

“The seeming silence of God is a serious problem for the suffering. The life of Joseph as exposed by Wayne Stiles will be a great encouragement to anyone who has had to wait to experience God’s answers. Wayne is intensely biblical and insightfully practical. He does his homework and he writes from the heart.”

—Dr. Mark L. Bailey, president of Dallas Theological Seminary

“The story of Joseph has always captured me, but I’ve never filtered it through the discipline of waiting. Wayne Stiles unpacks important and practical biblical truths that will help people finally embrace patient waiting as a lifestyle.”

—Mary DeMuth, coauthor of *The Day I Met Jesus*

“I hate to wait . . . and I’m not alone! We all want immediate answers, rapid-fire results, and instant fulfillment. But God operates on a different timetable. So how do we sync our watches with his? Wayne Stiles shares the answer in his fascinating study on the life of Joseph. You will learn much about Joseph. But more importantly, you will learn lessons about waiting on God that will help you develop a persistent, long-term faith.”

—Dr. Charlie Dyer, professor-at-large of Bible, Moody Bible Institute; host of *The Land and the Book* radio program

“In life, we all encounter the ‘best of times and the worst of times.’ My worse times are when I’m forced to wait—on a phone call, a stoplight, an important diagnosis, a long-awaited trip, you name it. Impatience is a taskmaster. And waiting on God? Well, that can be the most difficult wait of all. I gravitate to those people who help me learn how to wait with patience and perspective. Wayne Stiles is that kind of person, and his new book, *Waiting on God: What to Do When God Does Nothing*, is that kind of book. I was hooked when I read the title, and reading the book gave me insight, perspective, and even a little more patience when it comes to waiting on God. I recommend it highly. It’s well written, encouraging, and for many of us, even life-changing.”

—Mary Graham, former president of Women of Faith

WAITING *on* GOD

What to Do When God Does Nothing

WAYNE STILES



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2015 by Wayne Stiles

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stiles, Wayne.

Waiting on God : what to do when God does nothing / Wayne Stiles.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1845-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Joseph (Son of Jacob) 2. Waiting (Philosophy) 3. Providence and government of God—Christianity. 4. Trust in God—Christianity. I. Title.

BS580.J6S755 2015

241'.4—dc23

2015009269

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations labeled Message are from *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations labeled YLT are from Young's Literal Translation.

Published in association with MacGregor Literary, Inc.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



*For MATT and COURTNEY
And for OUR MOTHER—who waits no longer*

CONTENTS

Introduction 13

Part I Leaving Home

1. Living in the Gaps with God 21
2. When Dreams Turn into Nightmares 35
3. Satisfaction on Hold 57
4. Going Backward, Moving Forward 77

Part II Letting Go

5. Circling in the Round House 93
6. The Opportunity of Obscurity 109
7. The Surprising Place Where Waiting Begins 131
8. A Long Resolution 155
9. When Forgiving Someone Is Hard 181

Part III Coming Home

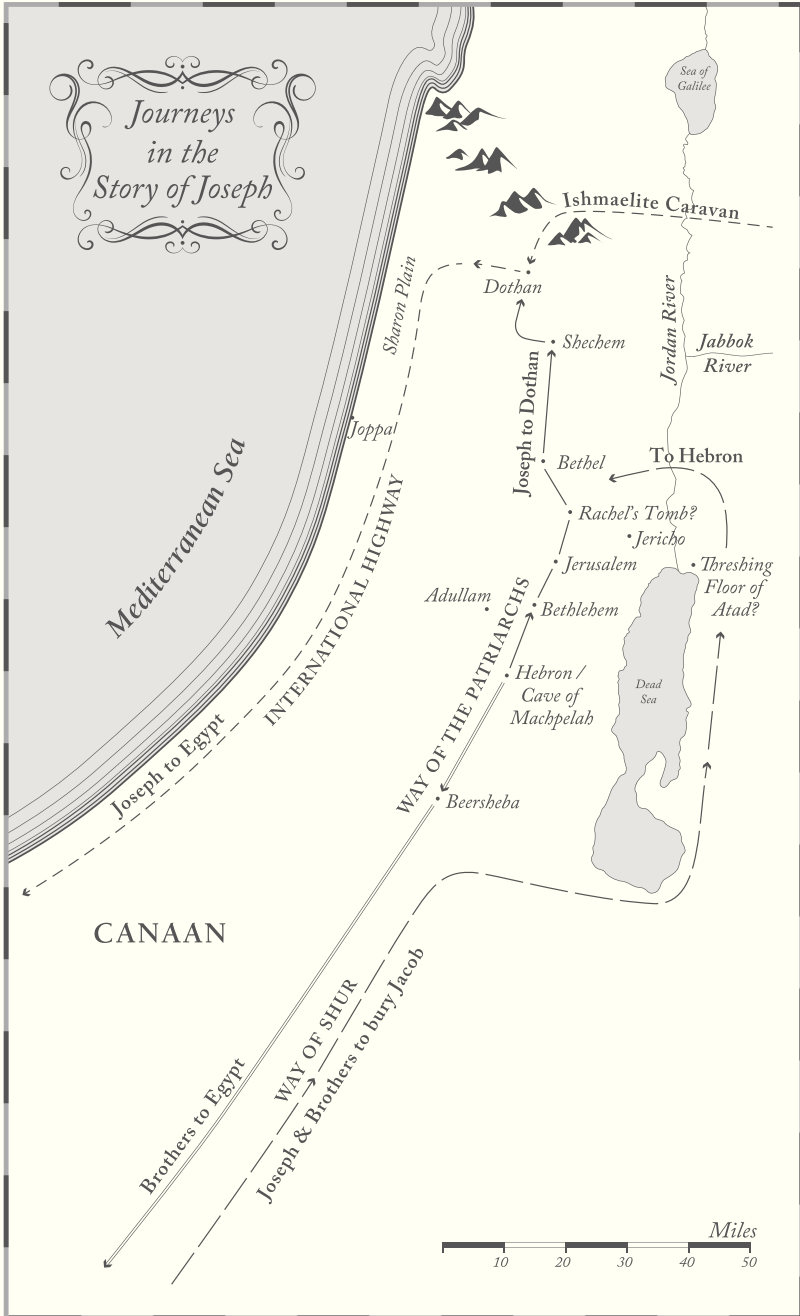
10. The Hope of Dying with Unfulfilled Dreams 205
11. What You've Been Waiting For 227

Acknowledgments 245

Note to the Reader 249

Notes 251

*Journeys
in the
Story of Joseph*



He sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. . . . Until the time that his word came to pass, the word of the LORD tested him.

Psalm 105:17, 19

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, my jaw dropped as I added up how much I had spent that year on highway tolls. This surprising revelation forced me to reexamine my early morning commute. I decided to take the access road to work each morning instead of the highway.

But I discovered I pay either way. I pay in time or in money. In angst or in cash. Because I seem to have more of time, I pay it at stoplights.

The worst is when the stale green light turns yellow and then stops me—with no one coming the other way. Almost as if the technicians who installed the street sensors cross-wired the lights so that the stoplight would change to red only when I approached. “Here comes Wayne; let’s make him wait!” As I sit at the empty intersection, I observe all these cameras and sensors with enough technology to ticket me when I run the light but not enough know-how to help me through the intersection in a timely manner.

Five in the morning. Pitch black outside. No crosstraffic. The light turns red.

So I stop. I have stopped just to stop. Dead silent. No one around. It’s just me and this long red light—plus seven cameras pointing my direction, daring me to cross the line. I imagine some officer

somewhere observing me through the camera, giggling at the poor guy stopped at the light just to stop.

But there has to be a reason, I reason. Maybe I'm stopped at this light because on the other side of town somewhere a light is green and someone else is cruising through. Maybe my light is red so that their light can be green. I have to believe there is a reason for the red light. A good reason, that is.

Because I trust God, I have to believe that waiting at the light in the dark with no other traffic serves a purpose. I can see no reason to wait—except for this light. So I wait.

As I sit there morning after morning (saving money, remember), I have time to think. Lots of time.

I began to make a mental note of all the reasons we wait: stoplights, waiting rooms, suppertime, difficult meetings, paydays, slowpokes in the fast lane, slowpokes in the slow lane, anticipating meeting someone we admire, a child's athletic practice, a person who needs to change but who stays blind to their fault, weekends, inspiration to write, that first kiss, those lab results, just the right moment to have a hard conversation, someone to take a breath so others can join the conversation, tax refunds, gardens to grow, investments to grow, Christmas morning, the mail, delayed air-planes, fast food, and public restroom lines. The list ends only when life does. We do a lot of waiting.

But the most difficult kind of waiting? *Waiting on God.*

Waiting on God usually means hanging on until he changes our circumstances—be they relational, financial, physical, or even spiritual. The trouble is, God seldom seems in a hurry.

At all.

What.

So.

Ever.

Instead, God often allows our circumstances to stay the same—or even to worsen—while he waits on *us* to change.

So . . . both God and we are in a waiting game, idling in neutral until someone moves first. We want God to change situations. God wants us to change in them. We want relief. God wants repentance. We want happiness. God wants holiness. We want pleasure. God wants piety. It's like a game of Ping-Pong. Or tug-of-war.

God always wins in this game.

It feels like we're kids again, playing "Red Light Green Light"—but this time with the Almighty. As soon as we start to inch forward, God spins around and shouts, "Red light!"

Most of the time, all we can clearly see are the systems in place to catch us running that red light. We see very few signals that indicate God is helping us move forward.

What's more, our efforts to attempt to speed up the process of waiting, or to sidestep it, can backfire on us. Like when eggs explode in the microwave—or oatmeal glops out of the bowl, leaving nothing to eat (I never understood why that happens). We can't microwave God's plans for us.

In the end, if we really knew the big picture, we too would want what God wants for us—and in the exact way and timing he wants it to occur. It's just that our pain often blinds us to that perspective. We see only the red light. God sees the purpose—his good and loving purpose—for the delay.

And although we cannot understand why the light is there, we do know what the red light means.

Wait.

For now, that's all we need to understand.

If God determines we're going to wait, believe me, we will. We will not hurry God. The waiting is a given. But *how* will we wait? Since we're going to wait anyway, we might as well wait well. Patience, then, is the art of waiting well.

The familiarity of the verse too often camouflages its comfort: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according

to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Although the theology of this verse gives us the end goal, it’s the getting there that bothers us. Seldom do we see what good could possibly rise from the ashes of pain we experience. We may “know” that it’s true, but how does that knowledge help us in the real world of pain? What do we do when it seems God is doing nothing?

Enter Joseph.



The story of Joseph reveals, better than most, how to wait on God. But while Joseph shows us how, it’s important to remember that the theme of his story in Genesis is not waiting on God. Rather, it is God’s providence—his sovereign direction in our lives.

Generally speaking, God’s providence in Genesis reveals his good purposes when other events—even evil ones—seem to threaten them. To get really specific, Joseph’s life shows how God preserved the line of Judah—the tribe through whom the head-crushing, serpent-slaying, seed-of-woman Messiah would come. (More about that later.)

So God is sovereign. That’s great. Super. But so what? That’s *his* attribute, not ours. We don’t have the luxury of eternity just yet. We’re stuck in time and space, with all their limitations and failings. How do we apply God’s sovereignty to Monday mornings?

The application of sovereignty shows itself in the life of a believer in a number of ways. It requires more than just pondering it. It even means more than worshiping God for his control (though that’s a great start). I’m convinced the primary way we apply God’s providence to our lives is by waiting.

We apply sovereignty by waiting on God.

Because the results of God’s sovereignty are delayed, waiting remains an act of faith. We believe results will occur one day. By

waiting on God, we affirm our belief in his providence. We trust his timetable. We hope in heaven. Waiting on God is inseparably bound to our belief in the sovereignty of God to bring about the good he promises.

So although Joseph's story on a theological level declares God's control and providence in our lives, on a practical level those grand truths are lived out in the trenches in time. Lots of time. That's where waiting comes in.

Waiting is often the application of many other, more abstract, biblical qualities of character. Hope, for instance, requires waiting. Faith is all about waiting. Patience and waiting are yoked together. Trust requires delayed gratification. In fact, run down your mental list of the fruit of the Spirit and see if waiting doesn't play into every single one of them (see Gal. 5:22–23).

As we journey through the life of Joseph in the chapters that follow, we will discover God is indeed working in our lives to accomplish his good purpose, even though we can't see how. We will learn to say, as Joseph did, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). That's God's providence at work. It's his sovereignty on display. But it took years of waiting to come to pass.

One reason most people love Joseph's life—aside from the fact that it's just a great story—stems from the fact that Joseph's life is a lot like ours. We see ourselves in his life. True, we do not live in nineteenth-century-BC Egypt, but we all have had to wait on God without much clarification as to why. We've all faced the disillusionment of failed expectations. We've struggled with temptation. We've had lousy families. We've felt like God had us on a shelf. We've had close relationships we thought were lifelong crumble. We've borne the weight of circumstances so crushing nothing but time and God's mercy could mend them. Joseph's life will show us how waiting on God relates to all of these.

Introduction

God revealed his plan for Joseph's future, but the Lord didn't reveal how his will would come about. Joseph's confidence had to be in God, not in God's plan. So it is with us.

We want God's plan so we can trust the plan. God hides the plan so we will trust him. So we will wait on him.

Joseph shows us how.

Part I

LEAVING HOME



Wayne Stiles, *Waiting on God*
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2015. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

1

LIVING IN THE GAPS WITH GOD

There are also many other things . . . which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.

John 21:25

The Bible doesn't tell us everything. Not even close. Oh sure, it tells us all we *need* to know. But it leaves out most of the details that scratch curiosity's itches. What did Jesus look like? Was Nehemiah bowlegged? Did Martha have a hysterical laugh? Was King David better looking than Brad Pitt? We'll never know.

That's because when we read the Scriptures, we see selected events. Even in the cases of individuals whose births and deaths are recorded—like Samuel or Samson or even Jesus—we read only of certain incidents. The Bible never shows the entire life of anybody.

Think about when someone asks you your own life story. What do you tell? No one has the time—and honestly, no one cares—to

hear all the details from your junior high school experience. When asked, you give just the highlights. Most likely that's all you remember anyway.

Occasionally, though, we encounter individuals who do remember the details. *All* of them. They'll drivel on about the color of the tablecloth, or how Uncle Bob is related to Holly's cousin, or the date and time Junior lost his tooth, etcetera, etcetera, and so on. During these insufferable eternities of benevolent listening, we find ourselves squirming in our seats, counting the floor tiles, hoping our cell phone would ring, or praying for the rapture.

Because time and especially patience are limited, most people really appreciate the bottom line. Frankly, I'm grateful the Bible gives it.

With too many details, we'd get lost in the weeds. We would see so much truth that we'd understand little of it. That's why the Spirit of God selected only certain events to record in the Bible. This has a practical reason as well. The apostle John wrote, "There are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). Practically, there just isn't space in any book—or all books—to record everything. So the author has to make decisions. It's not dishonest. It's just practical.

I have to smile at the brevity with which the Bible records Jacob and Esau's childhood. In one verse the twins are in the womb and in the next verse they are young men pursuing life. God usually records only the life-changing, pivotal events in the lives of those in Scripture.

By eliminating most events and giving us the bottom line, God exercises his prerogative to reveal what he wants us to know—to declare the nitty-gritty of his theme for a particular book or passage. The Spirit of God inspired Matthew, for example, to emphasize a different aspect of Jesus's life than Luke recorded. The same held true centuries earlier in the books of Kings and Chronicles—same

historical subjects, but the books had different purposes. Go even further back, and we see Deuteronomy restating the Law to a new generation of Hebrews.

In selecting some but not all events, God wasn't trying to smooth over embarrassing episodes or spin some revisionist history. His purpose was not to hide truth but to communicate particular truths. Most events, by necessity, had to end up on the editing floor.

That can pose a problem for us. Because the biblical narratives usually reflect only the turning points, we tend to see biblical lives as nothing but nonstop action. One only has to read the book of Ruth or about the life of Paul to see God's providence very involved in their lives. It's exciting stuff!

Our lives, by comparison, seem, well—*dull*. We'll go for years without a significant event. As a result, when we read the Bible we may assume it isn't applicable, or that God is angry with us, or that he sees us as insignificant—or worse, that we aren't even saved. We'll think, *God, why aren't you working in my life like you did in biblical days?*

When we hear exceptional testimonies at church or during a conference, the words can have the opposite effect than their intent. Instead of inspiring us to worship a God who works wonders, we find ourselves wondering, *Where are all the normal people? Or if that is normal . . . what's wrong with me?*



We need to remember that between significant events in the Bible lay large gaps of time. Weeks, months, years, sometimes even centuries. Even though the Bible omits the gaps, they are there. We can't forget that. We mustn't.

Most of life is lived in the gaps between great moments. The peaks seem to protrude only after miles and miles of death valleys. While the Bible reveals its characters in terms of their high points,

we, on the other hand, tend to evaluate our lives by the lousy week we just slogged through. We read and assess the Bible intellectually, but we evaluate our own lives emotionally. Sometimes that disconnect seems huge. And often, discouraging.

But gaps are normal. And expecting gaps is essential if we hope to maintain a life of faith as well as discern God's hand in our lives. Even Jesus's life had gaps—huge ones. We need to accept the gaps between great moments as God's will, but we also must learn how to live in these dull spaces.

Because most of life is gaps, we never know which days will prove significant. We have the obvious exceptions, of course, like births, graduations, weddings, and occasionally even deaths. But the list drops off after these few predictables. Only hindsight reveals the significant days of God's sovereign design. God sees them in advance.

Bored with these monotonous cracks that make up most of life, we try to fill them with significant experiences. We'll change hairdos. We'll change spouses. We'll take vacations. We'll set dates for the coming of Christ. Anything to avoid the humdrum sameness of life in the gaps.

But God arranges the gaps as well as the great days. The mundane days remain an essential path to the great ones. So what do we do in the gaps?

We wait on God.

We're not waiting on God for significant days. That never works. If we live for the hope of seeing significant days in life, we'll toss in the towel. The gaps are simply too long. We need a different goal: faithfulness rather than significance. Pascal wrote, "The strength of a man's virtue must not be measured by his efforts, but by his ordinary life."¹ If the Lord chooses to make a day significant, that's great. But that's his business entirely. Significant days are God's to ordain, not ours to arrange or manipulate.

It took Joseph's family a long time to learn that truth.



Even in a life that spans many chapters in the Bible, we see gaps. Joseph lived one hundred and ten years, but the Bible only focuses on his first forty-some. The majority of his life reads as a summary.

Because God selected which events of Joseph's life to record, we know God had his reasons for what we read. Part of that purpose we understand from Paul's general principle regarding the Old Testament: "Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). God selected events to give us hope while we wait.

Joseph came into the world as the firstborn of his mother, Rachel. Two phrases from her lips explain the meaning behind Joseph's name. She said, "God has *taken away* [*asap*] my reproach," and "May the LORD *give* [*yosep*] me another son" (Gen. 30:23–24, emphasis added). The Hebrew assonance between *asap* and *yosep* reveals that Joseph's name came not only from Rachel's experience but also from her hope—both firmly grounded in God. Joseph's very name reflected faith—a prayer—a hope in God to do more than he had done already. Although God would honor Rachel's request for another son, she also hoped to live to enjoy both boys. She wouldn't.

Think back to your first-grade year. Got the picture in your mind? You were about six or seven years old. Can you recall your schoolteacher? Or your best friend at that time? What was the class bully's first name? Can you draw the floor plan of the home where you lived? You probably remember more than you think—especially if any major events occurred at that time.

When I turned six my family moved across San Antonio to a different house. That meant a new school, new neighborhood, new friends, new teachers—new everything. I even had a new baby brother. To this day, when I return to those few suburban blocks, I

can point to places with hundreds of memories—all permanently etched in my mind. In fact, most of what I remember begins at age six.

That’s how old Joseph was when his family moved to Canaan from Paddan-Aram—a journey of about eight hundred miles (see Gen. 30:25–43; 31:41). Talk about a major move! The baby in the family, Joseph had an older sister and ten older brothers—half-siblings from one father and four mothers—all dwelling together.

Can you imagine Joseph’s father, Jacob, dealing with the angst of four wives? How about Joseph’s mother, Rachel, sharing her husband with three other women? Now add twelve half-siblings to the mix (and one more brother to come). The family would have made a great reality show. Or better still, a sitcom.

From our perspective, Joseph’s family of origin looks more like some aberrant cult than the seedbed for the tribes of Israel. The family had dysfunction smeared all over it. Their history included marital manipulation, sibling rivalry, bitterness, and backbiting—and that was just Joseph’s parents. Joseph and his siblings learned from the pros.

The father of the family, Jacob, learned how to lie from his own mother, Rebekah. God had promised that Jacob would have preeminence over his twin brother, Esau. Nevertheless, Rebekah refused to wait on God to bring about his will in his time. She modeled how to get what you want through deception and strategic maneuvering. She convinced Jacob to lie to his father, Isaac, and steal the blessing he had intended for Jacob’s brother, Esau. Bad plan.

As a result of this trickery, the heel-grabber Jacob had to flee from the murderous intentions of Esau, east across the Fertile Crescent. Jacob would never see his mother again.

In Paddan-Aram, Jacob met his match in his uncle Laban. Jacob offered to work seven years for Laban in order to marry his lovely

daughter Rachel. But Laban switched daughters at the last minute, tricking Jacob into working an additional seven years in order to have Rachel as well, the bride he wanted in the first place. Each of Jacob's wives brought along a maid, both of whom became his concubines, and the four of these women swayed Mr. Milquetoast with everything from manipulations to mandrakes.

In short, after twenty years of hard labor, Jacob returned to Canaan with four wives, a dozen kids, numerous flocks and herds—and some deep-seated, deceptive patterns of family behavior in tow.

This was not a family that waited on God.

All of this before Joseph's sixth birthday. From ages six to seventeen—some of the most formative years for any child—Joseph's life appears only in slices. The Bible hides the gaps of his life.

Even before the family crossed the Jordan River to return into Canaan, Joseph would have detected the tension that surrounded Jacob's final words with Uncle Laban. Joseph likely asked his mother why his father sent the family across the Jabbok River and yet he stayed behind—and why the following morning Daddy limped. Joseph had never met his uncle Esau, Jacob's brother, but Jacob's jumpiness about the get-together would have been obvious to the boy. Joseph watched as Jacob sent his other three wives and their children ahead to meet Esau, putting Rachel and Joseph in the back of the line—in the place of most protection and thus in the position most prominent.

Daddy's favorite son was becoming obvious.

Joseph's many childhood experiences included moving to a new home in Shechem, seeing the pregnant bump grow under his mom's apron (Joseph's first full sibling), and hearing of the rape of his sister Dinah at Shechem and the brutal revenge taken by Simeon and Levi. Another major move occurred south toward Hebron, after which Joseph's brother Reuben had incestuous relations with his stepmother. Joseph also would have remembered the death of his granddad Isaac and his burial in the cave of Machpelah in Hebron.

But the most significant event would have been the death of his mother as she gave birth to his brother Benjamin. Try to imagine the pain and confusion in Joseph's heart when he learned that his mom's complicated delivery had resulted in her untimely death. As the family traveled south along the ridge road today called "The Way of the Patriarchs," they buried Rachel by the side of the road on the way to Bethlehem. Joseph would never forget it.

All of Joseph's brothers grew to model their parents' and grandparents' examples of deceit, manipulation, family secrets, self-interest, lying, and sibling rivalry. Joseph had a front-row seat to the relational and emotional fallout that occurred from the backwash of such a family.

All of this leads up to the fact that life was ready to hand Joseph a raw deal. Circumstances had set him up to carry the torch of dysfunction to his own children. Joseph was cut from the same cloth. The die was cast. The mold was set. Take two. Ditto.

But God had other plans for Joseph.



When Joseph's narrative begins in Genesis 37, he has grown into a strapping young man of seventeen. And in a mere four verses we see the family's dysfunction still pulsating strong. In fact, it festered into hostility by means of yet another of father Jacob's vices.

Jacob had given Joseph a position of responsibility, like a foreman, over the family's shepherding operation. But when you have rascals for brothers, what can you bring to your father but a bad report? Imagine the older brothers' irritation of having their little brother tattle on them. Especially if the bad report proved accurate.

In addition to giving Joseph responsibility, the aging father gifted him a special coat. The King James Bible calls it the "coat of many colours" (Gen. 37:3). Whether the phrase refers to a full-length robe or to a richly ornamented tunic, it had the same effect on

the brothers. Joseph might as well have worn a sandwich board that read on the front, “DADDY’S FAVORITE,” and on the back, “THAT MEANS MORE FAVORITE THAN YOU.”

What in the world was Jacob thinking? He tossed tradition to the wind and skipped over ten older sons to bestow blessings on the firstborn of the favorite wife. How nice. That stuck in the other brothers’ craws. The coat likely revealed Jacob’s selection as to who would have preeminence long-term. Regardless, the brothers knew the coat meant more than their father’s choice of who would be boss. To them, it also symbolized their father’s love.

All parents have natural reactions to their children’s behavior. As Solomon wrote, “A wise son makes a father glad, but a foolish son is a grief to his mother” (Prov. 10:1). Parental gladness or grief often depends on the child’s behavior. That’s basic. It’s natural. And yet that wasn’t the case with Joseph. Jacob’s favoritism toward Joseph had more to do with Jacob than with Joseph. The boy was his father’s son in his old age, the firstborn from his favorite wife. It was all about Jacob clinging to a memory of a dream that he had buried on the way to Bethlehem.

Just as Jacob had done with the family lineup before meeting Esau, so he continued to do in life. Jacob still had Joseph in the back of the line, the place of preference—which the brothers understood as the front of the line. Joseph grew up as Jacob’s favorite. And if the brothers had missed the message over the last eleven years since moving to Canaan, they got it now. You couldn’t miss it. The coat made it clear. They deeply resented this visual reminder Joseph paraded on his back.

In fact, because of it, “they hated him” (Gen. 37:4).



Remember how you felt that Christmas when your sister opened the gift you wanted? Or when your brother got a T-bird for

graduation and you got stuck with the family Nova? Fast-forward to today and ask yourself how it hits you when a co-worker gets a raise but you have done more work—or perhaps, *his* work? Or when a neighbor decorates her home from an unrestricted budget and you're gluing the peeling wallpaper back on the wall? We find ourselves kids again, pouting around the Christmas tree amid our piles of toys.

There's a reason Scripture has to command us not to covet. It's in our (fallen) nature. It's systemic. It's the kneejerk reaction of jerks. If we can't have more than others, at least we want it equal. But less than others? Uh, *no*.

Unfair situations do more than aggravate our sense of justice. They also pierce the thin veneer of our humility, and out oozes a malodorous pride called jealousy. Like the day laborers in Jesus's parable—hired at the beginning of the day—we resent the privileged loafer on whom the landowner dotes (see Matt. 20:1–15). Even though we get paid a full day's wage for our work, we begrudge the fact that someone else gets the same for sitting on their duff all day. As we read Jesus's parable, we line up in agreement with those who protest the inequitable pay. We've all experienced it. We hate unfairness. But we must recognize that from God's perspective, we *all* represent those hired at the end of the day—those who got something for nothing.

As we stand before the Father, we receive his generosity, not his equity. Unfair isn't so bad after all. God has doted on us far, far more than we deserve. He simply applies a different measure of grace to different people—for his sovereign purposes.

But it's grace all the same. Undeserved.

Jacob should have known better than to give favoritism to Joseph. After all, Jacob's own father, Isaac, had a favorite son too (and it wasn't Jacob, by the way). Had he forgotten? Jacob should have remembered the painful pangs he felt as the unloved son. He should have recalled how favoritism could rip a family apart. It

had forever separated him from his mother—and it would soon remove him from Joseph.

When Jacob showered love on Joseph, he poured fuel on the fire of his other sons' jealousy. The brothers responded by hating the object of their father's affection. But Joseph himself would give them a new reason to hate him. This one came not from their father but from Joseph himself.

His dreams.

Joseph knew how his brothers felt about him. After all, they never spoke to him “on friendly terms” (Gen. 37:4). It was obvious. So why in the world he told them his bizarre dream about their sheaves bowing down in the field before his sheaf, I have no idea. Although Joseph never offered an interpretation of the dream, the meaning seemed plain enough to the brothers. They asked, “Are you actually going to reign over us?” (v. 8). To them, Joseph became more than the favored son with the special coat. Now he also seemed to gloat over his position—even in his sleep! Their hate only grew.

Dream number two drew a similar reaction from the brothers, and even Jacob chimed in with reproof: “What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?” (v. 10). Perhaps by “mother” Jacob meant his first wife, Leah, since Joseph's mother, Rachel, had already passed away. The whole family resented the dreams.

Joseph seemed to suffer from a mild case of naïveté. Most seventeen-year-olds do, you know. Remember seventeen? Oh, man. Hours in front of the mirror. Every hair in place. Every pimple a crisis. What to wear required a major decision. Why? Because peer pressure pushed hard. Approval was huge. No one liked oddballs.

That was Joseph. Brother oddball with the coat. The only people who admired Joseph were his baby brother and his old man. Those who *really* counted in Joseph's eyes, his older brothers, hated him.

How terribly isolated he must have felt. Who knows? Perhaps by sharing his dreams with his brothers he hoped to connect with them in some way.

But the dreams only served to drive them further apart. It was a no-win situation.



I have owned four Labradors through the years, and every one of them has had dreams. (Our current Lab snores louder than any human I've heard.) Most of these dog dreams look violent, even nightmarish. Muscles jerking, lips twitching, teeth bared, paws running, barking, growling—like some Freudian alter ego quivering on the living room floor. In fact, if I had connected their tails to a 220-volt cable and turned on the juice, I doubt they would have convulsed more violently. On one occasion I thought Rayah was literally having a seizure, so I touched her. She stopped trembling, looked at me, took a deep breath, and closed her glassy eyes again. Just a dream. No wonder Labradors snooze twelve to eighteen hours a day; they need rest from all that exhausting sleep!

I have often wondered what our dogs dream. I mean, all they know of the world comes from the backyard. What could be so exciting? A dog's dreams are frequent and violent, therefore comical—and insignificant.

Our own dreams get more attention. If we remember them when we awake, we find they usually reflect a slice of reality flavored with an offbeat imagination—kind of like Alice in some funky wonderland. (My wife designs houses in her dreams.) Have you ever wondered, *Why in the WORLD did I dream that?* Even though we seldom take our dreams seriously, they do mean more to us than dog dreams. At least we wonder *why* we dreamed them. Even weird dreams have reasons—whether they betray a fearful

subconscious, a distressing memory, or just bad pizza from the night before.

Dreams in the Bible, however, often represented more than nocturnal brain waves. They served as a means of prophetic announcement from God.

Let me pause for a moment and note that while our dreams may have *reasons*, we need to guard against the urge to assign them *meaning*. What we think about when we sleep reflects who *we* are, indeed—but we have insufficient New Testament permission to interpret our dreams as direct revelation from God. The author of the book of Hebrews relates how God spoke in the Old Testament “to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,” then adds that God “in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). The New Testament records all God wants us to know about what Jesus said as well as how believers should live until Christ comes for us. New Testament authors repeatedly point us to Scripture—all its gaps notwithstanding—and not to some other means of hearing from God.

Although the Bible doesn’t tell us everything we want to know, it does tell us all we need to know. It will always seem easier (and far more sensational) to be a mystic than to be biblically literate. Mystics don’t wait to hear from God’s Word in his timing. They don’t live by faith. The direct line they claim to have with God is nothing but an expression of immaturity and impatience. God has already spoken. Are there exceptions, say on the mission field? Of course. We can’t put God in a box. But exceptional experiences remain just that—and they don’t endorse a new norm or standard for us. God’s Word remains sufficient. We have the end of the story. We need no additional revelation. We just need to read, obey, and proclaim what we already have.

Joseph and his family, however, didn’t have Bibles like we do. None! Not one scrap of Holy Writ. Instead, the Word of God came to people through a variety of means—dreams being one

of them. Before Joseph, God spoke through dreams to Abraham, Abimelech, Jacob, and even Laban. As we move forward in Joseph's story, several more people will hear from God this way. And that's just in the book of Genesis.

In other words, Joseph's dreams meant more than the fantasies of a spoiled kid longing for approval. They represented prophecy—a revelation from God about the future. What did those dreams reveal?

Joseph would rule over the family.

Even though Joseph's dreams earned him the hatred of his brothers and a wrist slap from Jacob, his father knew what dreams could mean. He had dreamed too. He kept the dreams in mind, we're told.

But what happened next would cause them to disappear.