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Psalm 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45b; Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Desolation and Consolation

We just wondered a moment ago about what it is like to be stuck somewhere you don't want to be, and one of the things that we often wonder about in our lives is why it is bad things happen to good people—especially ourselves!

Today, we meet one of the “heroes” of the Old Testament, Joseph, but what we find isn't someone who is superhuman and above reproach: instead, we find a person who is deeply flawed in a family that has some real problems.

As mentioned in the time of wonder, Joseph finds himself in quite a predicament by the end of our passage today, but his time of desolation is not the end of his story—far from it. Instead, it is a crucial experience that will make him into the person that God needs him to be for his promises to be fulfilled to his people. Let's take a closer look at our passage today.

There are several themes that recur throughout Scripture. In today's reflection, we'll be taking particular note of the start of one of a great number of examples of the theme of desolation and consolation—but before we come to that, we find ourselves encountering another regular theme that is particularly strong throughout the Old Testament—that of dysfunctional families.¹

To give you a bit of context for Joseph and his murderous brothers, let me remind you of a bit of his family history.

His father has another very familiar name: Jacob. This is, indeed, the same Jacob as the story of Jacob and Esau; the one who used guile and subterfuge to manipulate his older brother into giving away his birthright. The same Jacob who was tricked into marrying the less appealing older sister of the woman he sought to court by his own father-in-law. While Jacob was indeed blessed by God and would become the patriarch of the kingdom of Israel (and in fact, he is *called* Israel in this passage), he was not a shining example of a loving family man, either in his youth, or—as we see today—as a father in his later years.

¹ While the use of em dashes is now considered synonymous with AI bots such as ChatGPT, I've been using them since I was a writing major way back in the good old days of the early 2000s. I'm not going to quit just because AI decided that people who write like me are the best ones to emulate! 😊

We read early in our passage that Jacob showed clear favoritism to his youngest son, Joseph, even granting him an extravagant, ornate robe—one that was so extravagant that his brothers were jealous of him to the point of anger. Joseph did little to quell that anger, though. We read already in v. 2 that he had come to Jacob with “a bad report about” his brothers. In other words, Joseph was a bit of a tattletale.

This, combined with the fact that, as we read in v. 3, “Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons,” and isn’t afraid to show it, leads to the depth of antipathy that gives rise to the elder brothers’ plot to get rid of this burdensome brother of theirs.

And yet there is more... one of the important details our reading today passed over is that Joseph, like his father, received visions from God. He had, indeed, received two visions recorded in Genesis 37: one him and his brothers gathering sheaves of grain in the field, only for the brothers’ sheaves to bow down to his; and another of the sun and moon and stars bowing down to him.

The way he shared this with his brothers intensified their anger and jealousy all the more. We may think that Joseph was perhaps just oblivious to his brothers’ anger, but when he shared that second dream with his father—who understands the importance of visions—even Jacob rebuked Joseph sharply... and yet, he kept that vision in mind.

So it came to be, when Joseph was sent out to check up on his brothers as they tended the flocks and he found them about 14 miles away from where Jacob thought they were, they had the perfect opportunity to kill this brother of theirs who ratted them out; who enjoyed their father’s blessing and favor; who showed such hubris in sharing his dreams and visions... who could very well take a good portion of the inheritance that should be theirs as his elder brothers.

The level of their anger and frustration toward him might seem shocking to us, if we don’t catch all of those little details that lead up to this moment. This family has been primed for anger and frustration. The older brothers *will not* see their birthright be taken away by their younger brothers like their Uncle Esau had.

And so, with the exception of Reuben, they didn’t balk much at the prospect of killing Joseph—or at the very least, leaving him for dead. It should be little wonder that they didn’t have any hesitation to sell him into slavery when the opportunity came, either.

And our reading today leaves us in that precarious situation with Joseph:

- His brothers had taken his beautiful robe from him—stripping him of the very symbol of his father’s favor and love

- He had been thrown into a pit—denied his freedom
- His brothers had sold him into slavery—taking away his autonomy
- And what’s more, he was sold to Ishmaelites, who would take him away to a different land—he was even stricken from his own home.

Joseph was facing a situation that we might well refer to as *desolation*—a state Miriam-Webster refers to as “extreme sadness caused by loss or loneliness; the condition... that has been damaged in such a way that is no longer suitable for people.”²

We see examples of desolation throughout scripture.

- Adam and Eve barred from the Garden of Eden
- Noah’s flood
- The Hebrew people’s time in the wilderness during the Exodus
- The Babylonian exile
- In Jesus’ own life:
 - Fleeing to Egypt as a young child
 - Being tempted in the desert
 - Praying in Gethsemane
 - Upon the cross

Those examples don’t end with Jesus, however! The Apostles would frequently face times of hardship, uncertainty, and trial.

- We might think of the deep conflicts they experienced around debate over the inclusion of Gentiles in the faith;
- Of the imprisonment and punishment they faced for sharing the gospel;
- Of those who would, like Stephen, face martyrdom rather than deny their faith in a time and place where following Christ might mean facing persecution even to the point of death.

So we return to that age-old question: why do bad things happen to good people? If we take the time to sit with this season of desolation in the life of Joseph, we might well reflect on what has led to it: Jacob’s favoritism may have set the stage, but it was Joseph’s own poor behavior toward his brothers—and his hubris—that truly fueled the fire of his brothers’ rage toward him.

² “Desolation.” *Merriam-Webster.com Simple Definition*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/simple/desolation>. Accessed 8 Aug. 2026.

But Joseph's visions weren't *wrong*. As Jacob intuited, there was something to them. God does have very big plans for Joseph and all of his family—plans that will require that Joseph be the right person in the right place at the right time—and he is *none* of those at the moment we've read of today. God needs Joseph to grow from the self-centered, prideful young man he is into a man who is wise, humble, and faithful—and to do that, Joseph will need to undergo a dramatic transformation.

While we might be tempted to see what happened to Joseph today to be a tragedy (and it is tragic, to be sure), if we see the broader scope of Joseph's life, we will see that God never abandons Joseph to this season of desolation, but instead continues to guide, protect, and bless him. But this time of deprivation and separation from what is familiar and comforting is the catalyst for Joseph's growth and development. That's not to make light of the terrible events that led to it, but it does highlight (as Joseph himself will one day say) that God can take something intended for evil and turn it to good.

Parker Palmer is an American author, educator, and activist who focuses on community, leadership, spirituality, and education. He is particularly noted for his Quaker roots and his advocacy for mental health.³

In his book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, Dr. Palmer shares reflections on his own personal experience with clinical depression—a topic that I am personally familiar with.⁴

In his reflections, he ponders an old Quaker thought that when a path forward is blocked, the closing itself carries guidance, not just the eventual opening. Life's closed doors, failures, and dead-ends are not detours from our vocation or calling, but rather a part of how our calling becomes clarified. He underscores that we learn as much about who we are from what is taken away from us as from what is opened up to us.

Palmer goes on to share that his own experience with depression stripped him of so much of who he was—his status, his sense of identity, even his ability to function in everyday life—that it drove him to a place where he met God from a place of brokenness and complete dependence upon the Almighty—and he emerged from it a transformed and stronger person.

Now, I want to be clear, as Palmer himself is in his book, that he in no way means to make light of clinical depression, or to glorify it in any way. He shares his experience with candor to illustrate the ways that God can take even the most destructive times in our lives and redeem it

³ Wikipedia contributors. "Parker Palmer." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 17 Dec. 2025. Web. 8 Aug. 2026.

⁴ Palmer, Parker J. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Jossey-Bass, 2000.

for a greater purpose. Mental illness of any kind is not something he would celebrate in his life or in any other person's, but he does share that he found redemption of that time in his life with time and perspective. That his particular season of desolation led to the stripping away of something in him that allowed for something new and stronger to be rebuilt in its place.

By the grace of God, the seasons of "desolation" that we face in life are not always so stark as those faced by Joseph, or the Apostles, or even Dr. Palmer. But no matter what the difficult times in our lives do look like when they come—and they do always come, sooner or later—we can trust that like all who have come before us, God will never abandon us to them. More than any blanket, or stuffed animal, or technicolor dream coat, God's presence in our lives is an assurance. As the Psalmist proclaims in Psalm 16, God will never abandon us to darkness and destruction.

God can use the difficult seasons in our lives to draw us closer to Him; to cause us to grow in faith and in resolve; to be transformed from what we once were into what he calls us to be.

The suffering is not his desire for us—even in Joseph's case, it is the result of human sin and shortcomings (his father's, his brothers', and his own).

But God uses those seasons of desolation to bring about growth and transformation, like a seed being planted in the soil to grow, or a caterpillar entering a cocoon to metamorphose.

And by his grace and with his love, if we persevere through the times of desolation, we will find ourselves emerging into God's consolation—but we'll talk more about that next week!

For now, let us offer up to God our struggles and worries—and ask that he would hold us close through them and walk with us as we move toward the promise he has in store for us. Let us pray.