2009-09-12 Genesis 37 *Joseph: In the Pit* Jerry Arnold

"Father in Heaven we are here because of You. We want to be here with You. We are praying that You would miraculously provide three and a half million dollars to pay this facility off. And we are asking that You would miraculously speak to each one of us, where we are at, on our journey. And that You will help us be where we are supposed to be. Lord, please teach us about Yourself, teach us about Your ways. We pray in Jesus name, Amen."

Please be seated. Joseph was seventeen. He was his father's favorite son. There are eleven brothers. Joseph has a younger brother named Benjamin; all of the other brothers are older than Joseph. And Joseph is cuddled by his father, he is the favorite son. One of the ways that Jacob distinguishes Joseph from the other sons is he buys him a special garb to wear. It is called in the Bible, "the coat of many colors." In the actual Hebrew it doesn't say colors. But it is a special type of coat. It may have special colors in it, but really, what it means it is a long garb. It would have long sleeves, and it would be longer in the down to the hem than most robes were. It meant it was the robe that was worn by people of wealth, people of influence, people in high places. It was a robe you could not work in. It would be like a person today showing up in a suit and tie around a construction site. You know they are not going to be hammering nails. And the common laborer wore different clothing; had shorter sleeves and it was a shorter robe, so you could actually work in it.

So Joseph has been distinguished from his brothers. In essence, his father Jacob is saying, "This guy is not going to work like the common labor you guys do. He is going to be the supervisor; he is going to be the son that receives the blessing." They resented it. O, they resented it furiously. Jacob had the right to do that. Joseph was the oldest son of the woman he loved, Rachel. Even though Jacob had married Leah first, in Jacob's mind, Joseph was the one who will receive the family blessing. Now, another thing that added to the angst is that Joseph had a dream one night, and he shared it with his brothers. He was out in the fields, and so were they. And they had their sheaves of wheat, and of a sudden, Joseph's sheaf of wheat stood up, and the other sheaves bowed down to it. When he shared this to his brothers, the implication was clear. They didn't like it. They did not like the idea of bowing down to Joseph. Bible says, "They hated him more."

Well, he didn't learn his lesson. I don't know if he is immature, foolish or if he is trying to stick it to them? He had another dream. And in this dream, the sun, the moon and eleven stars, his brothers, all bow down to him. This even got Jacob upset, and Jacob chided him for it. But, then he kept it in his mind, the Bible says. So, Jacob is wondering, what are these dreams? Well, the boys, the older ones, I shouldn't call them the boys, they are men now. They went off with the flocks. And they had gone to Shechem, which is about fifty miles away from where their home was. And Jacob said to Joseph, "Joseph, go check on the fellows. See how things are going." So, he put on his special robe. He walked fifty miles to Shechem and he did not find them. As he is looking around for them, a man approaches him and he says, "What are you looking for?" And he says, "I am looking for my brothers." And it just so happened, this guy had heard them talking, and he heard them say they were going to Dothan, another fourteen miles.

So Joseph goes another fourteen miles. So he has walked sixty four, sixty five miles, looking for his brothers. When he gets there, there is not a warm reception. In fact, the robe is taken from him and he is thrown into a pit. As the story goes on, he'll be taken out of the pit and ultimately, he will become the second in command of Egypt. But you know that. What we want to do today is try to understand the experience of Joseph while he is in the pit. He does not know the end of the story. In fact, you and I metaphorically end up in pits in our journey from here to heaven. We don't know how it's going to end, and the pit is very real and very significant to us. It is overwhelming!

It is dark in the pit, it is lonely in the pit, it is discouraging in the pit, we don't know how we are going to come out of the pit, and it is a real experience. So today, we are going to discuss Joseph and ourselves, being in a pit.

Please turn in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 37. We'll pick up the story just after the dreams have been talked about in the scriptures. We start with verse 11. This is the response the brothers had about the dreams. "And his brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter in mind." They envied him! Now envy is different than jealousy, and envy is different than coveting. The normal process is coveting, jealousy, envy, murder. You see it kind of builds on itself. Let me discuss coveting for just a minute. This will not be a sermon about envy, but I need to help you understand the emotions that Joseph is dealing with, or against, when he is cast into his pit. To covet is to want somebody else's position or property. And you want it so strongly that you are tempted to steal it. So coveting is wanting something that belongs to somebody else. If a man covets another man's wife, he will go after the wife, but he will not seek to destroy the man even though it may destroy the man's heart. You understand what I am saying?

Envy is far different. Envy is to resent somebody else's position or property so strongly you are willing to destroy them to get the position or the property. So coveting is, you go around the person; you don't directly try to hurt them. Envy goes right at them. I mean, you are seeking to do harm to the person, to get their position or to get their possession. Envy is a very strong emotion. It is listed in Paul's list of sins that are part of the human nature which means all of us have the problem with envy. In fact, it is described as being the emotion that was driving the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Hypocrites and the Priests when they brought Jesus to Pilot to be tried so that He could be crucified. It says in Matthew 27 and in Mark 15 that Pilot knew they brought Him there because of envy. They wanted what Jesus had, and that is the blessing of God and also the crowds and the authority associated with His truthful teaching. But they did not want Jesus, so they sought to destroy Him.

Now, envy has different levels, but they all begin kind of this way. You try to make someone else look bad so you can look good. At the center of acting out envy, will be trying to make yourself look good by making someone else look bad. In the work place, family, neighborhood, church, it could be put downs. "Yeah, yeah, they are okay, but…" Could be insults, could be ridicule, could be hints of incompetence; anything to devalue their work or their person. In essence, brothers and sisters, envy begins for all of us when we feel confident enough to criticize other people. Now that's a human problem. And I'll tell you right now honestly, and as clearly as I can, we've got to get a hold of that in our lives. We've got to get control of it because a critical spirit or freedom to think we can criticize other people for what they do or don't do is going to keep us out of heaven. It's a serious matter.

So these guys were envious of Joseph. Let's see what happens. Let's read about his journey just so you'll know it's there in the Scriptures. Verse 12, "Then his brothers went to feed their father's flock at Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, 'are not your brothers feeding the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.' So he said to him, 'here I am.' Then he said to him, 'please go and see if it is well with your brothers and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me.'" So Jacob sent Joseph out of the valley of Hebron, and he went to Shechem. "Now a certain man found him, and there he was, wondering in the field. And the man asked him saying, 'what are you seeking?' So he said, 'I am seeking my brothers, please tell me where they are feeding their flocks?' And the man said, 'they have departed from here. For I heard them say, 'let us go to Dothan.' So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan." That's the journey.

Now the conspiracy, look at verse 18: "When they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him." Now there is a danger that is demonstrated in this experience. It's called, 'group think,' where you allow the group and their attitudes and feelings to kind of become yours and it feeds on itself.

There is not one of these men by them self who would have sought to kill Joseph. Not one of these men by them self may have even said, “Let’s kill Joseph.” But when it was suggested, they began feeding on each other. Be careful, be extremely careful if you are in a conversation with a group of people and it’s turned negative, and it’s turned sour, and you’re really getting onto somebody or something. Watch out for that because you will have a tendency to say more than you wish you would have. And it can be hurtful and damaging because you really don’t feel that bad about that person.

I have a special warning right now for husbands. You know, men have a tendency to find humor in their wives; what they can and can’t do. And so men gather around, somebody has a joke about a woman or about a wife. And somebody might share a story about their wife, something she was air-brained about or whatever. Watch out for that because that can turn nasty real quick. And fellows, you cannot call those words back. You can’t call those words back and on the way home you may be thinking, “Why did I say that to those guys?” You know the sad thing about it is, it’s likely they’ll remember what you said, and it’s very likely they’ll share it with somebody else, and there is a chance it will come back to your wife. And one day, you are going to have a very, very hurt woman on your hands. Be careful fellows! Ladies, apply it to yourselves! You know as well the principle. Be careful!

So there is a conspiracy afloat. Verses 19 and 20: “Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit, and we shell say, ‘some wild beast has devoured him. We shall see what will become of his dreams.’” Boy they hate those dreams. “But Ruben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands and said, ‘let us not kill him.’ And Ruben said, ‘shad no blood, but cast him into this pit which is in the wilderness. Do not lay a hand on him’ that he might deliver him out of their hands and bring him back to his father.” So Ruben’s intentions are to deliver Joseph. Whether he did a good job or not, the Bible doesn’t say; whether he should have been more proactive, the Bible doesn’t say. It’s not the story. The story is something bigger. It’s just enough detail to help you know what is going on.

So verse 23, “It came to pass when Joseph had come to his brothers that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the tunic of many colors that was on him. And they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it.” Now, “…no water in it” doesn’t necessarily mean he didn’t have water, but it’s likely he didn’t have water. And the next verse says, “The others sat down to eat.” And when it says “…it’s empty,” it’s easy to associate, “Well, okay, there were no provisions for him in there.” Probably there weren’t. But what it really means is this: is that this pit was actually a cistern that had been cut down into the rock to catch the rain when it came. It only came in certain times of the year back then. And they would catch it, and keep it for a long time. They had learned to line these cisterns with lime. The bottom sides, every part of it, it was lined with lime. Somehow lime has an effect on water, it keeps it sweet. And so what would rain at one time of the year, you could come back, I guess what it was two or three years later, and the water would still be sweet. It wouldn’t be that stagnant stuff that’s growing things, it would be sweet water. So he is in one of those. He is in the pit.

Now, we are going to go twenty two years into the future. Just to get a little insight into how Joseph felt while he was in the pit. Twenty two years after this story, his brothers will come to Egypt. Joseph is second in command in Egypt. There has been a famine for two years. His family, back in Canaan, is out of food. So, some of the brothers were sent to go get food. Joseph sees them. They will ultimately have three encounters with Joseph before everything is taken care of. This is the first one, I’m not going to share with you what’s going on, I just want you to catch the expression of Ruben here. Chapter 42 of Genesis, verse 21, “Then they said to one another, we are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear. Therefore this distress has come upon us.”

When Joseph was thrown into the pit, there was anguish in his soul. There was pleading. They refused to listen. And I want you to think about this for a moment. Here is a man on a mission from his father to help his brothers. And when he goes there, they seek to kill him. And he has anguish of soul, and they don't seek to comfort him one bit. Now, it's very possible, in your life, you could be on a mission for your Father in Heaven, and the very people you are on a mission for treat you so poorly that you feel like Joseph would in the pit. The pit was a real place for him. He couldn't get out of it. It was dark. It was lonely, and he didn't know if he would ever be delivered from it. He'd heard what his brother said, and the Bible doesn't record the meanness of their speech. But if one brother said to kill him just a moment before, and one brother said, "No, let's just throw him in a pit," you know they are not saying anything kindly.

When they are ripping the clothes off of him, they are probably saying the things they really wanted to say for some time. This man, Joseph, is stinging from their words. He is alone. He must wonder where God is. What is happening to him? Will he ever see the light of day again or will he just die there of starvation and exposure? This is how he is feeling in real time. The pit is a horrible place. The pit is a lonely place, and the pit seems inescapable. Now, we have pits in our lives metaphorically. They come, and we wonder will we ever get out of them. I read this quote by O.S. Card in a book, "Ender's Shadow." And I want to say something. If "Ender's Shadow" is some spiritualistic book and it's evil and it's bad, please don't start anymore rumors about me and about the books I am reading. I haven't read the book, but I read the quote in another book, but I want to give the man credit. I've gone six years without giving author's credit because I did it once and it started all kinds of rumors about what type of books I am reading. So I am just saying that upfront, okay?

I haven't read book. If it's a rotten book, I don't care. If it's a great book, tell me. I may read the whole thing. All right, but this is the quote that's in the book. Two people talking, "Do you know why Satan is so angry all the time?" "Because whenever he works a particularly clever bit of mischief, God uses is to serve His own righteous purpose." Now that's true. You know, evil never wins with God. Really, it's like you playing chess against your computer. You are not going to win that. It will let you make choices, but it already knows what it's going to do. And you cannot defeat it. That's what it's like for evil to go up against God. "So God uses wicked people as His tools?" Interesting question! "God gives us the freedom to do great evil if we choose, then He uses His own freedom to create goodness out of that evil, for that is what He chooses." Another person, "So in the long run God always wins?" "Yes." "In the short run though, it can be uncomfortable." It is.

There are two types of pit we are going to talk about today. One is that that just comes upon us like it came upon Joseph, and another is the one that we make for ourselves, and will come to that in just a moment. But when evil gets us in a pit, God can turn it to good. When evil things happen, God can turn it to good. I cannot stand here today and say, "Just hold on to the Lord 'cause you'll get out of your pit." We may have to be in some pits our entire life. But it is going to be short in comparison with eternity. The pit is turned into a blessing. Darkness can actually educate us. "I walked a mile with gladness, she chattered all the way, but I was none the wiser, for all she had to say. I walked a mile with sorrow, not a word said she. But, all the things I learned, when sorrow walked with me." Evil will never win against God. And evil will never win against God's people. The pit can be a horrible place.

Psalm 88, if you would like to turn there and read it this afternoon, or sometime this week. It's a powerful Psalm describing how Jesus felt on Friday morning. You see, Jesus was arrested about midnight. He was taken to the house of Anis. And then from there He was taken to Caiaphas who was the High Priest at that time. In 1997, with a group of pastors, I went to the Holy Land. And on the tour, they added a new stop. It was Caiaphas' house. They'd found it about a year or two before. And they had dug it all out, and there it was. They had his house. Now it's

obviously not the walls and the roof, but the foundation, and he had a basement in his house. And in the basement were two jail cells. And then there was a place in one of the headers above a doorway with a hole right through the rock, and that's where they would tie the prisoners and have their arms up like this so they can be beaten. Then our guide, who was a brilliant scholar, took us to a section there and it was round and very deep with a staircase going along the wall to a certain point, and then there was nothing more. And they would take somebody down there and drop them down into this pit. And then when it was time to get them, they would pull them out.

There was a little spot drilled through the stone for guard to watch, to see what was going on. Here is what we were told. Jesus was arrested about midnight. He arrives at Caiaphas' house, and they have a little mock trial that takes place. And they beat Jesus, and they slap Him around, and they abuse Him. Then they have to wait until later in the morning to get the whole Sanhedrin together. So they throw Jesus in this pit. Jesus is in the pit. And when you read Psalm 88, it will touch your heart. It will tug at you. Because Jesus is crying out to God, because of the pain from God, because it's sin, our sin coming upon Him is like waves that roll upon Him. His acquaintances have all left Him. He's been left in the pit to die. Friends Jesus knows what a pit is like. And He can comfort us in the deepest of our pits.

So how do we do it? How do we survive in the pit? And if we've created our own pit, how do we get out of it? Let's look at a couple of verses. Please go to Psalm 18. We begin with verse 1: "I will love You, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my strength in whom I will trust, my shield and the horn of my salvation. My stronghold! I will call upon the Lord who is worthy to praised, so shall I be saved from my enemies." How are we saved from our enemies? By praising God! Now in this journey that we are all on from here to heaven, there is demonic influence upon us. Temptations come our way. Eat this, don't do this. Do this; don't do that, on and on, and on. It is a constant struggle for each and every one of us. And there are days that we don't do as well as other days. And some days we do better, but all us fail, and all of us repent, and all of us ask Jesus for His forgiveness, and we all receive His grace. And we get up and we keep going.

And the monotonous routine comes again. Temptation, temptation, temptation! And those temptations are real, they are important; I don't want to diminish them. But I'm telling you right now that that is not the devil's game plan. Getting you to eat between meals, or to overeat is just part of a process where his ultimate goal is to get you to be so discouraged with life, so discouraged with yourself, so discouraged with God that you give up. And you quit God. That's where it all heads. That's what the devil is trying to do. If he can get you to be so discouraged that you let go of God, he has won. So how do we deal with the forsakenness of the pit? How do we deal with the darkness of the pit? How do we deal with a loneliness of the pit? How do we deal with a forsakenness of the pit? We deal with it this way. We praise God for it. I will tell you right now, that the single greatest evidence of victory is that even with tears streaming down our cheeks, and we don't understand what's going on, we lift our hands towards heaven and we say, "God, I still praise You!"

You can never, ever, ever be defeated by Satan when you praise God. You cannot! It will never happen because the devil's plan is to get you to turn you away from God. Praising God brings us to the Lord, and brings the Lord to us. Look at Psalm 22 verse 3 simply says, "But You are Holy who inhabit the praises of Israel." Now if you read this in several different translations, you add these ideas together, and it simply means this that in God's dwelling you praise Him! When you find where God is, you praise Him! And it also means that praise is God's dwelling, and that He dwells in the praise of His people. You don't sense Him in your life, praise Him! You are discouraged in your life, praise Him. You praise God and you will sense His presence coming near. It is the victory over the dark things that happen to us, we praise the Lord.

What about a self inflicted pit? Isn't it interesting that the word "pit" is the root for "petty?" Pitiful! Let's be honest, sometimes it feels good to be depressed. It's a very self-centered and selfish experience, where we are more concerned about our self than anybody else? Can't you see how sad and sorrowful I am? Please, take note, please try to comfort me. I won't let you because I am not ready yet. It is very comforting to ride the moped around and to mope! Now please, I am not diminishing clinical depression or people you know, with chemical imbalances or stuff like that, or people that need professional help because they have been just so wounded by life. I am not; that's real, that needs to be taken care of. But most of us enter into a petty party with ourselves. And we throw ourselves into a pit. How do we get out of that pit? We have to praise God.

I will tell you how I know this. Almost twenty years ago, I was a conference evangelist. And my wife and I, and our three children and a Chevrolet pickup and a nineteen foot camper, drove all around the state where I worked. We held meetings, teaching people about the doctrines of the last days. It was discouraging to us. The church I had been pastoring had a hundred and fifty members. In one year, the five meetings that we conducted, when we added up the size of those churches, they didn't come to a hundred and fifty members. So when we went to a town and we are dealing with a thirty member church, or a twenty member church, and basically I figured out after a year, they were sending me to do a resurrection or to keep them buried peacefully. There was no chance to do a real good evangelism. A big crowd for us was ten or twelve people from the community to come and visit. And we always had baptisms.

But I am human enough to want recognition! I am Christian enough to admit it. I will say this, back in those days; I wanted people to know that I was around. But living in Collegedale has cured me of that. I wish they didn't even know I was here anymore. I told Karen the other day, "I have no idea what this community will do when I finally retire? What will they talk about?" Well anyways, I was doing these meetings. We had small church and we had invited our group of visitors to come to a special, wonderful vegetarian buffet. It will be a banquet; it will be a feast of healthy foods. Come in the morning; experience your first Sabbath worship service. We'll have a sermon. I told them what the sermon would be about and after that we will have wonderful fellowship and this great food, and it will be wonderful. That morning, I walked into the kitchen, and the ladies had their back to me. They didn't even know I was there. And they were saying, "I can't believe we have to cook for these people! Don't they have a house of their own?"

And I am thinking, "Why am I trying to bring people into this church, for what good?" And what shocked me is all this work they were doing was for two people, and that was our crowd. A mother and a daughter, that's all we had. And they were upset about that. Well the meeting finally ended and, I think I baptized them. No, actually, I'll be honest with you. I didn't baptize them. I felt too guilty to. I didn't want to bring them into that church. Well, we left. Midnight, Saturday night, I am driving the old Chevy truck with the trailer. The boys are with me. Karen and Hannah are about an hour ahead of us. And we break down. It's midnight, Saturday night, on a country road with no shoulders. And the only people out at midnight on a Saturday night are people who are high on drugs, or drunk, or both. So I have to stop the truck in the middle of, well in the right hand lane, but it's almost like in the middle of the road.

And every time a car goes by, the truck and the trailer are rocking. I had to get under a trailer to fix something. I don't remember what it was, something to do with an axle. So I'm down there working, and I've got it on a jack, and it's just rocking from the wind. I've got two young boys who want to help dad, I am scared to death they are going to slip out into the road. I don't know whether to have them in the truck where they won't get out into the road or to have them out of the truck, so I have them out of the truck so in case somebody comes up over the hill

and runs into us. I mean, I'll be gone, but my sons will live! But they don't want to stay out there in the field, it's dark; they are scared; they want to be with dad. So that's a constant, it's a constant, just, oh man, I finally got it fixed, got it off the jack, we head it home. Got home about one thirty in the morning, and Karen and I set in our mobile home. Her on one side and me on the other, our feet touching in the middle, and we were discouraged. We started listing all the things that were discouraging to us. And Karen said, you know when her dad was dying of cancer sometime, she would be so discouraged, she wanted to hear from God. She would just open the Bible and point, and read the text. I said, "Oh, that's not very theological." I've done it many times. But you try to be big.

I said, "I just got to hear from God," so we decided to do it. So I opened the Bible, and I turned, and here is what the text said. "You've dug yourself a pit, go lie in it." I said, "I don't think this works." I said, "Well I am going to try one more time," and this time I stirred it to the New Testament. And when I pointed it, it said, "You've made my house a den of thieves." I said, "No, no way! This just doesn't work." And I went to bed. And it's our custom; we have prayer before we go to bed. You know, "Thank you for protecting us today, please protect us tonight, watch over the children…" and now we have the grandchildren. And then if there is something special going on, like we need money or whatever, we'd throw that in. Just a short prayer! And then we conclude by saying, "Good night, I love you." Some nights it's, "Good night! I love you!" But anyways, we say those words. And we try to sleep. And I was tossing and turning that night, and I was pondering.

When I woke up in the morning, I realized God had spoken to me. But I wasn't sure, and I didn't want to push it. So I asked Karen what her impression of the previous night was. And she had come to the identical conclusion I had, and it was this. We had dug our own pit. We had talked ourselves out of the confidence in God by tailing up all our doubts, all our fears, all of the negative things about life, and we had dug ourselves a pit. Now I am telling you this because some of you will be helped by this. Some of you may have less respect for me, I really don't care anymore. I only care what God thinks about me. But in my life, I am a sanguine-melancholy. Which means, it's party time in one part of me, and it's hell in the other. And there has been an internal conflict within me that's been hard to understand. Because the part of me that, "Yahoo," you know, I'll say things, and the other, immediately, the melancholy in me will say, "Why did you say that?" "I don't know! I don't know why I say these things." "Man, you are dumb. You shouldn't talk at all." "I can't help it." And it just, and I got this battle going inside of me.

And in this battle, there have been a number of times, several times that I've sought; I thought that "I just don't know if I want to live anymore." And I had pretty well decided that I was going to take my life a number of years ago. But I couldn't get past my wife and three children being left alone. So I fought, and resisted the temptation, and I did myself no harm. I know what a self-inflicted pit is. I fight it every day of my life. My mom was depressed a lot, and so am I. I believe it contributed to my alcoholism and drug addictions. Jesus gives us victory in every area of our lives if we let Him.

So when we got up that morning, Karen said the same thing I had concluded. We had dug ourselves a pit. The question is what do you do with that? How do you get out of it? And I realized immediately from what I had been reading and studying. And that is this. In every difficulty, in every situation, in every heartache, praise God! Just praise Him! You don't praise Him for your loss. You don't praise Him for the person you loved that has died, but you praise Him that He will see you through it. You praise Him in every situation. So that day I made a promise to God. It was simply this. "If you give me breath, I will give You praise!" Now that was seventeen, eighteen years ago. And there had been many, many times I've stood with a pit below me. I had every reason and every right on earth to get into that pit, to get so discouraged, I would just quit. But I have practiced that promise to God. And I have

praised Him in every difficulty. I have praised Him in every dark, hard time in my life. And in seventeen years, I've never been in the pit again. There is power in praise! The victory over all that is evil really is to praise God.

Today, I have a little different appeal than usual. My appeal is simple, but it will change your life. And that is this. If you would like to make a promise to God today that if He gives you breath, you will give Him praise, if you would like to make that commitment, I am going to ask you to stand. "Father in Heaven, if You give us breath, we will give You praise. We ask for Your grace to help us. And we thank You, and praise You in Jesus' name, Amen."