



*(Sermon begins with a screen door on the stage. Tags are randomly placed on the screen. The tags visibly represent some of the following issues that we focus on.)*

Let's think about messiness. Have you ever wondered how God can use a messed-up person: someone with doubts, someone with flaws, someone who struggles?

Have you ever wondered how you can move beyond the baggage your parents created in you: abuse, divorce, control, unrealistic expectations?

If you're a parent, have you ever wondered how God can undo the messy job you've done in raising your child: too strict, too lenient, schools weren't good enough, schools pampered them too much, tension between not giving them enough so they miss out on opportunities or you give them too much and they become entitled?

As you look at the tangled events in our world, have you ever wondered what God will do with this?

Our tendency is to focus on these messy problems. And when we do, we feel discouragement, fear, anxiety and hopelessness. Something in you says, "that's not the way to live." Instead, we should do...what? Ignore them? Stuff them? Try to hide them? No, that seems like the wrong approach.

Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 37. Our passage of scripture describes a very messy situation and points us toward an appropriate response when we're dealing with the messes of life.

**This is the account of Jacob's family line. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, 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 (v. 2).**

Joseph is tattling on his brothers here and exaggerating the facts in a negative manner. That's what the word "report" means. It's always used that way in the Old Testament. Now there's a tag that Joseph himself would be hanging on the screen. It's just one example of his own sin and immaturity.

**Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate 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 (verses 3–4).**

Favoritism! That's some good parenting! Jacob should know how favoritism breaks down a family. He experienced it with his brother Esau and he foolishly repeats the pattern. The robe given is no ordinary garment. The Hebrew word *passim*, is used in 2 Samuel 13:18-19 for the garment of princess Tamar. This was an outer garment designating royalty, power and authority.

**Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it" (verses 5–7).**

Since we're not farmers, let me try a modern version of this dream on you. We all meet up at the dog park and our dogs are playing. Then suddenly, my dog stands up on his hind legs and grows larger, while your dogs gather around and bow down to him. If I gathered you together and shared this dream with you, how would you react? You might think I'm weird! But the message is subtly clear. I see myself as superior to you and I believe that you will be bowing to me. That's exactly how Joseph's brother's understood the dream too.

**His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers (verses 8–9).**

Since it went so well the first time he shared another dream with them! Joseph could benefit from training on winning friends and influencing people! This immaturity and naïve self-centeredness is another tag representing Joseph's sin.

"Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." Now the bowing is directly to him. Where the first dream left some room for ambiguity, this dream is direct and offensive.

**When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" (v. 10).**

Seriously, his father must have thought! You arrogant little punk! I've spoiled you rotten. My love for my son has inflated his

opinion of himself to the point of ridiculousness. Hang another tag on the screen for bad parenting.

**His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind (v. 11).**

Jacob kept this in mind because he's had surprising and shocking dreams from God too. So, he's offended but cautious. Reasoning that if God could give me a dream, He could give one to my son too.

**Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them." "Very well," he replied. So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron. When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?" He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?" "They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams" (verses 12–20).**

Cisterns were all over the place. They often held water and were six to twenty feet deep. Narrow at the top and wide at the bottom—like the shape of a 2-liter bottle.

**When Reuben (the oldest) heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it. 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, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt (verses 21–25).**

Notice their callousness. They just had a physical, confrontational struggle with their brother. Now their brother is at the bottom of a cistern, probably yelling and screaming out to them, and they sit down to eat.

**Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our**

**hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed. So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt (verses 26–28).**

What might Joseph have been thinking at this point? Maybe relief because his brother were just pranking him and now he's being pulled out. Or dread...while we don't know specifically, this was a horrific roller coaster experience for Joseph.

The major action of our story is complete now. The remaining verses describe the reactions to these actions, the tragic consequences and accumulation of this family's sin.

**When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?" Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces." Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave." So his father wept for him (verses 29–35).**

This is like a powerful, emotionally charged ending to Episode 1 in a TV drama. Imagine these scenes coming and going on the screen. Reuben, the older brother, is standing over the pit, horror and failure written all over his face. I see him dropping to his knees, grabbing his shirt at the neck, focusing all of his strength to his arms and ripping his shirt apart; gripping his hair, weeping. Fully lost in his failure to lead his younger brothers.

Joseph, the younger brother, hands tied by rope, is being unwillingly dragged along by a camel. If he stops walking he'll simply be dragged. So he's forced to take one unwilling step after another. Confusion and betrayal are written all over his face. He's screaming at the top of his lungs, pleading with his brothers to come and get him. His brothers are not coming to get him. They are standing, with arms crossed, staring with indifference at their young arrogant brother. Joseph's confusion and betrayal turn to terror. Tears start flowing from his eyes, building from a few tears to uncontrollable sobbing and screaming pleas for rescue.

Jacob, the father, in the middle of a normal day is standing among the family's tents when his sons return. In rapid succession he notices the somber expressions on his sons' faces, then he's presented the blood-soaked multi-colored coat. While holding it in his hands, he begins to shake violently; he falls to his

knees, embraces the coat and weeps uncontrollably. His face is contorted in grief. His face and clothes are quickly covered with a mixture of dirt, tears, saliva and blood. He's lost in his pain. Any concern for dignity is gone. He's completely unaware of those around him attempting to comfort him.

The brothers, who've placed the dastardly deed behind them, have turned off their consciences. They are in pure action mode, trying to minimize the damage, calm dad down and get back to the routine of life. Their efforts are frustrated by their dad's continual refusal to be comforted. They are bringing him a blanket, a cup to drink, escorting him to his tent, trying to take the blood-soaked coat away, pat him on the back, get a verbal response from him. Nothing registers with Jacob. He is lost in his grief.

What a mess! The lives of Joseph and his family would fill this screen with tags of personal failure and family failure. Sin compounded and havoc everywhere.

**Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard (v. 36).**

This last sentence leaves us hanging. We're left wondering, what's going to happen to Joseph in Egypt? Did Jacob ever find out what his sons did? Did he completely lose it? Did the regret and shame crush the brothers over time? So many questions.

Most of us know the end of this story. We know that God used Joseph to save his family. We know that despite this mess, God's hidden hand was working. And this story is given to us to encourage us through our messy times. Don't lose perspective. Don't lose hope. God is always moving. Despite the mess, His hidden hand is always working. Corrie ten Boon wrote, "God has no problems, only plans. There is never panic in heaven."

Stand behind the screen. Remember, our tendency is to focus on these things, these tags. It's natural. But God is offering a better way to live. Instead of focusing on these which bring discouragement, fear and hopelessness, look through them and seek God's hidden hand. I say His hidden hand because often when you're going through it, it's difficult to see God's hand at work. But that does **not** mean he isn't. God's hidden hand is always at work. He is the Sovereign King! The Lord of all! The King of you and the King of me.

## **Two techniques to look through the mess and seek God's hidden hand**

### **Remember**

When we remember we break the cycle of being tag-focused. Remember your past. Analyze how your hardships and challenges have been used by God to bring about something great. The reflective life is a life worth living. Have you reflected on the potential reasons why God took you through your difficulties?

That doesn't mean you always have an answer. Some things are a mystery for our whole lives. And only when we get to heaven will we understand the reasons.

Remember the past of others. By seeing how God used the hard circumstances of others' lives we gain encouragement. This could be people you know personally and people in the Bible.

Consider Joseph. He was raised in hilly, rocky areas. It was a herding/shepherding culture of goats and sheep. (Remember the animal gift his dad gave Esau?) The culture of herdsman is very different from farmers. The survival of farmers depends on cooperation with others. The herdsman, in contrast, is off by himself in the hills. Their livelihood could be stolen in one night. He's under constant threat of violent animal attacks. (King David defended his sheep from a lion and a bear.) He has to be aggressive, making it clear from his words and actions that he is not weak. He has to be willing to fight in response to even the slightest challenge to his reputation. His reputation as being strong and violent is at the center of his livelihood.

Sociologists call this a "culture of honor." That explains a lot about this story we've read today and much of the Old Testament. Joseph's brothers were insulted by their younger brother's dreams. And in their culture, an insult justly deserved a violent act.

Now consider this—God needed a man in Egypt in a position of influence to provide protection and salvation to His people from the coming famine. Was Egypt a culture of honor? No. They were farmers. They were highly educated, socially sophisticated, politically savvy. Egyptian culture operated in subtlety, negotiation and compromise, exactly the opposite of Joseph's family.

I believe Joseph was taken out of his culture of honor and placed in the Egyptian culture in order to re-educate and re-form him. Without going to Egypt, Joseph would never have been the right man for the job. Unlikely beginnings build tremendous heroes.

Years and years later in our story, Joseph is able to look back and clearly see God's plan.

**And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you (Gen. 45:5).**

I can recall some difficult times in my past. Difficult people I wanted to get away from, but I couldn't. Difficult and messy circumstances I wanted to escape, but I couldn't. As I was talking with a very wise Christian man about my turmoil and frustration one day, he offered this perspective that I'll never forget. "Shawn, don't be so quick to run from the very things that God is using to form your character." Those words totally changed my perspective.

In essence he was telling me to look through the mess and seek God's hidden hand. God often moves us from the comfortable to the uncomfortable in order to grow faithfulness deeply into our souls. From that point on, I started leaning into my hardships, looking for God's hidden hand.

I hope this screen is a visual reminder for you that you can put in your memory bank, easily recalled when you find that you are focusing on a tag. The simple remembering is often enough to break the unhealthy cycle.

It worked for me this week. I was frustrated and getting worked up. And the Holy Spirit popped this thought in my head, "Shawn, you're focusing on the tag." As I stood there, I started to smile. The cycle was broken.

Remembering breaks the cycle of focusing on the tags. Living the Word gives us something new to focus on—God.

### **Live the Word**

When we Live the Word we naturally focus through the tags onto God's hidden hand. It consists of reading the Word, thinking about what we've read, praying about what we've read, and living according to what we've read.

*My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word* (Psalm 119:28).

*My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life. The arrogant mock me without restraint, but I do not turn from your law* (Psalm 119:50-51).

*If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, Your right hand will hold me fast* (Psalm 139:9-10).

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God* (Hebrews 12:1-2).

*Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me* (Psalm 31:3).

What have you primarily been focusing on lately? Wouldn't it be a relief to shift your focus to God's hidden hand? I hope, even as I've been talking this morning, that some of you have already felt the relief that comes when you shift your focus. Imagine how amazing it would be if all of us lived with the confidence that God's hidden hand is always moving; if all of us lived with that as our focus. I believe our lives would be better and, more importantly, everyone else would see the power of God in us.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*