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SHATTERED DREAMS?

(*Genesis 37*)

Duke Snider was a star centerfielder for baseball's Brooklyn (later, Los Angeles) Dodgers in the 1950s. He had been asked to do a commercial for Pittsburgh Plate and Glass. PPG had developed a new shatterproof glass and the idea was to have Snider swing his baseball bat at the super-glass to show how unbreakable it was – it was even immune to the mighty swing of the Dodgers' home-run hitter. Arrangements are all in place in the studio; Snider appears in uniform, and, on cue, takes his best swing. Explosion! Glass flying! The director and a cameraman are injured from flying bits. The bigwigs in the office didn't want to believe this. They'd hit this glass with the heaviest hammers and a steel ball. So they arrange for Round Two. Snider decided he would restrain his swing somewhat this time. The director was wearing a welder's mask for this 'take.' Snider took his half-swing with the same shattering result.¹ He was paid but the 'commercial' was ditched.

1. Duke Snider with Bill Gilbert, *The Duke of Flatbush* (New York: Kensington, 1988), 252-53.

In our text Joseph's dreams seem to meet the fate of PPG's glass; his dreams seem to turn into nightmares. They lie, apparently shattered, with Joseph in Egypt; his robe baptized in blood, and Jacob committed to a lifetime of mourning.

What are we to make of Joseph's 'dreams'? The verb and the noun occur thirteen times in our chapter. Our best clue comes from how dreams function in the book of Genesis. In chapter 15 Yahweh communicated his word to Abram in a vision (v.1), not a dream. But then there are dreams in chapters 20, 28, and 31 (twice in this last, vv. 11, 24) – in each case God speaks in them. This point is not explicit here in chapter 37. However, in chapters 40 and 41 Joseph tells Pharaoh that interpretations belong to God and that, through the dreams, God was showing Pharaoh what was going to take place. In the book of Genesis dreams communicate God's word or God's plans, so we should understand the dreams here in chapter 37 that way as well. Joseph's dreams express Yahweh's plans for Jacob's family. So ... when we talk of 'shattered dreams' in Genesis 37, we don't mean something like: don't allow anyone to take away your dreams. Rather the dreams here convey the plan of God – but it looks like that plan will be shattered, like God's 'dream' hasn't a chance of coming true. The plan and 'dreams' of God can often look like impossible nonsense, but the testimony of the whole 'Joseph story' is that God keeps the dreams he gives intact and makes them come true. But we can't see much of that in Genesis 37. So, we have to step back, consider this text on its own, and ask what *this text* tells us about God's ways.

First, this passage tells us that **once you begin to see the people of God, you begin to grasp the grace of God**. How thick the animosity is here. Here is a tangled mess of sin,

stupidity, strife, and sorrow.² Here is blatant favoritism on Jacob's part (vv. 3-4), intensifying hatred on the brothers' side (three times their hatred is noted, once their jealousy, vv. 4, 5, 8, 11),³ and perhaps indiscretion on Joseph's part in candidly reporting the dreams (vv. 5ff.). Surely Jacob was aware of the brothers' animosity, so why would he send Joseph alone into the jaws of that beast (vv. 13-14)? Add to this the viciously murderous designs (vv. 18-20), the calloused profiteering (vv. 27-28), the convincing deception (vv. 31-32, which, apparently, Reuben agreed to join), the hypocrisy of the family 'comfort' (v. 35), and the unrelieved grief (v. 35b) – and one has a major morass to the nth power. Note too the calculated 'your son's' (v. 32), not 'our brother's.' What do you think of the 'covenant people'? Don't they make a grand impression?

Paul Tripp tells of a Saturday afternoon at home when his sixteen year-old son, on a whim, dyed his hair green, appearing before Paul with hair like 'shredded green plastic wrap.' What galled Tripp about it was that a local church was finishing up a study on the family and had invited Tripp, as a family counselor, to visit on Sunday, speak at the conclusion of

2. For the record there are some debatable points in the text. First, most take the 'nasty report' (v. 2) as a bad report Joseph brings about the brothers. But John Currid contends that the literal 'their [nasty] report' is the brothers' slanderous report *against Joseph* (*A Study Commentary on Genesis*, 2 vols. [Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2003], 2:185-86). Second, though most take the last of verse 4 of the brothers' inability to speak kindly to Joseph, Nahum Sarna proposes it should read, 'they could not abide his [Joseph's] friendly speech' (*Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 256). Finally, interpreters differ on how to regard Joseph here – are we to think of his reporting his dreams as done in an arrogant or 'snotty' sort of way? It can be difficult to 'read' attitudes from a narrative report.

3. Bruce Waltke points out the irony of twenty-one uses of the word 'brother' in the chapter (*Genesis: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 498).

the study, and *bring his whole family along!* (I would have had him stay home. When asked if all of my children were here, I would say, 'Well, no; I have a son, but he's at home recovering from a slight head injury.') But you might imagine what Tripp at first imagined. Two ushers at the rear of the church. 'Who's the kid with the green hair?' 'Oh, he's the son of the family counselor speaking this morning.' 'Oh, really?' Tripp's initial thought was that when those people saw 'greenhead,' no one would listen to anything he himself might say – a real blot on his message and reputation.⁴

That's the problem with Jacob's family. Are they not a blot on Yahweh's whole Abraham-plan (Gen. 12:3b)? Will all the families of the earth really be blessed through this bunch of thugs? Don't you read Genesis 37 and ask, '*This* is the family God has called to be his people?' You look at these folks and ask, Why does God have anything to do with these people?

The only answer – if we may steal a text from Deuteronomy spoken to Jacob's future family – is that 'Yahweh set his love on you and chose you' (Deut. 7:7). Doesn't 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 tell us that when Jesus gathers his remnant he digs it out of Satan's landfill? 'But however much sin increased, grace was always greater' (Rom. 5:20b, NJB).

Again, chapter 37 taken by itself tells us that **once you hear the silence of God, you begin to face the mystery of God.** How do you 'hear' the 'silence' of God? Let me explain, at least in the case of Genesis 37.

Note the way the story is written. Do you see how everything seems to be in human hands? Whether special affection, ill reports, intense hatred, pasturing flocks, looking for brothers, being tossed into a pit, wheeling and dealing, and so on. And especially note the *non-mention of*

4. Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2002), 105-6.

God, his apparent ‘absence,’ this silence about him. There is no overt indication of his view of things. Genesis 37 is one of those ‘godless’ texts. This is very different from chapter 39, where there’s an emphatic emphasis on the Lord’s presence. But not here. None of God’s intimidating threats as in chapter 31 (to Laban), no comforting appearances of angels as in the first verse of chapter 32.

This ‘silence’ is a problem. If God is silent, if he does nothing (Ps. 28:1; 35:22; 83:1), we are without hope. But that’s the way it seems to be in this narrative – there is no intervention.

That was the way it was in early April 1940 when the Germans came to Oslo, Norway. The German navy had stalled, but parachutists and airborne infantry had made a landing at Oslo’s airport. William Shirer has said that a few cars parked on the airfield would have prevented a German landing. But no intervention was taken; the Norwegians just allowed it to happen.⁵ That’s how it seems in Genesis 37 – everything is just happening and there is no hindrance at all.

There’s a spillover here for Christian experience. Now it’s true, isn’t it, that sometimes our way is more like Genesis 39 – we are in various troubles but have a sense that the Lord is ‘with us’? But sometimes the believer’s experience can be more like Genesis 37 than 39. Times when God seems so removed, so absent, so ‘not there.’ Everything seems to be in human hands and not friendly hands – hands that seem to be able to do whatever they want. You may run into folks who dogmatically assure you that no believer will ever experience God this way. Have they read their Bible? It’s likely that sooner or later, and maybe often, you are going to have problems with

5. William L. Shirer, *The Nightmare Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 483.

God's ways. There are times when you go through a Genesis 37 kind of life. Once you 'hear' the silence of God you begin to face the mystery of God.

But Genesis 37 packs an additional testimony: **once you discover the hand of God, you begin to declare the praise of God.** If, in Genesis 37, God seems not to be 'there,' how do we know he *is* there anyway? Answer: by the small traces of his hand.

Let's back up and pick up the story. Joseph trekked from near Hebron to Shechem, roughly fifty miles, likely taking up to five days (v. 14b). Then he hears his brothers are in Dothan (v. 17), thirteen miles north-west of Shechem. Upon arrival, his brothers drop him into one of the pits (vv. 20, 22, 24).⁶ Salvation begins in verse 21, when Joseph is dumped into that pit at Reuben's insistence. That pit was one of salvation and Reuben was the savior (vv. 21-22). You may not think that being heaved into a pit is very 'saving,' but it's a lot better than the original recipe, which was to kill Joseph and *then* toss him into the pit. And the pit is dry (v. 24) – there is no water in it; Joseph might starve eventually but he won't drown. Now most pits are the pits, and this one is no exception, but at least it's dry. Have you ever thanked God that your 'pit' is a dry one? Sometimes we need to give thanks for the conditions in our pit.

And then half-way through his pita-bread sandwich, Judah has a brain storm (vv. 26-27). Judah is all heart and shekels. Why not sell Joseph to passing traders? Asiatic slaves were a frequent commodity in Egypt.⁷ But what a saving sale that was! Again, you may not think a slave deal is very saving. Admittedly, being sold like a used, defunct lawnmower does nothing for your ego, but it beats staying in a pit or being hauled out of it and finished off. Then, of course, there is

6. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Genesis*, 195.

7. Sarna, *Genesis*, 261.

the re-sale in verse 36 to Potiphar. But Joseph is alive, and after what was planned in verse 20, this is something. He is still on his feet – all because pits and chains are part of God’s ‘salvation.’ The pit and the sale are the works of God’s kindness, ultimately for Israel’s good – though they do not *appear* so at the time. It is difficult to have the savvy to see the goodness of God in ‘negative’ events, in events that could have been so much worse; hard to see his hand in what he has *not* allowed to happen.

This idea of ‘negative’ evidence brings to mind Tom Lennie’s description of conditions on the Isle of Lewis after the First World War. Many men who’d served in the Royal armed forces returned home bitter and disillusioned by what they had endured and by the atrocities they had seen. The influence of the evangelical church seemed weak in light of the suffering and poverty there that followed the war. It all seemed a fairly depressing picture of the spiritual state of Lewis at the time. But there were some who saw something else. One observer said that the vitality of religion was evident not in full churches but in empty prisons! Where else could you find a community of 30,000 people and such a deficiency of incarcerations?⁸ It was non-obvious, ‘negative’ evidence.

Sometimes we may be where Joseph is here. We can’t yet see ‘the end of the Lord’ (James 5:11, AV). But sometimes we can see the Lord perhaps setting the stage for his deliverance, arranging the props for his forthcoming act. Don’t despise God’s clues, the mere hints of his mercy. And when you see them, give worship and praise and thanks.

Shattered dreams? Not when they are God’s dreams, God’s plan. At the end of this story the dreamer is still

8. Tom Lennie, *Glory in the Glen* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009), 307-8.

on his feet, even though he's been sold like a side of beef there in Egypt. And no one had a clue that he'd been sent there by God. But God makes sure his dreams come true. That's why we have an empty tomb.