

The Truth Hurts

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[0 : 00] I don't know if you know the Lloyd Webber musical. It has a song in it, Jacob, Jacob and Sons. It's a rather jolly sort of song. Jacob, Jacob and Sons, we have them here in Genesis 37, recipients of the greatest promise ever made to humanity, neighbors from hell.

And we'll see plenty of that bad behavior in the weeks that follow and indeed in this chapter. But there's enough of it in this chapter to be going on with. So let's dive into the detail and look at some of the detail in this chapter. It comes to us in two movements, I think.

Verses 1 to 11, the growing hatred. Verses 12 to the end, the dreadful crime. Let's look at the growing hatred. Joseph's brothers absolutely hate him. And there are three triggers for that hatred in this chapter. Look at verse 2. First, the bad report. This is the account of Jacob.

Joseph, a young man of 17, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. Now, some people look at this and suggest that Joseph here is just perpetuating the feud of his parents, maliciously clipping on his brothers or falsely accusing them. And while that's possible, it's kind of out of character with the Joseph we read about in the rest of the story. Given the rest of the story, I think it is more likely that Joseph is looking out for his father's interests. He's a faithful son, just as he does through the rest of this chapter. And that the problem is the brothers.

However, bringing a bad report about your brothers is never likely to guarantee that they love you and they don't love him. Second trigger for their hatred is the splendid robe. Verse 3.

[2 : 00] Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he'd been born to him in his old age, and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. Israel is not a wise father.

He loves the firstborn of his much-loved Rachel much more than the other sons, and he shows it. And he shows it especially by making and giving him this splendid robe, which of course makes all the other brothers feel just great. And it must have been difficult for Joseph himself to be singled out in this way, especially knowing how his brothers felt about that. It's possible that the robe signifies not only greater affection, but a greater position in the family. It may be that this is the kind of robe you give to the firstborn in the family, the inheritor. And of course, he is Rachel's firstborn, but he is way down the list. He's number 11 son in the family order, which again is not going to go down well. And it doesn't look at verse 4. They hate him for it. And finally, there's the unusual dream, or dreams really, or a dream in two parts. It's the same kind of dream, isn't it? First, there's an earth-based dream. Look at verse 7. Your sheaves bowed down to mine. And then another one like it, verse 9. This time a heaven-based dream. Sun, moon, and 11 stars bowing down to me.

Now, there's no comment on these dreams here. We're not told explicitly here that they come from God. The brothers don't think they do. Verse 8, they hate him all the more because of his dream. Verse 11, they are intensely jealous because of him. His father doesn't like the dream either. Look at verse 10.

What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come down and bow down to the ground before you? You see, he thinks Joseph has got above himself. He's honored him too much.

And yet, he keeps it in mind. Verse 11, there's something about those dreams. Perhaps it's that they both say the same sort of thing in strikingly different ways.

[4 : 36] Perhaps it's that there's an earthly component and a heavenly component. Heavens and earth. It's got a kind of comprehensive feel to it. Of course, these dreams shape the whole of the rest of the book of Genesis.

For in the end, his family does bow down to him. In the end, his family honors him as the rescuer from God, their savior, and a savior with worldwide impact.

But at this point, nobody in the family is even a little bit glad to hear Joseph talking about his dreams. Perhaps he wasn't entirely wise, given his family dynamics to be so full of them in his conversation.

But all the same, these dreams are what God is going to do. See, there are two things going on in this story. And not just here, but all the way through the following chapters.

Two things are going on. At ground level, there is stupid human favoritism. Folly, really. At another level, entirely, there is wonderful divine favoring.

[5 : 52] See, it's not just that Jacob is foolishly honoring this son. The truth is that God is going to wonderfully honor this son. God is raising up from this family, from this family, a rescuer.

A rescuer they so much need. One who will be used to turn them to God, humble them before God. And one who God will use not just to bring blessing to this family, but indeed to the land of Egypt.

And lots of surrounding people. There's a rescuer being formed here. On the ground, however, human beings just hate to see one of their number being honored against the rest.

Especially if he's number 11 son. The brothers don't care who's doing the honoring. All they can see is that one of them is being favored. So the growing hatred here is not merely the hatred of stupid things that the father is doing.

It's the hatred of what God is doing. And here we bump into a really uncomfortable truth. A truth that really hurts. That when human beings see God beginning to raise up a rescuer.

[7 : 09] The kind of rescuer they so much need. They react not with gratitude. But with hatred. Because of course the raising up of a rescuer.

Inevitably means the humbling of others. That's just what it involves. Let me illustrate with a personal story. I've got a good friend who's been in church ministry for a long time. He went on holiday by the sea with his family.

Swimming. Swimming one day in the English Channel. He's quite a good swimmer. But he swam out a bit too far. And he got in a strong current. And he swam. And he swam.

And he swam. And he could not get back to the shore. Eventually he took refuge on a handy rock. From where he stood and waved at the beach.

He waited for a long time. After a while on the horizon a dot appeared. The dot moved gently in his direction.

[8 : 07] He realized it was a helicopter. When he realized that it might be coming for him. That was a humbling moment. But not nearly so humbling as the moment when the guy came down onto the rock on the winch.

Landed. Looked at him. And spoke these unforgettable words. Who's been a silly boy then? It's humbling being rescued. Humiliating being rescued.

And people do not often respond all that well to the arrival of a rescuer. Unless they realize in what danger they are. And he jumped on and grabbed onto the rescuer. And was winched to safety.

You see this most extremely in the coming of Jesus into the world. An event that this story prefigures in so many ways. As we'll look at later on. What happened when the ultimate rescuer came into the world that he'd made?

It's easy to hate a rescuer. Because being rescued is humiliating. So we have here the growing hatred. Partly in response to human folly.

[9 : 17] But partly in response to the rescue that God is planning. Second, the brutal crime. Verse 12. His brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem.

And Israel said to Joseph. As you know your brothers are grazing their flocks near Shechem. Come. I'm going to send you to them. Very well. He replied. Now it's not obvious to us here I suspect.

But Shechem is a very, very dangerous place. For these guys to go with their flocks. Why is that? Well, because back in chapter 34. Following the rape of their sister.

The brothers take brutal revenge. Against the whole family. Of the perpetrator. Slaughtering them all. Those boys.

Come from Shechem. And so not surprisingly. Jacob is worried about his sons. Taking the sheep down there. And he sends Joseph to see if they're okay.

[10 : 17] Interestingly. He seems completely blind to the fact. That his favoritism has caused great hatred within the family. And of course it's not the brothers who are in danger.

It's the one being sent who's in danger. Do you notice that even before Joseph arrives. His future is decided. He arrives in verse 23.

But before he arrives. They've seen him. Verse 19. Why? Well because he's got that splendid coat on. Verse 20. They've decided to kill him.

Verse 21. They've been persuaded not to kill him. And he's not even arrived on the scene yet. Reuben intervenes. Notice that Reuben's intervention is very unlikely to be for good motives.

Back in chapter 35. We have another bit of family dysfunction. Reuben the oldest son. Sleeps with his stepmother. An act of total disregard for his father's honor in the family.

[11 : 23] It is possible that Reuben sees this as an opportunity. To get back in his father's good books. Maybe to become the favored firstborn again. The kind of guy who gets the coat.

So when Joseph arrives. Verse 23. They take him. And they violently strip him of his clothing. And they hurl him into a hole in the ground. And then they murder him.

Well they don't actually physically murder him. They sell him into slavery. But the point is that that's just as good as murdering him. This is not a merciful thing that they do.

Selling him to the Ishmaelites. Who will take him to Egypt. You sell a guy into slavery in a foreign land in the ancient world. And you are sending him to die. That's what you're expecting.

It's a way of killing someone without having to do the deed yourself. And that's exactly what Judah says in verse 26. Look at verse 26. What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?

[12 : 26] Let's sell him to the Ishmaelites. Let's get rid of him that way. It's much more straightforward than us having to do the deed and then cover it all up. It will be a far tidier way of disposing of him.

And Reuben when he comes back to his brothers and finds what has happened. Is in no doubt at all at what has been done. Look at verse 29. He tore his clothes. So what do the brothers do?

Well they kill a goat. They smear the robe with blood. They take it home. And they present it to their father. We found this. They say. Verse 32.

Notice that's kind of true. Kind of true. But they don't say where they found it. Or what condition it was when they found it. Or who was wearing it when they found it.

They let their father come to the conclusion they want him to come to. And so their father is deceived. And the terrible irony of this is. That Jacob once deceived his own father.

[13 : 27] And he did it with a slaughtered goat. And with slippery words. And with slippery words just as the brothers do. He the arch deceiver is himself deceived in the same way by his own children.

Folks this is a really grim story isn't it? It's a dreadful story. Terrible family dysfunction. Spreading through the generations.

Unrestrained folly and wickedness. What are we to make of it? What is this doing in the Bible? Well let me give you four reflections on this story.

That really are of enormous importance for us. Here's the first. Notice how refreshingly honest the Bible is. That this story is here at all.

Is a massively reassuring thing. It is often assumed both by people who are and people who are not yet Christian. That any life with God.

[14 : 35] Any life that God might be interested in. Is going to be a better class of life. A better sort of life. That assumption comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

The thought that God only bothers with nice people. And I'm not one of those. So there's no hope for me. Or the thought that the experience of the spiritual person. Kind of floats above the mess of the real world.

If only I were a really spiritual person I think. Maybe my life would not be so difficult and messy and complicated. Or that life is easier if only you're right in the center of God's plan.

Try telling that to Joseph. Who is smack bang in the middle of God's plan. Now this passage blows a reassuringly loud raspberry.

At all of that stuff. I think that one of the most encouraging things about the Bible. One of the things that I find most convincing about its truthfulness actually.

[15 : 37] Is that every time you open it. It is talking about the world as it really is. Not a kind of sanitized photoshopped version of the world.

The real thing. And the truth is that in the real world. In which the loving God reigns absolutely supreme. Bad things happen to good people all the time.

It is just hugely reassuring to find that God is straightforward about that. Isn't it? He is not a reluctant politician. Slightly embarrassed about his tax returns.

He is not ashamed to be totally straightforward. About the state that his world is in now. The wickedness in the world has not taken God by surprise.

He knows what he is doing. He knows it is there. He gets it right out in the table every time you open the book. It is not that amazingly reassuring. He is not trying to pretend.

[16 : 39] The Bible is refreshingly and reassuringly honest. Here is the second reflection. Even in this story there are reassuring reminders of God's sovereign control.

I wonder if you noticed. There is not a single mention of God in this passage. Not one. And nearly everything that we see happening in this passage is a demonstration of unrestrained human nastiness.

But there is the dream. And as the chapters unfold the dream proves to be a God-given dream. Joseph goes to Egypt and he becomes great.

And his family is in great need. And they come to him and they bow down in front of him. And he saves them along with the land of Egypt. Please turn on to chapter 50 verse 18. This is right at the end of the story.

Please turn on to that. Keep your finger in chapter 37. We will be back very quickly. Chapter 50 verse 18. Joseph's brothers then came and threw themselves down before him.

[17 : 48] That's what the dream said they'd do. We are your slaves they said. But Joseph said to them don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me.

But God intended it for good. To accomplish what is now being done. The saving of many lives. You intended evil.

But God intended good. Now turn back to chapter 37. And look at the final verse. Meanwhile. The Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar.

One of Pharaoh's officials. The captain of the guard. The brothers intended that. And they intended it for evil. They wanted to get rid of him. But God had good in mind.

When he took Joseph to Egypt. Folks I wonder if we really believe this. I wonder if I really believe this. That God is big enough to use even the most evil of human actions.

[18 : 53] To bring about good in the end. I wonder if you really believe that. Of course at this point in the story. None of that good can even be glimpsed from ground level.

Never mind imagined. You cannot see God's goodness in action on the ground in chapter 37. All you see is human wickedness.

Just like Joseph back then. So now we cannot see God's control in the events of every day. When was the last time?

You came downstairs in the morning. And opened the curtains. And switched the news on. And said. Ah. Evidence once again of God's sovereign control in the world. You've never thought that in the morning.

Have you? The world is as chaotic. Every morning as it was the morning before. But this passage reassures us. That God is absolutely in control.

[19 : 54] So do not think that the present difficulties that you see in the world. And in your own life. Are big enough to get in the way of God in the end.

Bringing to pass all the good he wants to for the world. And for your life. And for everything. And for all who trust him.

Third observation. This chapter brings a very unsettling perspective. On the most formative influences in our lives.

What would the first audience have made of this story? I wonder. It's always a good question to ask when you read the Bible. What would the first readers of this story. Or the first people that this story was told.

What would the impact of it be on them? Well who were the first readers? I imagine. The first readers of the Pentateuch. The first five books of the Bible. Are people from the nation of Israel.

[20 : 57] A bit further on. They've been in Egypt. They've been slaves in Egypt. They've been rescued from Egypt. From slavery in Egypt. Post Exodus people.

Are probably the first readers. People descended from this family. People wonderfully rescued from slavery in Egypt. Egypt. What would this story have told them?

Well it would remind them very strongly. Of the kind of people they're descended from. It's not always reassuring to know. The sorts of people you've been descended from.

It would be so easy as an Israelite. Rescued from slavery in Egypt. To think to themselves. We were the oppressed people. That God rescued from slavery in Egypt.

How good and right and just it was for him. To rescue us from slavery in Egypt. Come to think of it. Why would he ever have done anything else. Than rescue us from slavery in Egypt.

[21 : 55] My daughter rescued a dog. She lives and works in China. And she and a friend were walking down the road. Walking down the road in Beijing where they live. And they came across a dog.

You meet a lot of abandoned dogs in Beijing. It's just what happens. This was a particularly nice looking dog. He looked as though he'd crawled off into a corner to die. He was very, very thin.

And very unhappy looking. So they bought him a sausage. And after the sausage he perked up somewhat. And he looked like such a nice little dog. That they took him home.

And he has been adopted into the wider family. And he's now owned by a couple who love him. Who've got a small boy who loves him very much. He has been named Zwingli. Which is an unusual name for a small dog.

But that's the name. I met Zwingli a couple of weeks ago. On a visit to Beijing. He is a delightful little dog. He's just lovely. He's well behaved. He's nice with children. He's obedient.

[22 : 51] He's potty trained. He does all that stuff really well. You could not possibly meet the dog Zwingli. And not want to rescue him. He's just delightful. This story reminds the people of Israel.

That their rescue. Is quite unlike the rescue of the dog Zwingli. The nation they belong to. Bears the name of a man.

Israel. And this story reminds them. That the children of Israel. Are by nature a bunch of murderous betrayers.

Victims of oppression. Yes. But also. You come from a bunch of dreadful people.

That of course is why they were in Egypt in the first place. The brothers sent Joseph to Egypt to die. And that's why the family ended up there. Jeremy Paxman's quote.

[23 : 54] You shouldn't go into this family history business. It's just upsetting. This family history is recorded. Because it is meant to be upsetting.

This story reminds every Israelite. That the nation that was rescued. Is not a nice nation. Not a lovable family. They have an ancestry.

That can simply not be ignored. And of course. There's something similarly upsetting. For us here. Of course. We're not called Israel.

Israel. Most of us. Many of us. Have names starting with muck. It's nothing like Israel. But notice verse 2. Of Genesis 37. This is the account of Jacob.

The writer says. That phrase. This is the account of. Holds the book of Genesis together. There are 10 of these. In the book of Genesis. Five of them. In Genesis 1 to 11.

[24 : 52] Before Abraham. And five of them. In Genesis 11 following. After Abraham. They hold the book together. And one of the things.

That these. This is the account of. Phrases do. Is remind the reader. That this small. Family story. Is tied into.

A much. Much. Bigger story. A story. Of how. Everything. Started out right. In the beginning. And everything. Went catastrophically. Wrong.

At the beginning. That we. Human beings. Have an ancestry. That we cannot. Escape from. One that defines us.

Much more profoundly. Than any of our. Immediate circumstances. Does. Though we are not. Adam and Eve. Though we were not. Alive. Back at the beginning. When they.

[25 : 46] Wickedly. Turned their backs. On the loving rule of God. We have. Inherited from them. The same stuff. That this family. Has inherited from them.

Guilt. Sin. Shame. And. All the tendencies. To turn away. From a loving God. Introduced. At the beginning.

And so. Amply. Demonstrated. In this family history. And folks. I think this is a very important thing. For us to get on board. We live.

In a culture. In which. The victim card. Is about. The most. Powerful card. You can play. In discussion. I am a victim.

Of. My circumstances. I am. The way I am now. Because of my parents. Or because of my illness. Or because of something bad. That's happened to me.

[26 : 41] And of course. All of those may be true. And painfully true. But there is a much. Much. Bigger narrative. Going on. That shapes us. Even more profoundly.

Than any of those things. C.S. Lewis. Puts it like this. In. Prince Caspian. Aslan. Is talking to Caspian. The prince. Caspian. Who wishes.

That he came. From a more. Honorable lineage. Than the human pirates. He's descended from. Aslan. Aslan. Says to him this. You come. Of the Lord. Adam. And the Lady Eve.

And that is both. Honor enough. To erect the head. Of the poorest beggar. And shame enough. To bow the shoulders. Of the greatest emperor. On earth. Like. Jacob's family.

Like them. We are. Indelibly. Marked. By our first. Ancestors. And desperately.

[27 : 35] In need of rescue. Just as much. As they are. This story. Is meant. To be unsettling. Verse 2. Joins. This. Rather.

Nasty. Family story. To its. Source. The ancestry. We all share. With its. Both. Both.

Its great. Honor. And. Its. Terrible. Shame. And that. Ancestry. Is much. More. Defining. Of who. We are. And of the.

Rescue. We need. Than. Anything. Else. That. Could. Ever. Happen. To us. In life. It is. The biggest. Defining. Thing. For all. Of us. Final.

Reflection. And here. We close. Chapter. 37. Tells. Us. Something. About. God. And. How. He. Works. As.

[28 : 32] As. Mentioned. Already. God. Is. Raising. Up. A. Rescuer. In this. Chapter. The. Beginning. Of. That. And. There. Are. Features. Of. How. He. Does. That. That. Really. Ought. To. Ring. Bells.

For. Anybody. Else. Who's. Read. Further. On. The. Bible. In. This. Story. We. Have. A. Greatly. Loved. Son. Who. Looks. After. His.

Father's. Interests. And. Obeys. Him. A. Son. Marked. Out. By. His. Father. But. Hated. By. His. Brothers. A. Son.

Sent. Into. Danger. For. His. Brother's. Safety. A. Son. Who. Is. Stripped. Beaten. Betrayed. And.

Handed. Over. To. Foreigners. To. Die. A. Son. To. Whom. Everyone. In. The. Family.
Bows. Down. In. The. End. You see.

[29 : 25] Though. God. Is. Not. Mentioned. In. Genesis. Chapter 7. The. Chapter. Has. His.
Fingerprints. All. Over. Them. You. Cannot. Think. Of. The. Story. Of. Joseph. Without.
Thinking. About. Another. Son.

Another. Sent. And. Hated. Son. Another. Stripping. Another. Beating. Another. Handing.
Over. To. Foreigners. To. Die.

You. Cannot. Avoid. That. This. Is. Just. How. God. Does. Things. And. So. Much. Does.
He. Love. That.

Ultimate. Son. So. Deeply. Is. He. Committed. To. That. Ultimate. Son. So. Great. Is. His.
Desire. For. That.

Great. Son. To. Be. Honored. That. Hints. About. That. Rescue. Plan. And. That. Grace.
Great. Rescuer.

[30 : 18] Cannot. Be. Kept. Out. Of. The. Bible. They. Are. There. All. The. Way. Through. And.
Perhaps. Here. As. Strikingly. As. Anywhere. This.

Is. How. God. Does. Things. That. Son. Of. All. Sons. Prefigured. Here. In. Joseph. Came.

To. A. World. Like. This. One. Not. For. Lovable. People. For. People. Like. These.
People. Really. Horrid. People. And.

By. People. Like. These. People. Was. Despised. And. Rejected. Which. Of. Course. Is.
To. The. Greatest. Possible. Shame. Of. Our. Race.

But. Our. Only. Hope. In. The. World. Let's. Pray. Together. Let's.

[31 : 15] Just. Have. A. Moment. In. The. Quiet. To. Respond. To. What. God. Has. Said. To. Us.
And. Then. I'll. Lead. Us. In. Prayer.