

# God's dreams for a dysfunctional family

## Genesis 37:1-11

If God is there, why is this happening to me? When I look at the world and what's unfolding, what's God doing? Is there a plan? A purpose? A point? If He loves us, where is He, what is He up to?

People have asked these questions for thousands of years, and I know fine well we're still asking them today. The questions tend to come up when things happen that feel beyond our control, and we wonder whether God is in control of it, and if He is, what He can possibly mean by the way He's managing things.

So between now and the summer (with a break in April for Easter), we're going to look at Genesis chapters 37-50. The story of Joseph. Long before it was the plot line for plays on stages in schools and in the West End, it has taught God's people over the centuries about the *sovereignty of God*.

And at this point, in the lives of those in our church family and the community around us, it seems like we need to discover more about the sovereignty of God. To say that God is 'sovereign' is part of this message in the Bible that God is King. It is to say: God rules.

There's three sides to the biblical idea of 'sovereignty.' It means that God has *ownership*. All things belong to Him: Heaven and Earth and everything in them, including you. And in a special, permanent, forever adopted way; all those belonging to God's family through faith in His Son Jesus.

It means also that God has *authority*. What happens in the world, and what happens in our lives, is up to Him. He's the Creator, we're the creations. What will be is up to Him. Not us. Not chance or fate. It's His call.

And it means that God has *control*. There's nothing that happens that surprises, frustrates, confuses or blindsides God. Instead, He works everything together to bring about His purposes for us and for this world - purposes that are *good*, which we know because Jesus came to this world and showed us that 'good' is who God is.

And it's this third aspect - that God is in *control* - that we're especially taught in the story of Joseph. As we go through the story, we'll find out how that idea gets introduced, challenged, and wonderfully confirmed in the final act. So if

God being in control is something that you're ready to wrestle with, join us as we journey through the story of Joseph.

Now, I say the story of *Joseph*... but actually, in v.2, we read that 'this is the account of *Jacob*. That's Joseph's father. And he's here in this chapter, but he's clearly not the main character in the story in the chapters to come. In what sense is this *Jacob's* story, rather than Joseph's?

This verse is a reminder to us that this story we're going to read is part of the bigger story in the whole book of Genesis. The story of how God made the world, how we broke it and introduced sin into it, and how the consequence of that would be the destruction of the world and all its people.

The story of how the world re-emerged and people started again - but they still kept sinning and falling deeper and deeper into a life that looked more like death when they tried to forge their own identity. The story of how God put His plan into action to respond to all this.

The story of God choosing a man called Abraham, and telling him, 'Through you and your family, I'm going to bless all the families of the world. Through your family, I'm going to rescue a people to belong to me.' The story of Abraham responding to that with trust and obedience - taking God at His word, no matter what he left behind, and no matter how unknown what lay before him.

The story of Abraham messing things up and hurting people along the way, because he was a sinful human being like everyone else. The story of God blessing him and working through him anyway, because God was committed *to* Abraham's family and working *through* Abraham's family.

The story of how the plan continued after Abraham - through his son Isaac, and not his older brother Ishmael. Through the child that God had promised, not the one that Abraham had brought about through his own efforts because he lost patience in the promise.

Through Isaac and his wife Rebekah, through their son Jacob, not his older brother Esau, who gave up his inheritance as the one to carry on God's family and plan for a bowl of stew. Through this scoundrel called Jacob, who plots and schemes, who toils hard to win a wife and gets tricked into marrying her sister; and who toils hard again to get the girl he really wanted *as well*.

This is the story of men and women growing up, living, lying, loving, fighting, messing up, breaking their families, chasing dreams, getting it right, getting it wrong. It's the story of God breaking in to speak to those He'd chosen for His plan through this family, and of them listening, trusting, believing, dreaming and wrestling with God.

It's the story of God calling a family to belong to Him, and placing His hope for this world in them. Despite their frailty, smallness, pettiness and ordinariness. To these people God said, 'I will be your God, and you will be my people. And I will bless the families of the Earth through you.'

As we begin Joseph's story, we're really continuing Jacob's story - Jacob, who was renamed 'Israel' by God when Jacob wrestled with Him in Genesis 32. 'Israel' means 'one who wrestles with God.' It's the name we read in our passage in v.3. It's the family whom God won't let go, and who won't let go of God - even when that hold puts you out of joint.

The story we're about to read is one of life, ambition, and betrayal... of slavery, prison and death... of dreaming, power and responsibility... of famine, crisis and moments of truth in broken relationships in that family.

How will the sovereign God bring about His plan to rescue the world through all that?

*Who or what is in control in your life? In this world?*

Just read vv.2-4, and you find that this family that God has chosen isn't exactly a model one. In fact, it's highly dysfunctional. Jacob has his children by four women - Leah and Rachel and their servants Zilpah and Bilhah. There's a recipe for a soap opera's worth of disaster already.

We read about Joseph maligning his brothers to his dad - the Hebrew word gives the sense of a hostile intent behind it, it's not just a goody-two-shoes telling on the boys for something they really deserve. He wants to put them down.

We read about Jacob favouring Joseph over his other brothers, because he was born to Jacob in his old age. Joseph was the second youngest, actually - his younger brother Benjamin was born to the same mother, Rachel - the woman that Jacob loved best. But Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. Joseph was the first born to Jacob's first love.

Jacob's learned nothing from the pain and trauma caused by his mother's favouritism towards him as a child, or his favouritism towards Rachel over her sister Leah. Or at least, if he knows it in his head, and says to himself, 'I'm never going to be like my parents were' or 'I won't be like I used to be,' it hasn't actually changed his behaviour in any way.

So he gives Joseph this coat. On stage, it's been a 'coat of many colours' (ranging from the product of a primary school mum's sewing machine to a professional costume in theatre land). But the Hebrew is not clear as to the nature of this coat. It's translated 'richly ornamented' here in the NIV, but as the footnote says, the meaning is not really clear.

Some scholars think that it means a 'long coat / coat with sleeves,' which suggests that whilst the other brothers are the labour, Joseph is the management. Most scholars agree that the giving of the coat bestows not just favouritism, but also a higher status to Joseph than his brothers.

And of course the brothers don't like it. In fact, they 'hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.' But who is 'him' in that sentence? It's probably Joseph they're directing this to. But the Hebrew allows for it being Jacob, the father of the house himself, that the brothers are fuming with and talking to only with a scowl on their faces.

There's a couple of stereotypes for us to overthrow as we read these verses. First of all, *the human characters of the Bible are not perfect*. Well, there is One. Jesus is the only perfect human, the only One who lives a truly good life. Every single other human character is very far from perfect. They're sinful, messed up, broken people like me and you.

We tend to read their stories in the Bible as if they are role models. We read the sentence, 'Joseph/Moses/David did this' as if our next thought should be, 'so that was the right thing to do and we should be like them.' But their stories don't tell us that we should copy the heroes of old blindly. There's at least as much in there about learning from their mistakes - what *not* to do - as there is about successful choices in living for God.

Don't get me wrong, Joseph is a great example to us of a life of God-trusting integrity. Along with Daniel later in the Old Testament, there's probably no other character in the whole Bible short of Jesus who comes closer to what a life like this looks like. But even with Joseph and Daniel, there are sins and mistakes. So let's not read their lives (or any Christian's you know today, for that matter) as if 'they did this so that must be what God says is right.'

Sometimes the Bible passages tell us when something was ‘pleasing in the eyes of the Lord’ or when ‘it made the Lord angry.’ But a lot of the time, the narrator reports things without commenting on right and wrong. Because actually, the stories are more about what God was doing in the midst of the everyday reality of people’s lives, triumphs and failures.

So read the stories for what they are - sinful human people experiencing God taking them, rescuing them and using them as He found them. And that leads me to - I hope - encouraging you as we overthrow the second stereotype.

*God loves, calls, saves and works through dysfunctional families.* In just vv. 2-4 of Genesis 37, we read about family members maligning each other, not speaking to each other, vying for position. We see them expressing favouritism, jealousy, hate and rejection. We see a man repeating the mistakes that his father and mother made, despite himself. We see red-blooded, bitter relational humanness.

Does this sound like your family? Ah, come on... it *does*, doesn’t it? I don’t think I know many families where at least some of this stuff isn’t there. Where in the extended family at least, there isn’t one relationship blunted by awkward silence, forced smiles or outright dislike.

A neighbour explained to me recently, ‘we’re not a church going family ourselves.’ ‘Church going family,’ I thought to myself. What’s one of those? Is it a nice polite one that’s well dressed, always smiling and super-lovely to each other? Is that what *you* think?

I hope that someone here today listens to this, or someone hears or reads this online, and hears this: that those gathered here in our church haven’t arrived this morning after making breakfast in bed for each other and helpfully commenting on how nice each other’s hair looks. We’ve rolled in here, most of us, fresh from shouting for the bathroom, yelling at the kids and arguing with each other about getting here on time or what’s for lunch or whatever...

Sometimes we come into this place thinking that we don’t fit because we’re the only ones who don’t look like we’ve got it together. We’re the only messy, messed up family. But we’re not. Look around you. It’s them too. Them, who smiled when they came through the doors like you did. And it’s you, and your family, if you’ll just accept one thing: *God loves, calls, saves and works through dysfunctional families.*

Sometimes we come into this place (or maybe you're still watching us from a distance), and we think that the deep pains, sapping tensions, warped family trees and the brokenness and shame in our tribe isn't 'churchgoing' material. We're not that kind of family.

Well, open your eyes. Neither are Jacob and his lot. Neither, for that matter, are *any* of the families in the whole book of Genesis - a book filled with dysfunctional families and God's loving choice to adopt them. So come - you and your family - and be with us, and be with God. Just as you are.

None of this means that God isn't interested in restoring, renewing and reshaping your family. In fact, we're going to see in Joseph's story just how God does that with this lot in amazing, unexpected, moving ways. It just means that you don't have to 'get your family's act together' before you can be part of God's family in the church. You just need to accept the loving truth that *God loves, calls, saves and works through dysfunctional families.*

*Pause for silent reflection / prayer*

Now then - what about these dreams that Joseph has? Joseph feels the need to share with his family about two dreams in vv.5-11. And although he doesn't interpret the dreams (something he'll become famous for doing for others later on), it's easy enough for his family to get the message - that Joseph is going to rise to authority over the rest of his family.

Here's what I wonder though - was it right or wrong for Joseph to share these dreams with his family? The text doesn't comment either way. Neither do we get told what Joseph's motives were in sharing the dreams. Was he showing off? Was he relishing the brothers' reactions so much that he said it twice? Or did he feel compelled to share the dreams, as if it was something he *had* to do no matter the rejection he would suffer?

*Was it right or wrong for Joseph to share the dreams? Why?*

Does God speak to us in dreams today? How do we know? How do we weight *that* up? Well, here's some thoughts from the passage that I hope will help.

This passage is teasingly ambiguous about whether these dreams are the revelation of God, or just the fantasies of a boy who's been given a nice coat and told by his daddy that he's better than his brothers. Earlier in Genesis

where God reveals Himself in a dream, He speaks, and we're told clearly: 'God spoke in this dream and said...' Not here, though.

If we get dreams and we have a sense that God might be speaking through them, how do we know? Well, we live with the same ambiguity about that. Ultimately, we only see that these dreams were God-given at the end of Joseph's story when God brings about their fulfilment in bigger and better ways than even the dream suggests. *That's* when you'll really know - when the implausible, unlikely, unpopular dream comes true.

But it's only because Joseph *did* share the dreams at the start that we can look back with wonder at the end and say, 'Wow! God really did show us that this is what was going to happen!' And that makes me think that if there's enough stirring us to think that God might be placing something on our minds and hearts, we should default towards sharing that - at least with church leaders whose job it is to discern.

There are some questions to help us sift the God-given vision from the late-night-cheese-inspired nonsense. Firstly, is the dream repeated? Joseph had this experience of a repeated dream - slightly different in its content the second time, but unmistakably the same message. The same thing happens to Pharaoh later on in the story. A repeated message from different angles.

For us as a church, we might be wise to listen for the repeated riffs we're hearing. Maybe the same person keeps getting the same message in different ways. Maybe more than one of us is getting the message in different ways, without knowing it.

Another helpful question is, 'Is there a compulsion to share the dream?' Joseph shared the dream with his family even when they'd made it clear before he opened his mouth that it wasn't welcome. He even dared to open his mouth a second time to share the second dream, although he understood perfectly well the rejection he'd experience.

Now this might be because Joseph was being a brat, or it might be because Joseph was compelled that he needed to share the dream that he had been given. Whether it was arrogant or necessary for Joseph to share his dreams, this much is true - it only impacted on other people because he shared what kept coming his way. So, bottom line is... if you have a sense that God is speaking to us about something - please tell our Leadership Team - maybe *especially* if it's going to be unpopular!

I expect that, like me, most of us don't have that gift, won't be able to relate to that experience or have use for those guidelines (although one day you might get a surprise!) But all of us can learn something from the passage here about how we *react* to the idea of a dream from God being shared with us.

The brothers 'hated Joseph all the more' because of his dreams. We're told that twice - once in v.5, before Joseph even describes the dream to them, and then once in v.8 because of what Joseph had described. The brothers rejected Joseph both before and after hearing his dreams. That means, they didn't just despise him for what the dreams were about, but also for the fact that he felt he needed to share these dreams with them at all.

But Jacob's reaction, in vv.10 and 11, is a little different to the brothers. Jacob 'rebukes' Joseph for what he hears. A rebuke is not a rejection of a person. It's acting on your belief that you need to offer correction to someone that you love and accept, and you still want to walk alongside. 'Joseph, I love you, and I'm still here with you - but I think what you've said is wrong.'

Here's the other thing about Jacob's reaction - he didn't like what he heard in this dream. But he didn't write it off, either. He 'kept the matter in mind. That's what Mary did when shepherd strangers burst in after she'd given birth to tell her that they'd had a message from God that her Son would be a Rescuer and a King to them. It's what she did again twelve years later when her boy was found in the Temple talking about God revealing that *He* was Jesus' Father.

She 'treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.' She 'kept the matter in mind.' Wiser to do that with the things that God's people tells us He is revealing to them. Their dreams may turn out to be nothing more than a combination of the influences on a person's psyche that week. But it may turn out to be God telling us something.

The bottom line here is, 'let's just hear it, and see how it plays out...' Because our future sense of how in control God really is may soar when we can look back to today's dreams as shared markers that He gave us to point towards tomorrow's amazing things.

And that confidence in God's control - although we've got many more answers to search for about that in the weeks ahead - that's something that He desires for our dysfunctional families to discover. That much He has made perfectly clear.