and working for his glory and our good.

There is no greater comfort than to know that no matter how absurd and irrational (dysfunctional) your circumstances may seem, God is sovereign and can use anything, redeem anything, purpose anything for good!” He can take the mud and turn it into a masterpiece.

No one in chapter 37 would ever believe that statement – the sin, the pain, the anguish, the uncertainty, they just couldn’t see that God was purposing all of it, for their salvation.

“When life looks like it’s falling apart, God may actually be putting His plan together.”

Hope for someone today that is experiencing severe dysfunction – in life or in themselves.

God is still working – you may not see it or feel it (like everyone in Gen 37) but believe me, take heart, don’t give up, trust that God is working.

What is God doing in Dysfunction? Working Transformation. “God creates out of nothing. Therefore, until a man is nothing, God can make nothing out of him.” – Luther

Jacob – had to have his idolatry taken away, will finish as a faithful patriarch, blessing future generations.

Reuben – God had to lesson his leadership, influence and prominence - shows a softened conscience, though weakened by past sin.

Judah – has selfishness rooted out and transforms into a self-sacrificing leader.

Brothers – had to have their sin exposed, see their wrong, need and receive forgiveness and become the 12 tribes of Israel.

Joseph – had to have his pride stripped off of him and be humbled before he could be elevated - grows into a more mature, less arrogant, forgiving and visionary leader who preserves God’s people.

Whether you’ve done evil or had evil done to you, God’s not done with you...

He can bring meaning out of the mess. He can bring purpose out of your pain.

Today, God is still working transformation in the midst the dysfunction.

Maybe you have idolatry.

Maybe you have pride and arrogance.

Maybe you have jealousy and anger and hatred.

Maybe you have tried to usurp power only to lose your influence and now weasel around.

Maybe you are selfish, self-seeking, self-serving, always looking for something to gain.

Maybe you have seared conscience, gone way to far down the road of evil.

Maybe you have had impossible expectations thrown at you.

Maybe you have been wronged, abused, betrayed, and evil committed against you.

The ONLY HOPE in every single one of these situations you find yourself in

is the salvation, redemption and restoration that comes through Jesus Christ

To the flawed: God's mercy is bigger than your mistakes - only he can forgive.

To the wounded: God's presence is closer than you think - only he can heal.

To us all: Jesus is the greater Joseph—Sent by the father, came to his own, his own rejected him, hate him, wanted to kill him, they stripped of his robe, sold for pieces of silver...

Joseph foreshadows Jesus and reminds us that God often brings salvation through the suffering. Jesus was betrayed so that we could be forgiven, abandoned so we would never be alone, buried so that we might rise."

What is God doing in the dysfunction?

Still working: to bring about salvation and transformation.

Sermon Discussion Questions
Where is God in Dysfunction by Destin Garner
RPC Central I Sunday, August 25, 2025
Rpc.fm/live
Scripture Passage: Genesis 37:1-36

Have different people from your small group read verses from the chapter above aloud, before starting group discussion.

1. What do we learn about the character and nature of God from this chapter &/or sermon?
2. What is very unusual and simultaneously very encouraging about this chapter of scripture?
3. When you read about the dysfunction of families in this chapter and throughout scripture, what comes to your mind? How does this give you hope for your own family?
4. List some specific words/ways we see foreshadowing of Jesus Christ in verses 18-27 of this chapter?
5. Are there any memorable “pits” that you have found yourself in? What did you learn about God and yourself when you were in that season?
6. In Genesis 37:31, we see that Jacob's sons take Joseph's robe and dip it in goat's blood to deceive their father. Why is this ironic? (Jacob had slaughtered a goat, using the meat for a stew and the skins to deceive his father Isaac and rob his brother Esau of his blessing in Genesis 27). What principles can we learn from these stories of jealousy and deception?
7. What lessons can we learn from Jacob's grief in Genesis 37:34-35?
8. When do you feel tempted to believe that God has forgotten you? Do you think it is possible for God to redeem your pain?
9. What could you do to seek God's presence the next time you feel forgotten or like He has abandoned you?
10. What would it look like to trust God with your disappointment, grief, pain, or unfulfilled dreams? How can we as a small group encourage you in an area you are struggling with this month?

Next steps

Consider what opportunities has God placed in front of you to serve Him and fulfill the purpose He has given you this week, even if it's not ideal or what you dreamed life would be?

Find an index card or sticky note and write down 1-2 dreams that the Lord has placed in your heart. Commit to praying for the Lord to grant you discernment, humility, wisdom and perseverance as you commit your future into His hands. Consider sharing with a group leader, mentor or godly friend.

Who can you pray for this week and reach out to, that might be encouraged by the story of Joseph?