

A Coat of Many Colors

Genesis 37:12-36

This is undoubtedly one of the most familiar of the common children's Bible stories. It's one of the very few stories from the Bible which I remember from my early childhood and church background. Joseph and his brothers. The coat of many colors.

And yet, it's not really the sort of story we should really want our younger children to become too familiar with, because it's filled with wickedness. It really is a story about wicked brothers and an unspeakably mean thing that they do to their own younger brother. It's certainly not any sort of example that we want to imitate, for being mean to brothers and sisters is too often their natural tendency of children, and we all have to work hard to practice being kind.

So I want to study this story this morning in the context of emphasizing the horrible wickedness of what these brothers did. And in that, of course, the exhortation is to put away such wickedness and such wicked impulses in our own life. I'll start with a question.

I. HOW WICKED DID THE SONS OF ISRAEL BECOME?

What were their angry passions? Let's go through and study it. First,
v.18. "...they conspired against him to kill him."

"They plotted to kill him." They schemed among themselves deceitfully how to get rid of this brother who had claimed that he would eventually rule over them. It was, no doubt, a regular subject of conversation, for the Bible says that they were plotting as they saw him in a distance and before he reached them. The idea to kill him didn't come when they saw him, for the deceitful

plans had been started a long time before.

We studied the root of this bitterness last week.

v.4

v.8

v.11

I would describe this as,

A. Bitter deceitfulness.

These brothers were bitter. Their hatred had been fed by their jealousy, and the end result was a deep-seated bitterness and resentment toward their younger brother. So they sat together and talked of killing him. That's where all the trouble started for Joseph. Bitter deceitfulness.

Then, when they Joseph, the made fun of him.

v.19

Such,

B. Insolent mockery.

Insolent means arrogant, or rude, or disrespectful. It is a bold and presumptuous attack upon another person. And words really do hurt. Words really can be mean. And insulting.

"Look, this dreamer is coming!" Those words could well be translated, with a sarcastic tone, "Look, the master of dreams is coming." The brothers are mocking Joseph, for their bitter resentment has already been made evident.

Again, an obvious application for us all, the dangers and wickedness of making fun of others, being rude or unkind in what you say. And we continue to witness such horrible examples of that in the political process of our national elections. It is so

distasteful, and so inappropriate. And how much worse it is when it is in regard to our brothers and sisters.

The NT gives us the positive standard for how we are to talk.

Eph. 4:29 “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers....5:4 neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.”

Much to their shame, the sons of Israel display insolent mockery. And then, their words lead to action. To,

C. Murderous violence.

v.20

Now their foolish talking leads to a specific idea. They look at Joseph coming to them, wearing that lavish coat which his father gave him. And then they spy a pit, probably an empty cistern, a great big hole in a rock that was used for holding water, and they put the two together. “Let’s put him in the cistern.”

I should note that cisterns were sometimes used for prisons then, for with deep holes, and the sides of rocks smoothed by water, they were well suited for that purpose. But this wasn’t to be a prison. This was to be a grave. “Let’s kill him and throw him into one of these pits.” Such murderous violence. And where did that come from? It came from the root of bitterness, the envy and hatred which had festered in their hearts. Reuben talks them out of actually killing Joseph, but they throw him into the cistern nonetheless. And then sit down to eat dinner. Such,

D. Heartless cruelty.

v.23-25a

Talk about cold-blooded cruelty. They sat down and had dinner. This whole thing had become like a game for them, like a sporting hunt. They were like a group of hunters returning to the cabin after capturing the prey they had been after all day. But this wasn’t an animal. This was a man, their own brother. And he lay stripped of his robe imprisoned in a cold but empty cistern. While his brothers enjoyed a happy meal. Heartless cruelty.

Then,

E. Selfish vindictiveness.

They got even. They silenced that dreamer who had so boldly predicted that he would rule over them. They shut him up. They did away with him, even though they were kept from killing him. They did the next best thing. They sold him into slavery. And in one way, that was better than killing him, because not only did they get rid of him, permanently they thought, but they also got paid!

Think about it. Even Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, couldn’t keep his money. They guilt drove him to suicide. But these brothers took the money and satisfied their own selfish desires as they rid themselves of that younger brother whom they had grown to hate so deeply.

v.25

And,

v.28

They took money to get even with their brother. Selfish vindictiveness. And then, in a real sense, the worst thing they did of all, in light of their family relationships. They let Jacob believe Joseph was dead, inflicting upon him more pain than death itself would have brought. Such,

F. Mean-spirited callousness.

What they did to Joseph was bad enough. But what they did to Jacob was incomprehensible. How could they be that callous toward their own father? How could they let him suffer in his grief like he did? Had they no heart left? Was there nothing to regulate the mean-spiritedness of their own hearts?

How could they do it?
v.31-35

I doubt there is any deeper tragedy than to lose a child to a violent death. Surely many parents endure such great grief in their hearts, and Jacob's reaction is not overstated. "Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days."

He suffered what he thought would be a grief that would weigh upon his heart until the day he died. In refusing to be comforted, he said, "I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." I shall go to my grave in grief.

Joseph's brothers lied. They lied to their own father. They lied because they couldn't tell him the truth, that they had sold Joseph into slavery. So they lied in such a way as to literally crush the heart of their own father. All because they had grown to hate Joseph in their envy and jealousy. Such mean-spirited callousness. That's how wicked the sons of Israel became.

Now, by God's grace, there were some limits to their wickedness. Despite all that I've said so far to emphasize that wickedness, God restrained them. In Reuben and Judah, we see,

G. The limits of wickedness.
First Reuben.

v.21-22

Now, his intentions are obviously good. And, in fact, humanly speaking, he probably saved Joseph's life. He convinced his brothers not to shed blood, for they all knew what God had said about that.

Gen. 9:6 "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."

Reuben prevailed, no doubt because that law of God had been impressed upon the hearts of these brothers, despite the depth of wickedness to which they had fallen. Still, God's grace was operative. The law restrained them from further sin. Joseph's blood was not shed. His life was spared.

Reuben, however, was planning to come back and rescue Joseph. There is something very praiseworthy in that, for it was Reuben, the firstborn, whose position and honor was most threatened by Joseph's dream of authority. It would be Reuben's position that Joseph would overtake, if that dream came true.

Of course, Reuben's sin of immorality with his father's nursemaid Bilhah had cost him the blessing of the firstborn, but there is at least the implication in his actions here that he had genuinely repented of that. His defense of Joseph's life was praiseworthy, as was his desire to take Joseph back to his father. And Joseph seemed to recognize that, for later, in Egypt, it was Simeon, not Reuben, whom Joseph held captive in prison when the other brothers returned to their father to bring back Benjamin.

Yet the praiseworthiness of Reuben's actions are overshadowed by the fact that he still sought to resist evil with evil. That is, with a deceitful and cunning plan. He should have more fully stood up to his brothers with his authority as the oldest,

and used his moral authority to put an end to this wickedness once and for all. But he tried to trick his brothers, and rescue Joseph himself without confronting his brothers, and the plan failed. For while he was away, most likely watching the sheep, Joseph was sold to the Midianites.

v.29-30

Then there is Judah, who also provides a limit to the wickedness of these brothers. It was his idea to permanently cancel the plans to kill Joseph, and instead to sell him as a slave.

v.26-27

Again, the reference to God's law prohibiting the shedding of blood. Judah rightly knew that no good would come of it. In fact, just the opposite. They would find themselves guilty. Slavery seemed such a good option, for surely he knew he could convince his brothers to go along, and surely that would take care of the problem of Joseph just as completely as murder would. Or so he thought.

Nonetheless, by God's grace, his actions did put a restraint upon the wickedness of the other brothers. By God's grace, Joseph's life was spared. Despite the horrible wickedness that was done to him, he was not murdered. But another question should come to mind at this point? How can this be? After all, these are the children of Jacob, the sons of Israel. These will become the heads of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. These are the grandsons of the patriarch Isaac, and the great-grandsons of father Abraham. How could this be?

II. HOW COULD THE SONS OF ISRAEL BECOME THIS WICKED?

I can't give an absolute answer to that question, but I can certainly identify some things we see in what we have studied so

far. The first of which is,

A. Parental foolishness and immorality.

The foolishness begins simply with naivety, the insensitive inability to understand the depth of hatred which the brothers showed to Joseph. To put it plainly, Joseph never should have gone into that situation. He never should have been sent by his father into that dangerous environment. But he was. And he went.

v.12-17

Again, simply naive foolishness. There was, as well, the foolishness we studied last week. The foolishness of Jacob showing favoritism to Joseph above his other sons, and giving him that coat which symbolized his special status. And there was the foolishness of Joseph who so quickly and arrogantly blurted out the message of the dreams which he had received. He certainly did his part to provoke his brothers anger.

But, of course, parental foolishness goes deeper than merely a father favoring one son. All the sons grew up in a home which had four wives, four wives competing for the attention and approval of one husband. And that was immoral. The root of their rivalry can be laid at the feet of their father engaging in such immorality.

Most parents have to deal with some form of sibling rivalry, but to have 12 children identified with four different rival mothers virtually assures that sinful rivalry will be passed down to the next generation. And it surely was. It is certainly true that the sins of the fathers are passed down to the sons, in the sense that our children will quickly learn to imitate our sins, often much quicker than they will learn to imitate our righteousness.

Joseph and his brothers were raised in a horribly divided and competitive home, where family rivalries were established even before conception. Such rivalry bears its bitter fruit in the lives of the children. And children raised in a home based upon immorality, in this case, bigamy, will also be permanently affected by that experience. And so this family stands out as a testimony of God's grace. This is the family of God's people, and these are the founding fathers of the nation of Israel, because God is a God of grace.

For the sons themselves were wicked, the consequence of parental foolishness and immorality. And their wickedness came as a consequence of their own,

B. Personal carelessness and self-confidence.

Notice, as I've already mentioned, the references to the law of God. These boys knew the law, and though it did somewhat restrain their sinfulness, still they carelessly rejected the law.

v.21-22

And,

v.26-27

Two of the sons, the two oldest, knew the law and referred to it. And they didn't commit murder, therefore. But they still were careless in their neglect of God's law. And no doubt, overly self-confident. Then, and now, those things will almost always produce evil fruit in the lives of children. Carelessness about the things of the Lord, taking for granted what blessings the Lord bestows. And self-confidence, trusting in a great heritage instead of trusting in a personal relationship with the Lord.

And if you are careless about the things of the Lord, as the children of Jacob were, you will be forever vulnerable to the terrible wiles and temptations brought to you by Satan himself.

You will fall victim to the Devil's clever devices unless you strive with all your strength to put on the full armor of God, to resist him in the faith.

How can the sons of Israel become so wicked? I might just as easily ask, "How can Christians today do such wicked things?" And the answer will often come back truthfully, personal carelessness and self-confidence.

One final question to keep all of this in its proper perspective.

III. WHAT IS GOD'S PURPOSE IN ALL THIS?

That is, of course, the main question which we should always ask. What is God's purpose? Two answers, the first more or less implied. And the second immediately obvious.

The first is simply to see the experiences of Joseph and his brothers as a way for God to teach his people the lesson of the need for genuine repentance, a lesson which comes from the realization that there are awful consequences of sin.

God allows and decrees these sinful acts of Joseph's brothers to humble them, for they would be brought to account. They would be brought to repentance. As we will see in the chapters that follow,

A. The children of Israel would learn the consequences of sin.

And to learn that, they were humbled. Joseph would rule over them, just as that dream predicted. But, in God's providence, that would happen in Egypt.

v.36

The brothers, in their sinful wickedness, thought they were

selling Joseph into slavery. And they were. But God used those sinful circumstances to bring about good. Joseph was exalted, in Egypt. As a slave. And his brothers were forced to honor him, in their humble repentance. Indeed, the whole nation of Israel which would descend from them would learn the difficult lessons of repentance and discipline as they would wander through the wilderness for 40 years after the Exodus.

We, like they, must learn the consequences of sin. And therefore, be moved to put it to death! More and more, to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness. God is accomplishing that great lesson, as he sovereignly governs and controls even these sinful acts of Joseph's brothers.

And secondly, much more obviously, God's purpose was that,

B. The children of Israel would go to Egypt.

Let me take you back to Genesis 15, where I started last week. In that chapter we have that great and awesome covenant ceremony of the smoking firepot passing between the pieces of the animals, which was when the covenant was inaugurated with Abraham.

Gen. 15:12 "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then He said to Abram: "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. 14 And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age."

God is fulfilling that prophecy. The children of Israel would live as strangers in a country not their own. That country would be Egypt. And they went to Egypt, first of all, because Joseph's

brothers sold him into slavery to the Midianites,

v.36

And what was God's purpose in having his people enslaved in Egypt? So that he could free them! If Israel was never enslaved, God would never have had the opportunity to deliver them, to redeem them. And that is an extremely profound explanation of why God allows sin in the first place. That explains why God decreed the certainty of sin and the fall in the first place.

Why did God allow and decree that Adam and Eve would fall into sin? Why? So that he could save fallen man! God decreed that man would sin so that God could reveal the depth of his love for fallen man in his son Jesus Christ.

Eph.3:9 "...to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; 10 to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, 11 according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God created all things so that he reveal the depth of his love through the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross. Salvation is God's eternal purpose! And salvation means that there must first be sin.

May we worship and forever praise the God whose purpose was for the people of Israel to go into Egypt so that he could redeem them from their slavery. So may we worship and forever praise the God whose purpose was for his covenant people to fall into sin so that he could redeem us from our slavery to sin. In other words,

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.”

Blessed be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.