

## GOD'S CHARACTER-SHAPING WORK

### Genesis 37:1-28

*37 Jacob settled in the land where his father had been a sojourner, namely, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>This is the account of Jacob's family. Joseph, who was seventeen years old at the time, was feeding the flock with his brothers. He was just a young lad with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. Now Joseph brought the report concerning their bad conduct to their father. <sup>3</sup>Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because Joseph was the son born to him in his old age; so he made for him a multi-colored robe. <sup>4</sup>Joseph's brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; so they hated him and could not speak peaceably with him.*

*<sup>5</sup>Now Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers. Then they hated him all the more. <sup>6</sup>He said to them, I beg you, listen to this dream that I dreamed:<sup>7</sup>we were binding sheaves of grain out in the field, and my sheaf rose up and stood upright. Your sheaves came and bowed down to my sheaf. <sup>8</sup>His brothers said to him, Shall you, indeed, reign over us? Or shall you, indeed, have dominion over us? So they hated him all the more because of his dreams and because of his words.*

*<sup>9</sup>Joseph had still another dream, and he reported it to his brothers. Listen, I have had another dream. In this dream the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me. <sup>10</sup>He also told it to his father as well as to his brothers. His father rebuked him, and said to him, What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and brothers indeed come and bow down to the ground before you? <sup>11</sup>So his brothers envied him; but his father kept the thing in mind.*

*<sup>12</sup>His brothers went to graze their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup>Israel said to Joseph, Are not your brothers grazing the flock near Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them. And he said to him, Here I am. <sup>14</sup>And he said to him, Go now, see if all is well with your brothers and with the flock; then report back to me again. So he sent him off from the valley of Hebron and he came to Shechem. <sup>15</sup>A certain man found him there, wandering in the field; so the man asked him, For whom are you looking? <sup>16</sup>And he said, I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are grazing the flock. <sup>17</sup>And the man said, They have moved on from here; I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. <sup>18</sup>They saw him from a distance. Before he came near to them, they plotted against him to kill him. <sup>19</sup>They said to each other, Look, here comes that dreamer. <sup>20</sup>Come, let us kill him and throw his body into one of these cisterns. We will say, A wild animal has devoured him; then we shall see what becomes of his dreams.*

*<sup>21</sup>When Reuben learned about their plot, he tried to deliver Joseph out of their hand. He said to his brothers, Let us not take his life. <sup>22</sup>Do not shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but do not lay your hands on him. He said this so that he might deliver Joseph out of their hand and restore him to his father.*

*<sup>23</sup>When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the multi-colored robe that he was wearing. <sup>24</sup>Then they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty, there was no water in it.*

*<sup>25</sup>As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and*

*myrrh; they were carrying their cargo down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup>Judah said to his brothers, What profit is there if we kill our brother and cover up our crime? <sup>27</sup>Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let us not lay our hands on him; for he is our brother, our own flesh. His brothers agreed with him. <sup>28</sup>So when some Midianite merchants passed by, the brothers pulled him out of the cistern and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. They brought Joseph to Egypt.*

### **Genesis 50:15-21**

**50** <sup>15</sup>When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully repay us for all the evil which we did to him. <sup>16</sup>So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, Before he died, your father gave this command, <sup>17</sup>This is what you are to say to Joseph, I ask you now, please forgive your brothers' transgression and sin in doing you wrong. Now, we beg you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father. Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup>His brothers also came and fell down before his face; and they said, Look, we are your servants. <sup>19</sup>And Joseph said to them, Fear not; for am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, namely, the saving of many lives. <sup>21</sup>Now, therefore, do not be afraid. I will take care of you and your little ones. So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

### **Introduction**

Have you heard about the "Gator Aid" that was given to the enlisted men in a Florida training camp during World War II?

The daily training regiment for those GIs included a run through an obstacle course. On the final stretch of that endurance test the men had to grab a rope and swing across a broad, shallow pool of water. Under the blazing southern sun that water looked so inviting to the trainees, especially after having gone through the grueling obstacle course, that they soon developed the habit of dropping into the pond instead of swinging over to the other side.

To put an end to this practice and to assist them in landing on the far side of the pond, an enterprising lieutenant supplied the recruits with his own version of "Gator Aid" long before a beverage by that same name was marketed. The lieutenant's "Gator Aid" involved a real live 'gator. He trapped a large alligator and deposited him into the pool. From then on the trainees had no trouble completing the swing over the pool and landing on the far side, a healthy distance from the water's edge. (*Our Daily Bread*, 7/3/97)

The trainees did not appreciate the 'gator being relocated in their former swimming hole, but the lieutenant reminded the recruits that they were not there for recreation, but for training. In order for that training to be accomplished, the

lieutenant found it necessary to introduce challenge and adversity in the form of a real live alligator. In a similar way, many times the LORD will employ adversity to shape the character of His covenant people. The history of the sons of Jacob is a case study of God's character-shaping work.

Because it is an expression of His covenant love for you, accept God's character-shaping work in your life.

## I. Let Us Accept God's Character-Shaping Work, Because We Need It

Joseph brought to his father *"the report concerning his brothers' bad conduct"* (Gen. 37:2.) The fact that such a report could be circulated about them indicates that there must have been some basis for it. Contrast their case with that of Daniel as recorded in Daniel 6:4,

*Then the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs. But they could find no instance of negligence or corruption, because he was faithful—he was guilty of neither negligence nor corruption.* (Dan. 6:4)

Next we are told of the brothers' attitude toward Joseph: *"they hated him and could not speak peaceably with him"* (Gen. 37:4.) Their hatred was motivated by jealousy, *"his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, so they hated him"* (Gen.37:4,) and by envy (Genesis 37:11) Mitigating circumstances reveal character and test character—it was hard for the brothers to see their father make Joseph the special object of his loving favor and to have Joseph recite to them the divinely given dreams of pre-eminence that were granted to him—but such circumstances do not excuse any lapse of character.

The remainder of Genesis 37 relates how the brothers' hatred of Joseph expressed itself in their actions. They conspired to kill him (vs. 18-20)—but in the providence of God Reuben intervened to rescue his brother from death (vs. 21-22.) The brothers next proceed to sell Joseph into slavery (vs. 26-27.)

The following chapter (Genesis 38) gives an account of Judah's involvement with the Canaanite culture. Judah establishes a close relationship with Hirah, the Adullamite (vs. 1.) The text literally reads, *"Judah pitched his tent next to a man of Adullam"* ... so as to enter into friendly relations with him (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament, The Pentateuch* Vol.1, p.339.) Judah soon proceeds to marry the daughter of a certain Canaanite named Shuah (vs. 2,12.) Scripture notes that the first two sons of this unholy marriage met with untimely deaths as acts of divine judgment against them:

*Er, Judah's first-born, was wicked in the sight of Jehovah; therefore Jehovah took his life.* (Gen. 38:7)

*Judah said to Onan, Lie with your brother's wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother for her, so that there may be children for your brother. <sup>9</sup>But Onan knew that the children would not be his; so, when he had sex with his brother's wife he spilled his semen on the ground, in order that he might not provide children for his brother. <sup>10</sup>The thing he did was evil in the sight of Jehovah; therefore he took his life also. (Gen. 38:8-10)*

Some time after the death of his wife, Judah engages in an act of immorality with a woman he mistakenly assumes to be a pagan cultic prostitute; but in fact, it is his daughter-in-law, Tamar (vs. 15-16.) Verse 21 speaks of “*the prostitute,*” or, literally, “the consecrated woman;” i.e., she was consecrated to the Canaanite goddess of fertility (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament, The Pentateuch* Vol.1, p.341.) Here is a pagan perversion of the holy and the sacred.

Judah is forced to admit that he had not fulfilled his vow to Tamar to give her his third son, Shelah, to be her husband (vs. 26.) Apparently, Judah never even had any serious intention of keeping his promise to her, note Genesis 38:11,

*Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah has grown up. He told her this because he thought, He may also die, like his brothers. (Gen. 38:11)*—it appears that Judah was only making an empty promise to Tamar.

As Genesis 39 immediately resumes the account of Joseph in Egypt, picking up where Genesis 37 left off, it appears at first as though Genesis 38 is a “misplaced, unnecessary intrusion” upon the story of Joseph. But such is not the case. The Old Testament commentators, Keil & Delitzsch, point out the significance of Genesis 38 and the role it plays in the story of Joseph:

The ... sketch from the life of Judah is intended to show that the sons of Jacob were in danger of forgetting their sacred calling by making marriages with Canaanite women; and by so doing, putting themselves in danger of perishing in the sin of Canaan. Such would have happened had not the mercy of God intervened by leading Joseph into Egypt to prepare the way for the removal of the whole house of Jacob to that land. This protected the family from the corrupting influence of the manners and customs of Canaan just as it was expanding into a nation. (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament, The Pentateuch* Vol.1, pp.338-339)

Genesis 38 shows why it was necessary for God to send Joseph ahead to prepare a place for Israel in Egypt, and why it was necessary for the LORD to temporarily remove Israel from Canaan—which He did by means of the adversity of famine.

As you consider the lives of Joseph's brothers, you note that they are the covenant people of God. They give some evidence of God's work of grace in their lives: 1) Reuben intervenes to prevent Joseph's murder, and he does so for the sake of his

father (Gen. 37:21-22); 2) the brothers heed Reuben's rebuke and refrain from carrying out their intended crime of murder (Gen. 37:26-27); and 3) Judah acknowledges his sin with regard to Tamar and repents (Gen. 38:26.) But the brothers obviously are a long way away from a godly, mature Christian life. In order to produce the needed sanctification and deliver them from evil, the LORD introduces adversity into their lives, especially in the form of a great famine.

Let us accept God's character-shaping work, because we need it. Consider the testimony of the Psalmist:

*Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I observe your word. ...<sup>71</sup>It is good for me that I have been afflicted, so that I may learn your statutes. ...<sup>75</sup>I know, O Jehovah, that your laws are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. (Psl. 119:67,71,75)*

When we encounter adversity, let us prayerfully ask: What does God want me to learn? What does God want to change in my life? Is there a specific sin or sinful attitude the LORD is seeking to correct?

## **II. Let Us Accept God's Character-Shaping Work, In Order to Profit from It**

According to Genesis 41:57-42:2, the famine has a devastating effect upon Canaan, causing Jacob to send his sons to Egypt to buy grain:

*And all countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe throughout all the land. Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, so he said to his sons, Why do you stand here looking at each another? <sup>2</sup>He continued, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there, and buy for us from there; so that we may live and not die. (Gen. 41:57-42:2)*

Joseph recognizes his brothers—but rather than reveal himself to them, he accuses them of being spies (Gen. 42:7-9.) Despite the brothers' protests, Joseph commands that they be put into prison, and he keeps them there for three days (Gen. 42:14-17.) The treatment they receive convicts the brothers of their sin against Joseph:

*... they said to one another, We are truly guilty concerning our brother. We saw the distress of his soul when he begged us not to harm him, but we would not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us. <sup>22</sup>Then Reuben answered them, Did I not say to you, Do not sin against the child? But you would not listen. Therefore, I tell you, his blood is required of us. (Gen. 42:21-22)*

Simeon is left as a hostage in Egypt while the rest of the brothers are released to return to Canaan. When along the way they discover their money in their sacks, they become terrified and with a guilty conscience recognize the hand of God:

*“their heart fainted, and they turned to one another with trembling and said, What is this that God has done to us?”* (Gen. 42:28.)

As the brothers are returning home from their second trip to Egypt, Joseph instructs his steward to overtake them and, “discovering” his royal goblet planted in their grain sacks, to accuse them of theft. Upon returning to Egypt, the brothers’ response, expressed in the words of Judah, is, *“God has uncovered the iniquity of your servants”* (Gen. 44:16)—that is to say, God is exposing and bringing to judgment their iniquity. Note: The brothers are not admitting guilt to the charge of theft, as becomes clear from their response to Joseph recorded in Genesis 44:7-8,

*... they said to Joseph, Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing. <sup>8</sup>Look, the money that we found inside the mouths of our sacks, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan. How then can it be that we would steal silver or gold from your master’s house?* (Gen.44:7-8)

On the contrary, they are convicted of their sins against Joseph. But they still do not openly acknowledge their sin. When Judah recites the family history he mentions the death of their brother, but lets it appear that he was, in fact, killed by a wild beast (Gen. 44:20,27-28.)

Joseph finally reveals his true identity to his brothers: *“Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, Cause everyone to leave my presence. So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers”* (Gen. 45:1.) The brothers’ initial reaction is to be *“terrified at his presence,”* so much so that they were speechless (Gen. 45:3.) But Joseph calms their fears by assuring them of God’s good purposes in the whole affair (Gen. 45:5-8,) and he kissed all his brothers (Gen.45:15.) Joseph’s display of mercy helped his brothers to confess and deal with their sin.

Joseph then instructs them to return to Canaan, report to their father that he is still alive, and bring Jacob down to Egypt. Genesis 45:27 records that they reported to their father *“all the words of Joseph”*—thereby acknowledging to their father their sin.

After the death of their father, the brothers approach Joseph and humbly request his forgiveness (Gen. 50:17.) Joseph graciously grants them forgiveness, acknowledging that he may not take vengeance against them: *“Joseph said to them, Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God?”* (Gen. 50:19.) In responding as he does, Joseph is bearing testimony to the fact that man does not have the right to take justice into his own hands, that prerogative belongs to God, as the Apostle Paul writes to the Romans, *“Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but allow God to express his wrath, for it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the LORD”* (Rom. 12:19)

In the case of Joseph's brothers, God used the adversities they encountered as a means of bringing them to an acknowledgement of their sin and to the gaining of full reconciliation with their brother—the LORD was using adversities for their sanctification.

Let us accept God's character-shaping work, in order to profit from it. Sometimes God's intention may be to secure the confession and repentance of a specific sin:

*When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long; <sup>4</sup>for day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. <sup>5</sup>Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to Jehovah. And you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Psl. 32:3-5)*

At other times God's intention may be to produce a greater degree of spiritual maturity:

*My sons, do not regard lightly the LORD's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you; <sup>6</sup>for the LORD disciplines those whom he loves ... he disciplines us for our profit, so that we may share in his holiness. (Heb. 12:5-6, 10)*

## **Conclusion**

As we consider the account of Joseph's brothers, may we understand the spiritual significance of their history: many times God will employ adversity to shape the character of His people. Recognizing it as an expression of His covenant faithfulness and fatherly love for us, let us accept God's character-shaping work in our lives and thereby profit from it to the glory of God, bearing in mind the exhortation of the writer to the Hebrews,

*No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Heb. 12:11)*