

“FIELD OF DREAMS”
The Story of Joseph – 1
Genesis 37:1-36

There was a hit single by The Undertones about twenty years ago called “*My Perfect Cousin*”. Some of you may recall it. I do, because the cousin in the song was called Kevin and I also had a cousin called Kevin who bore an uncanny resemblance to the wonderful child described in the song – a boy who was good at everything and seemed to be more or less unblemished in every department (at least, according to my Auntie Betty). Everything Kevin did went right – and everyone loved him for it. At least, every adult did: the cousin’s contemporaries weren’t quite so sure.

Joseph, of whom we have read this morning in *Genesis 37* was presumably someone’s cousin, but it was actually his brothers who really got fed up with him. What we have in the chapter we read is a description of someone whom I think I would gladly have chucked down a well. I know you’re not supposed to say such things about the patriarchs – or, indeed, about anyone in the Bible – but be honest: doesn’t he sound like a thoroughly dislikeable person to you? Try and imagine that you don’t know the rest of the story – we’re going to look at that over the next two or three weeks anyway, so concentrate on the first part today – and think how you might have felt if you were one of the older brothers.

Here’s Joseph, a young man of seventeen at the beginning of the story. You and your brothers are all much older because your father Jacob had Joseph by Rachel, his favourite wife, later on in life. And the kid Joseph is spoilt rotten. Jacob loves him more than he does you and to show it he has given him a magnificent coat which, when Joseph wears it (which is most of the time) simply rubs in how much of a favourite he is. Not only that, but Joseph is a bit of a sneak. He comes out with you to look after the herds and tend the sheep, then goes home and reports to Jacob just how well (or how badly) you’ve done the job.

And he keeps having these dreams. Now, he knows he’s the king of the heap and he has Jacob just where he wants him, so you are well looked down on. If he speaks against you, then Jacob will believe him rather than you any day of the week. But he lays it on even thicker by telling you about these visions he has in which you are all bowing down to him. It’s bad enough that he’s strutting about amongst you now, without the threat that one day you’ll all be bowing down to him somewhere or other.

If you didn’t know the rest of the story, you would have formed the opinion by halfway through this chapter that Joseph was a thoroughly unpleasant character and richly deserved any retribution that came his way. At the beginning of the chapter, it’s just four of the brothers who are affected by him. By v4 they’re all pretty much at his throat (maybe that’s an understatement!). In v8 we read that their hatred grows, and by v10 even Jacob is telling him to calm down a bit. This is not a popular young man – and the dreams really only make things worse. You’d have thought he might have toned it down a bit, but he just seems to lay it on thicker and thicker.

But I suppose the only thing we can really accuse him of here is insensitivity. As the story unfolds – and we’ll look at more of it next week and on into next month – it becomes clear that Joseph is a pretty special person. He turns out to be a wonderful servant, a great politician and administrator and to have an exemplary character that no-one can really spoil. There’s a great deal we can learn from the story of Joseph – and not only about the dynamics of family life. But let’s concentrate on this first chapter of the story today.

As we’ve said, Joseph struts about through the family of Jacob upsetting more or less everyone with his constant squeaky clean character and his insistence that he will one day be top dog and able to boss them all about quite legitimately. Eventually the time comes when the brothers can stand him no longer. Jacob sends Joseph out to where the brothers are supposed to be grazing the sheep and, after a bit of a detour, he

finds them near Dothan. By this time, though, they have decided that enough is enough and when the “*master of dreams*” turns up they’ve resolved that they’re going to get rid of him once and for all. In fact, they have decided the best way to deal with him is to kill him.

No doubt jealousy played an important part in this. But there may well also have been a sense of fear. If they get rid of Joseph now, then the things that he has dreamed about won’t be able to happen. Obviously they haven’t read their Greek myths, where this kind of thing is happening all the time. The parents of Oedipus, for example, are told by a sibyl that their son will grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. To prevent that happening, they abandon the child and when he grows up, he returns to his homeland and kills a man who turns out to be his father before marrying a woman who turns out to be his mother – but, of course, none of them recognise each other. In the same way, Joseph’s brothers’ plan actually serves to bring about the things he dreamed about rather than preventing them.

The oldest brother, though – Reuben – feels this might be a bit over the top and suggests that they throw him down a water hole. (It appears in v22 that he has a secret plan to rescue him later on.) To emphasise just how callous they are, we read that they threw him down the hole and then sat around having a meal – at which point a caravan of traders arrives and Judah has the bright idea of making a bit of money out of the situation. They haul Joseph out of the cistern and sell him (for the going rate) to the Ishmaelite traders, who are on their way down to Egypt. A bit of subterfuge with the easily identifiable coat that Jacob had made for Joseph, and the plot is concluded. It appears that all the ends are tied up and all the incriminating evidence is disposed off. The brothers are rid of Joseph and their father actually believes that it’s all been an accident. The traders, meanwhile, have taken Joseph to Egypt and sold him to one of the officers of the royal guard. That’s where we’ll leave it this week.

This story of Joseph is probably the first properly developed story in the Bible. We find out more about him in these verses than we do some of the other characters and there is a very cleverly written plot. In this first chapter there is a sense of foreshadowing. It’s all set up really well, with little clues and so on that will prove vitally important in the later development of the story. We’ll see in the next few weeks how this all fits together.

But, as with so much of these Hebrew scriptures, which we now call the Old Testament, there is a much larger scale foreshadowing. Some people refer to it as a system of “types”, whereby incidents and characters in the Old Testament point forward to things in the New Testament. And there have been many parallels drawn between the character of Joseph, the apparently innocent victim of others’ malice, and Jesus Christ himself. Not least we can see it in the family relationships described here. Jesus, like Joseph, was despised by his brothers. There is sense in which that is true literally. According to the gospels, Jesus’ earthly brothers, the sons of Mary and Joseph, though he was mad and tried to get him to change his ways. But in *John 1:11* we read that when Jesus came into our world he was rejected by his own people. The people to whom he had come, the people of Israel, descendants of Jacob, despised him. They did not like what he said nor who he was. And that’s been the case with all peoples ever since then. They shunned him and tried to find ways of disposing of him. Eventually, of course, they nailed him to a cross of wood because they got so fed up with his message.

But although Joseph was despised by his brothers, he was loved by his father. And so was Jesus. On two significant occasions during his earthly ministry, God actually spoke from heaven to confirm his love for him. As he came up out of the water at his baptism, and as he was bathed in transfiguring light on the mountain top, Jesus, and those with him, heard God speak words of affirmation and love. As Jacob was unable to intervene when Joseph’s brothers set out to kill him, so God the Father did not intervene when Jesus was arrested and nailed to the cross – but both Jacob and God loved their sons and made no secret of it.

Vaguely interesting stuff, you may be thinking; but so what? What’s that got to do with me and my life today? Well, as always, these stories of the characters of the Old Testament may well be of some interest

to some people because of what they tell us about the characters themselves. But they are of vital interest to everyone because of what they tell us about God. Whether we are looking at the story of Joseph or Moses or David – or anyone else, for that matter – the most important aspect of it is the God behind it all, and the plan that God has which is being worked out through the lives of those people.

As we'll see – or as you already know, if you know the story of Joseph – this seemingly disastrous beginning to his life led on to much better and greater things. God's plan was unfolding through the life of this irritating person. What begins as the story of the pampered son of a wandering herdsman in an obscure corner of the world many centuries ago becomes part of the great tapestry of God's love which embraces all men and women in all ages. Without the events of *Genesis 37*, God's purposes would not have been fulfilled as they were. We'll look at that in more detail in a couple of weeks' time.

But even more wonderful is the plan that God was going to enact through his own Son, Jesus – a plan to bring liberation and hope to everyone on earth. This, as Paul famously told King Agrippa, was not some little plot "*done in a corner*", but a gloriously open secret. It was the plan that God had to bring you and me salvation, release from the consequences of sin in our lives. Jesus died so that you and I could know forgiveness and be reconciled to God for all eternity. Joseph, the spoiled brat of Shechem played a small part in the epic unfolding of that plan, but you and I also have a part to play in it.

If you want to be involved in God's plan, the invitation is there for you to accept. God invites you to put your faith in him, to trust him for the whole of your eternal future. Jesus died so that you could be forgiven. Jesus went to the cross to bear your sins. How will you respond? When Joseph was thrown into the waterhole, the future looked bleak. He had no way of knowing what would happen to him in the short or the long term. You do not know what will happen to you in the short term – but with God you can have the strength to face it. And with God you can be sure what will happen to you in the long term: there is an eternity with God in heaven waiting if you are prepared to put your faith in him. Like Joseph, you may not know what lies ahead, but you can trust in the God of miracles to lead you through it.