

Families in Godless Times

Why is God missing in the story of Joseph's betrayal?

godless times study #1: Genesis 37:1-36

essential facts

When Joseph was 17, God showed him through two dreams that he would have great authority over his family in the future, but God is never mentioned in the passage (Gen. 37:1-11). Shortly afterward, Joseph's brothers betrayed him by selling him into slavery, but again God is not directly mentioned in the long, detailed story (Gen. 37:12-36). Why not?

possible explanations

Which of the following points do you think are valid or important?

- God is not mentioned in order to stress human responsibility.
- God is not mentioned because the focus is on human relationships.
- God is not mentioned in order to encourage readers to think about sin.
- God is not mentioned because he did not care what happened to Joseph.
- God is not mentioned in order to help build suspense for the longer story.
- God is not mentioned directly, but he revealed himself through Joseph's dreams.
- God is not mentioned directly, but he revealed himself through various happenings.
- God is not mentioned because it was many years before Joseph began his ministry.
- God is not directly mentioned because to do so might have associated Him with evil.
- God is not mentioned because Joseph was boastful and did not know the Lord at first.

1. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, but...

families can survive even in godless times

Genesis chapter 37, in which Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, is one of five chapters in Genesis in which God is never mentioned. It is much darker than chapter 44 in which the brothers repented. (Chapter 36 is mostly genealogies, and chapters 23 and 47 are largely about normal business transactions.)

Joseph's brothers opposed God's man but were part of God's plan.

Mark the lines (as completed) below as either correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() The sinfulness of Joseph's brothers is stressed in chapter 37.
A-1	() They were hard hearted (37:21-27, 42:21).
A-2	() They envied Joseph and hated him (37:4, 8, 11, 18).
A-3	() They did not seriously consider Joseph's dreams (37:11, 19).
A-4	() They treated their own father terribly as well as Joseph (37:31-35).
A-5	() Jacob's dysfunctional family (29:18-31, 37:2-4) was part of God's plan.
A-6	() Judah's sinfulness is stressed in three chapter, in chapters 37, 38, and 44.
A-7	() Genesis 50:20 shows that Joseph's brothers were evil and that the Lord was not.
B	() The sinful acts of the brothers in chapter 37 were limited by God.
B-1	() God did not allow the brothers to kill Joseph (37:18-28).
B-2	() It was good that the caravan came when it did (37:25, 28).
B-3	() God led Judah to suggest selling Joseph into slavery (37:25-27).
B-4	() Selling Joseph into slavery was not as evil as killing him (37:25-27).
B-5	() The betrayals of Joseph and Jesus are similar (Gen 50:20, Acts 2:23, 3:17-18).
B-6	() Joseph's story has a happy middle and end (39:2,21, 41:38-41,50-52, 44:16, 49:22-26).
C	() It is good that God is not directly mentioned in chapter 37.
C-1	() Perhaps God is not mentioned at first because Joseph did not know the Lord at first.
C-2	() God not being mentioned in chapter 37 shows that Joseph's ministry had not begun.
C-3	() Because God is not directly mentioned, human responsibility is emphasized.
C-4	() God not being mentioned encourages godly readers to think deeply.
D	() It is good that God can be indirectly seen in chapter 37.
D-1	() It is good to read between the lines to see God at work (37:3-4, 15-17, 25-28, 36).
D-2	() It is good that the dreams in 37:5-11 revealed part of God's long-term plan (42:9).
D-3	() It is good that Genesis chapter 37 events are explained later in 45:5-8 and 50:20.
D-4	() Joseph said that God wanted his brother's to sell him into slavery (45:5-8, 50:20).
D-5	() God turned Joseph's brothers' evil act into good (Gen. 45:5-8, 50:20, Rom. 8:28).

See the next two pages for lively discussions on and suggested answers to the above lines.

The discussion on this page and the next was overheard at [a family life Bible study](#). Those present were discussing many of the points on Joseph and his brothers on the previous page.

study leader (on Jacob's family being dysfunctional)

Joseph's relationship with his brothers and their evil actions in chapter 37 show that Jacob's family was dysfunctional. Yet, even though God is not mentioned in the chapter, God was at work (D-1), and eventually Joseph's brothers came to understand what God had done (45:5-8, D-3) though it took many years. Chapter 37 is a godless scene, but there was happiness in the family later (B-6). So there is hope for dysfunctional families (A-5). What do you think?

home schooling mom (on polygamy being the root problem)

Parental favoritism and sibling rivalry (A-2) are still with us, but the level of it in this chapter is over the top. I suspect the root cause was Jacob's polygamy (C-3) which was not part of God's original design. Eve was deceived by the serpent, and Jacob was deceived by Laban (A-5).

seminary student (on the lack of Scripture)

Yes, but don't forget that Jacob's family did **not** have the Scriptures. So there was no written rule against polygamy back then. Moreover, it was natural for Joseph's brothers to be skeptical of divine revelation through dreams (A-3, D-2). I would be as well, especially from my younger brother. It was a godless time, because they lacked Bibles.

counselor (on the relationship between knowledge and sin)

Is that really it? They must have known about Cain and Abel (B-4), and the root of sin is often **not** ignorance. Did you notice that Jacob didn't totally reject Joseph's dreams (37:11) like the proud, older brothers did (A-3)? The sinfulness of the brothers is what's stressed (A).

study leader (on overcoming dysfunction)

That's why most of the A lines are correct. Line A-6 is only partly true, however, since Judah repented later on, in chapter 44. Again, this shows that there is hope for dysfunctional families (A-5). Human responsibility is stressed in chapter 37 by not directly mentioning God (C-3), but as a whole the life of Joseph has a happy ending (B-6) because God worked. He turned the evil actions of the brothers into good (45:8, 50:20, D-5). This is somewhat like the story of betrayal and resurrection in the Gospels, and the repentance of many Jews in Acts chapter two (B-5).

middle-aged man (on happiness and forgetting in 41:51)

What about the happy middle of the story (B-6)? What about Joseph being released from prison, made prime minister, and being happily married with two sons (41:38-41, 50-52)? And what does it mean in 41:51-52 when it says that Joseph forgot all his father's house? I suspect this means that he had peace about what his brothers had done to him years earlier. Is that it?

study leader (on Joseph's happiness at home)

That is a big part of it, but since Joseph also forgot his toil and hard times in Egypt (41:51), these verses probably means that he had stopped dwelling on any of the past negatives that he had experienced. He was a happy man, and not just because he had a high position. Above all, God was with him **and** his family (49:22-26). His afflictions were past (41:52).

By the way, some think that Joseph's wife was an idol worshipper (41:45), but I believe that is highly unlikely, because Joseph had a great testimony in Egypt and their sons had godly names. Joseph is somewhat like Jesus, and Asenath is a bit like Gentile believers, in the church age.

college freshman (on young Joseph's faith)

Can we go back to chapter 37 and talk about Joseph as a teenager for a few minutes? If lines C-1 and C-2 are correct, what is a teenager like me to do? Joseph was still young, of course, but he must have been a believer. Otherwise he would not have resisted Potiphar's wife [39:8-9]. If the Lord was with him in Potiphar's house in 39:2, he must have been with him a few days or weeks earlier in chapter 37 as well. How did everyone else mark lines C-1 and C-2?

home schooling mom (on young Joseph's service)

For sure, line C-1 is wrong. If Joseph was still unsaved at 17, the whole story falls apart. God send Joseph to Egypt [45:8] at a young age because the Lord knew that Joseph was ready to go. Of course, it was 13 more years before he was ready to be prime minister, but he served the Lord in Potiphar's house and in prison. And, of course, he also served God in his father's house before that in chapter 37. [See 37:2 and 13-14.] Some believe Joseph was boastful in 37:5-11, but that doesn't fit the story as a whole either. So I think line C-2 also is incorrect.

study leader (on what God did in chapter 37)

Great points. If you take the story as a whole by carefully reading through Genesis chapters 37-50, you can understand various things that are not directly stated in the first of these 14 chapters (D-1). Verses like 44:5-8 and 50:20 explain God's part in the events in chapter 37 (D-3).

The Lord did not allow the brothers to kill Joseph (B-1), even though that was their original plan. However, it is wrong to say that God led Judah to suggest selling their younger brother (B-3). This makes God responsible for Judah's evil plan and is not in line with what Joseph said in 45:5-8. He said that God had sent him to Egypt to save lives (44:5-8), but he did not say that God wanted his brothers to sell him. Line D-4 also wrongly blames God for the evil deeds of men.

seminary student (on what God did in chapter 37)

We talked about this paradox in theology class last week! God is sovereign, but he is not the Author of evil. So I believe the main reason why God is never directly mentioned in chapter 37 is to stress human sin and responsibility (A, C-3). What the brothers did was evil, but God turned their evil into good (50:20, Rom. 8:28, D-5).

home schooling mom (on getting back to the family focus)

I'm thankful for what God did, but I'm not into theology. Isn't this a Bible study on family life?

study leader (on hope for families in godless times and places)

Yes, it sure is. So, again, why was Jacob's family so dysfunctional? It was because God's design for marriage was violated, and more than once. Even so, God still worked, and one of the most blessed marriages in all of Genesis was that of Joseph to Asenath, an Egyptian woman from a pagan background (41:45, 50-52, 49:22-26). God is gracious. So there is hope for families even in godless times and places where the Lord's presence is somewhat difficult to see (C-4, D).

my application
