

WHEN YOU ARE SEVENTEEN GENESIS 37

About 1994 President Clinton conducted a press conference on MTV. The young viewers challenged the president with a number of personal questions about his underwear and his favorite rock song and other such matters. But the atmosphere of the conference was extremely serious when 17 year old Dahlia Schweitzer asked a penetrating question. “Mr. President” Dahlia said, “It seems to me that singer Curt Cobain’s recent suicide exemplified the emptiness that many in our generation feel. How do you propose to teach our youth how important life is?”

President Clinton was startled by the seriousness of the question for a few moments. He had not expected someone to raise such a profound issue as the importance of human existence. But then the President commented that there didn’t seem to be a legislative answer to Dahlia’s question. He could never have been more right. The answer to Dahlia’s question is found in the experiences of another 17-year-old.

Joseph was seventeen years old when the events recorded in Genesis 37 happened. This is the early life of one of the most impressive human beings that ever lived on planet earth. He was the oldest son of Jacob by Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. He was one of 12 sons in a family of 13. The things that happened to this impressive teenager give us some insight into the very nature of the teen years. The teen years of life are years with tremendous potential. I want us to look at the experiences of Joseph that are found in this chapter. In order to discover four profound things that are true when you are 17.

I. YOU ARE CAPABLE OF OVERCOMING YOUR ENVIRONMENT.

There are those in our society who contend that environment determines what you will be. If you will give them the environment in which a 17 year old lives they feel confident that they can predict the future of that person. Joseph lived in a negative environment but he wonderfully overcame that environment to become a world citizen. Some of you who are 17 or close to 17 have been using your environment as an excuse for not realizing your best in life. Consider with me the environment in which Joseph lived and how he overcame that environment.

1. Passive parents.

It is almost impossible to overstate the dysfunctional quality of Jacob's family when Joseph was 17. Joseph's mother had been dead for some years and his life was under the influence of a step-mother. His father was a man who knew God but was very ineffective in sharing with his family what he knew of God. Chuck Swindoll is probably right when he labels Jacob as the "typical, passive parent." You see this passive approach to life as it relates to his family again and again in the inspired record in Genesis. When Dinah was raped and her brothers commit an atrocity against the citizens of Shechem, you would have to interpret Jacob's actions as less than appropriate. Instead of taking the moral leadership in his family we see him reacting to the things that happen around him. He did not provide for his sons the kind of moral leadership that they needed.

When the 17 year-old Joseph came home to tell him of the transgressions that his older brothers were guilty of, Jacob reacted passively. Some have criticized Joseph for his actions, but there is nothing in the Biblical text to justify such a criticism. It is reading in to the text something that is not there. It should rather be seen as an evidence of the moral character of

Joseph at this point in his life. He was offended by the obvious moral transgressions of his older brothers and thought that his father should know about these transgressions. He shared these transgressions with his father in the hope that his father would take some appropriate disciplinary action. Instead his father chooses to ignore the transgressions of his sons. There was no call for accounting for their actions. This home environment was not one you would design in order to produce a world leader. But Joseph demonstrated by his experience that your environment does not determine your future nearly as much as it is by how you react to your environment. It is your reaction to the circumstances in which you find yourself that will ultimately determine what you become in your life.

2. The envious siblings

The relationship of Joseph to ten of his eleven brothers was never healthy. The actions of Jacob toward Joseph guaranteed that from the very beginning. Since Joseph was the first born son of Rachel, he was the favorite of Jacob's eye. Jacob distinguished him from the others in the way that he dressed. He provided for Joseph that famous "coat of many colors." This was by design to set Joseph apart from his brothers and was to indicate that the mantle of

leadership would rest on the shoulders of this firstborn son of Rachel. This bred deep resentment in the heart of his brothers.

Joseph distinguishing himself spiritually aggravated the problem. When he began to share with his brothers some things that God had revealed to him in a dream concerning his future, they rose up in anger against him.

Everything he did seem to be offensive to these ten brothers.

Siblings rivalry is still with us today. You may be seventeen and find yourself in competition with an older brother or sister. Your parent may be using the older brother to set the standards of your life. You may find yourself in a very unfriendly environment with the members of your family. Does that dysfunctional family environment determine that you will have a dysfunctional and ineffective life in the future? Obviously not! Joseph stands tall in the history of the people of God to demonstrate that when you are seventeen you are capable of rising above the environment and the circumstances in which you find yourself. Your environment may make it more difficult but it will not make it impossible to be and to do what God wants you to be and do.

II. YOU ARE CAPABLE OF PROFOUND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE.

We must interpret events in the life of Joseph in light of the period of history in which he lived. We must keep in mind how God related to man in that ancient day. This will affect how we understand the two dreams that came to Joseph when he was seventeen.

The first dream that came to Joseph was an agricultural scene. He describes it like this as he shared it with his brothers, “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.” The brothers were quick in their response to the dream. They understood that this claim on the part of Joseph to be the kind of vain statement that youth sometimes make and is an expression of wild ambition. They understood that he was claiming some day he would be lord over them and they would bow before him. Joseph at this point, in my judgment, was only sharing with them something that God had shown him in a profound moment of spiritual insight. God communicated with man in that day regularly through dreams.

The second experience was equally impressive. In this instance he said to his brothers, “Listen, I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” Jacob heard this dream and raised a question about it. He demanded of Joseph an explanation. He wanted to know did Joseph understand that he was to be lord not only over his brothers but his mother and father as well. Joseph was simply sharing with them a profound moment of insight that God had given him concerning his future. Jacob was wise enough to hide this in his heart for later consideration.

The lesson that I want us to see in this experience in the life of Joseph is that when you are seventeen you are capable of profound spiritual experiences. As a teen you may be tempted to discount the significance of what God is doing in your life at this point. This is a mistake on your part. You are capable of having profound spiritual experiences in your teen years that will have implications for all of the years of your life.

Some of us who are parents or grandparents, or some of us who work with teens, may not take their spiritual experiences seriously enough. We may be tempted to discount them as something that is just a reflection of the period

of life in which they find themselves. It is true that the teen years can be extremely emotional and very impressionable. But it is also true that the eternal God can communicate to a seventeen year old things that are significant for many years to come. There is the potential in your life as a teen to have profound spiritual experiences with God.

There have been many young people in the past that God has touched and used in significant ways in their teen years. Many of us who have had the joy of serving God for a long time point back to experiences in our teen years that have blessed us through all the rest of our years.

III. YOU ARE VULNERABLE TO SEVERE TRIALS OF FAITH.

Not everything that happens in the life of a teenager is good. Some very bad and hurtful things can become a part of life when you are seventeen. Joseph found himself as the victim of great wrong and injustice when he was seventeen. You will remember the experience of Joseph – his insensitive father sent him on a long trip to check on his brothers who had been away from home watching over the flocks for an extended period of time. This trip on which Jacob sent Joseph may have taken him as many as 65 miles away from home. It was at least a long trip or otherwise it would not have

been necessary to send Joseph to find out about the welfare of his brothers. When I say Jacob was insensitive he evidently had chosen to ignore the evident conflict between Joseph and his brothers. But being the kind of person that he was, he moved without question to do what his father had assigned him to do. When he arrived at Dothan where his brothers were attending the flocks they saw it as an opportunity to do him harm. Their first plan was to kill him. Then they decided just to put him in a pit and leave him there to starve, but finally they actually sold him to be a slave to some Midianite travelers that were passing by. Here is a seventeen year-old son who is beloved to his father who finds himself totally separated from family and friends. He finds himself as a slave in a foreign country when he is only seventeen.

How do you deal with this kind of adversity when you are only a teenager? Will not this kind of injustice destroy him? If you look at all of the life of Joseph it becomes obvious that actually this adversity became a stepping stone toward the high places of influence in the land of Egypt. His experience is a reminder to us that when you are seventeen you are capable of withstanding strong adversity and deep experiences of trial to your faith.

Teenage faith is capable of being loyal and true to God in the midst of great difficulty and great adversity.

There are some of you as teens who find yourself with your faith being subjected to a test. Some of you have your faith tested at school. Some of you find your faith tested at home. Some of you find your faith tested by opposition from some gang. Some of you find your faith tested by some handicap or adversity that has come into your life but Joseph's experience reminds us that you have within you the potential of overcoming those trials and adversities and coming out on the other side a stronger and more useful human being.

IV. YOU ARE MOVING TOWARD YOUR LIFE CALLING.

This is

one of the wonders of life lived with a God awareness. God has a purpose for every life. He has a purpose for a Jacob and a Joseph. He has a purpose for your life. He does not suddenly begin to make that purpose known or move you toward that purpose when you become 21. Actually God is at work moving you toward His purpose for your life even before you are born. When God in His wisdom selected your grandparents and parents He was already moving you providentially toward His ultimate calling for His life.

This is a profound lesson that we can learn from the life of Joseph. God was providentially at work when he was seventeen, moving him toward his ultimate destination of sitting in the highest seat in a foreign land, even the land of Egypt. It is a beautiful thing when we see it working its way out in the life of this outstanding world citizen. It is a step of faith on your part, when you are seventeen, to believe that God is at work even now moving you toward his ultimate calling for your life. But this is what happens when you are seventeen. If you find yourself as the object of some great wrong or injustice, God can use that great wrong or injustice to prepare you for something better out there in the future.

Teenagers are called GenX by the sociologists of our day and there is a lot of speculation about the uniqueness of this particular generation of teenagers. They have probably been the object of more hurt and pain than any other generation of teenagers in the history of our country. They have gone through more divorces with parents and have experienced more pain in their families than any generation in the past. Does this mean then that they are the hopeless generation that will just fry their brains with drugs or drown themselves in alcohol? Does it mean that they are destined to be non-

productive and worthless in their contribution to society? ABSOLUTELY NOT! The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph is still the same. Jesus Christ has not changed. He is still relating to teenagers in this GenX generation as He has related to teenagers in every generation.

When you are seventeen you can be an overcomer with reference to your environment. When you are seventeen, you are capable of communicating with God and God communicating with you. When you are seventeen you are capable of withstanding and overcoming the most difficult of circumstances. When you are seventeen you are already on the way to God's plan for your life. Don't miss what God has in mind for you! Remember Joseph! It is a great day to be seventeen.