

Lessons from Joseph 10-28-01

Genesis 39:1-1, 20-23 41:15,16 38-40

Almost one-fourth of the book of Genesis is devoted to the life of Joseph. That is as much as is devoted to the father of faith, Abraham, Joseph's great-grandfather. There is such a clear picture of Christ in the life of Joseph, matched only by that of his grandfather Isaac. I guess that is why he is my favorite Old Testament character. Let's look briefly at the first half of his story, and pull out a few of the pictures that speak to us. Lord willing, we'll finish next week.

Joseph was Dad's favorite. Israel (Jacob) had put him and his mother in the back of the group going to meet Esau, just in case there was a battle. Perhaps they could get away. There has never been any doubt that he loved Rachel and her children the best. After Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin, Joseph and Benjamin held that place in Israel's heart of the dearest and best.

When the boys were older, Joseph's honesty in telling on his brothers, earned him the unenviable position of reporting on his brothers. Yet, the brothers did envy him. His specially ornamented coat was a constant reminder that Dad loved him best. The drama that begins to unfold is better than any Hollywood script.

His brothers see him coming and decide to kill him. Their nickname for him is "the dreamer" because of his dreams that prophecy his family will one-day bow down to him. But Reuben has already been out of favor with his father and, as oldest, this death may end up going against him. So Reuben convinces them to just leave him in an empty cistern. These holes in the ground, hewn into limestone, were water storage pits and were often hewn like a well, impossible to climb out of without a rope. The bottom was usually muddy silt that had washed in during rains. While the brothers were having lunch a band of Ishmaelites were travelling by on their way to trade with Egypt.

One of them gets the great idea of selling Joseph instead of letting him starve to death in the pit. That way they can profit from his demise. So they pull him up and sell him to the Ishmaelites. Reuben was out watching the flocks, and when he returns the boy is gone. He fears the boy's disappearance will be laid to his charge, so they invent a cover up. They are going to deceive the deceiver, Jacob. It sure seems to run in the family. They take Joseph's coat and mix it with the blood of an animal and take it back to Dad and say, "Look what we found. Could it be Joseph's?" Jacob/Israel goes into mourning. At least, he has Benjamin left, the only other child of Rachel.

God is doing something in Israel's life that He often does in ours. He pries from our grip the thing that we cling to so tenaciously. How are we going to put Him first when people and things are so desperately important to us? God is still

making Jacob into Israel. Jacob's transformation before meeting Esau was only a beginning. So often, we come to Christ and expect we will now be victorious over sin in every area of our life. But God is working out of us what He has already worked into us – the Life of Christ. If we aren't clinging to Him, but some other gift of God, we will find He must sever that strong tie. Jesus told his disciples that they had to forsake whatever stood in the way of learning (disciple means one who learns) from Him. He used the example of "*father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life...*" Luke 14:26 – as being things that could get in the way. For Israel, or should we say Jacob, it was these two favored sons.

We think of things that get in the way of our relationship with God as evil things, but it is often blessings like family and friends. The problem is not the thing itself. It is how we cling to it, set our heart upon it. And so, God separates us from friends, family, organizations, institutions, methods and locations to pull us out of our comfort zone. It is there we learn to sift the wheat from the chaff. We discover what was of God and what was of man, what will remain and what is passing. We sort out, over the following years, what it is we should learn, and what remains unshakable.

Isn't it true to life how we will let go of one thing and immediately cling to another? We later find that Benjamin filled the place in his father's heart that the supposed passing of Joseph had left. All things will pass from us or us from them. Our loving Father would shift our attention to the One who will never leave us or forsake us. He is the only One who should rightfully have that first place in our hearts. Let us return to Joseph.

Upon arriving in Egypt, Joseph is sold to Potiphar. Potiphar is the captain of Pharaoh's guard. A study in Joseph's life is a study in the Divine sovereignty of God. If Potiphar had not held such a position, Joseph would not have ended up in the particular section of prison that brought him into contact with the Pharaoh's cupbearer. Gen 39:1-5 (NIV)¹ *Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.*² *The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.*³ *When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did,*⁴ *Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.*⁵ *From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.*

We have almost no mention of Joseph's spiritual life, but we have hints through his reactions to the world around him. All those hints lead to the conclusion that

Joseph turned to God in his distress and God blessed him. God so blessed everything he did, that Potiphar, seeing this, made him his general manager. Joseph had quickly learned the lesson of Hagar – *Ishmael* – God hears my misery. It is interesting that those were the people who carried Him into Egypt. When God must send us through the fires of refinement and preparation, He goes with us. Did the very name of his captors comfort him and speak to his heart?

Gen 39:6-16 (NIV)⁶ So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome,⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"⁸ But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care.⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.¹¹ One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside.¹² She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.¹³ When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house,¹⁴ she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed.¹⁵ When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."¹⁶ She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home.

Here is one of those places we see the dedication to God that this young man had. We don't know his age at this time but it is somewhere between 18 and 27. Here is a young single guy in his prime, and a lovely but lonely lady who must have been beautiful. The Egyptians definitely had an idea of physical beauty and Potiphar's position would have given him the choice of loveliest women for a bride. But look at Joseph's way of dealing with temptation. We can learn a lesson from it for any type of temptation. He considered whom he would be sinning against. Potiphar had placed him over all in his house, but to take his wife would have been an insult and mockery of his trust. Then he stated clearly that it would be a sin against God. All sin is a sin against God. Like Potiphar, God had invested in Joseph and expected his faithfulness. He has invested in each of us! It is good for us to face the fact of Whom it is we sin against if we give in to temptation. Sin isn't just the breaking of a rule. It is a selfish and cruel response to a holy God who has blessed us. It is the shunning of His love in preference to self-love. If we come to grips with the reality of sin, in contrast to the lie Satan would describe it to be, we are less likely to fall for its seduction.

In the end of verse 10 we see another way of dealing with temptation, stay away from it! Coach Bill McCartney once said, "Make a clear line marking off sin and then stay 10 yards back." Joseph knew it was against his master and against God, so he refused to even be with her. Instead of flirting with the temptation, he didn't give opportunity to the temptation by keeping far from it. But when it snuck up on him – he ran. When you find yourself in the clutches of temptation – bolt. Flee just as fast as you can. Here is a man who realizes how destructive sin is and how devastating its consequences. If we are as wise, we too will flee temptation. Most of our running takes place within our minds as we run from thoughts that are from the old nature. Past failures and their consequences give us conviction to run in future temptations. Don't fall for Satan's lies a second time. It's too costly! Run!

Potiphar's wife, angry about not being able to get what she was after, lies about Joseph and accuses him of trying to rape her. Joseph is unjustly sent to the prison where the king's prisoners are held. Gen 39:20-23 (NIV)²⁰ *Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison,²¹ the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.²² So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there.²³ The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.*

The Lord was with him is mentioned twice. These things happened to them for examples. The Lord is with you and He will bless you. It does not matter what our conditions as long as the Lord is with us. Again, Joseph rises to the position of general manager over the king's prison. The king's cupbearer and baker are thrown in jail. They both have a dream. Joseph correctly interprets the dreams and they come to pass. He asks the cupbearer to please tell the king about his plight, but he is forgotten for years. Then the Pharaoh has a dream that no one can interpret. Finally the cupbearer remembers Joseph.

I can't imagine going through the trials that Joseph endured. He saw his brothers sell him into slavery. He watched the lying wife of Potiphar have him condemned to prison for being faithful. He spends years in prison. When he gets the perfect opportunity for a presidential pardon, he is forgotten by the man he helped. How would you feel? What would you be saying about God? What would your attitude toward God be? The old saying, "The darkest hour is just before the dawn", was probably never truer than at that time in his life. When you feel your cause is forgotten, like your vision of what God is doing in you and through you will never come to pass, stay faithful. The dawn arrives right on time, God's time. God has never left you and never will. He is fulfilling His purpose in you.

Joseph was 30 when the Pharaoh called him into his royal court. Gen 41:15-16 (NIV)¹⁵ *Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."* ¹⁶ *"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."* Joseph doesn't declare how wonderful his gift is. He doesn't give his credentials. He doesn't put himself forward at all. 14 years of servitude have humbled Joseph and prepared him for this moment. "I cannot do it." If only more men and women of God realized this and humbly professed it.. It reminds us of the Scripture from the Apostle Paul last week. "I know that in me, that is in my flesh dwells not good thing." Joseph knew it was not his ability, but God's.

"I can't, but God will." Joseph had utter conviction that God was willing and able to do it through him. He made sure God got all the glory. What a mighty God we serve. We know we can't, but when He lays the task before us, we also know in His time and His way, He will! Pharaoh tells the dream and Joseph gives him God's interpretation. Gen 41:38-40 (NIV)³⁸ *So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"*³⁹ *Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you."*⁴⁰ *You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."* God can trust Joseph not to let this position go to his head because Joseph has learned humility. We would readily say God wants to make us all famous. Joseph's position was influential and respected in the eyes of the world, but many men filled with the Spirit of God were despised by the world. The important thing is Joseph's relationship to God. In a right relationship God could use him in a mighty way, whether the world respected him or despised him.

Do you accept the circumstances of life as God's Divine hand molding you into an ever-deepening relationship with God, or are you questioning the Almighty? What a peaceful trust is ours when we place our trust and total confidence in the God who hears our misery. Have you learned with Joseph that His presence with you is all that is important, or do you seek something outside Him? He may have to separate us from something that is quite dear because we are so dear to Him. Are you so humble in the recognition that all is from God that you give Him all the glory? Then He can place you where He will and work freely through your life in the lowest places and in the highest. God is transforming our lives. In the breaking process He is making humble vessels He can fill with His Spirit. As the Potter, He will use each one as He wills, but His desire is not so much to use us, as it is for each of us to know Him and His presence with us.