

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28  
Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b  
Romans 10:5-15  
MATTHEW 14:22-33

## JOSEPH AND US

Ever want to get back at a “wise guy,” or someone you thought was a pretentious jerk? Ever resent someone younger than you at work who is the boss' favorite and looks like he's on a cushy road to a big job with few qualifications? Ever experience serious sibling rivalry in your family? Ever get tempted to deceive a parent of yours about what was really going on in the family? Ever imagine that you could do a dastardly deed with no consequences for you?

If you have ever answered “yes” to any of these questions, the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis is for you.

Ever been “framed” and punished for something you didn't do? Ever feel powerless, the repeated victim of forces beyond your control? Ever think, “Can things get any worse?” Ever get your hopes raised, and then crushed again? Ever wondered “Where the heck is God now that I really need help?” Ever have to wait for *years* for your circumstances to change for the better?

If you have ever answered “yes” to any of these questions, then the Joseph story in some way is your story, too.

Ever discover that “what goes around comes around”? Ever realize that God had been with you in your bleakest hours and God then led you unexpectedly to a wondrous new opportunity?

Ever have the opportunity to get back at the people who had hurt you the most in your life?

These elements and more, too, are part of the extraordinary story of the Patriarch Joseph, 11<sup>th</sup> son of Jacob, grandson of Isaac, great-grandson of Abraham, and savior of the people of Israel despite -- initially -- the best efforts of his older brothers.

I encourage you to sit down sometime this week and read the whole story of Joseph yourselves, in Chapter 37 and Chapter 39-50 of Genesis. It is vivid, gripping, accessible, and life-changing. You have been warned. It is one of “the Bible's greatest hits.” If you don't believe me, believe the great novelist Leo Tolstoy, who called this story and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount two of the biggest influences on him ever.

The patriarch Jacob gives us many examples of how *not* to behave toward other family members, as we have already seen in the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures in recent weeks, but to all of these he adds one more: he plays favorites among his children. Big mistake. Joseph was his favorite, and Jacob was not subtle about it, as we heard in today's reading, giving Joseph some fancy threads variously translated as a “coat of many colors” or a “coat with long sleeves.” The same term was used centuries later in King David's time for the beautiful robes given to princesses, so Joseph's robe was certainly not to be used by someone -- *like his older brothers* -- who had to do rugged, outdoor

work. The robe was the type for the bratty kid destined for the cushy desk job who already wanted to boss around the guys in the pickup trucks who were actually *doing* the work in the family business. As a robe like one for a princess, Joseph's coat probably looked effeminate as well. So his brothers resented him -- *especially* when he ran out to the fields to check on them and then ran back to Daddy to tell him everything he thought, in his 17 year-old wisdom, they were doing wrong.

In addition to this, Joseph dreamed dreams -- dreams in which, symbolically, his brothers and even his parents bowed down to him -- and he was naive enough to share these dreams with his family. Millennia before Freud, people put a lot of stock in dreams as foretellers of the future -- and as communications from God. The people of Israel, however, never developed a professional caste of dream interpreters as did Egypt and Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq). The only time dreams are related in the Old Testament (to Joseph and to Daniel) the interpretation is given by divine revelation, not by magic or science.

Nevertheless, when Joseph came out to a remote area to check up on his big brothers "they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of these pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.'"

Resentment, jealousy, anger at favoritism and at Joseph's easy life cooks in the brothers and finally boils over. But his oldest brother Reuben persuades them not to kill him but to strip him of his robe and throw him into a pit without water, perhaps merely to humiliate and scare him for a while. But while Reuben is away, Judah persuades his malleable other brothers to sell Joseph to some passing traders. So Joseph disappears, in shackles, into slavery in Egypt for 20 pieces of silver. The brothers, with good reason, never expect to see him again.

They then cover up their crime by slaughtering a goat and smearing Joseph's famous coat with its blood. Jacob, lacking the resources of CSI and DNA analysis to tell him what is really going on, understandably concludes that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. The conspiring brothers watch their father mourn profoundly for their brother, who they thought *was* as good as dead. Thankfully for *them*, however, God had a plan.

It adds extra power to this story to know that in the Second Millennium B.C. most people thought of their gods as local; the idea of there being one God for everyone everywhere would have been revolutionary. So Joseph, shackled to the chain of slaves on the way to Egypt, might have thought that not only was he beyond his father's help -- but beyond God's as well. Imagine the state of mind of this 17 year old youth whose charmed life had gone through such a sudden and disastrous transformation -- and at the hands of his own brothers. He would have many years to think about this.

But in the midst of his ordeal, the LORD was with Joseph. He was purchased by Potiphar, an Egyptian court official, and the LORD ensured that everything Joseph did prospered. Joseph was gradually promoted from field slave to house slave to slave in charge of the running of the entire estate. And all the while, this once-bratty teenager was growing up into a 20-something "hunk." Which Potiphar's wife noticed.

She tried to seduce him -- which Joseph resisted, protesting that not only would that be a wrong committed against her husband but a sin against God -- not the way pagans viewed adultery. She accused him falsely of doing what she had wanted, and without further adieu Joseph lost his position and was imprisoned without trial for an indeterminate amount of time.

Ever been accused unjustly? Ever lost a job or an opportunity because you refused to do something you knew was wrong? How about Joseph -- he was now a foreigner, a slave *and* a prisoner. Could someone fall any lower? He might well have prayed, "What's going on, God? I didn't do anything wrong! Why is all this happening to me?" His life was spared, surprisingly, but there may have been times when Joseph wondered if serving an indeterminate sentence in an ancient Egyptian prison was what you'd call "living."

But there is no place God's power can't reach. Everything Joseph did as a prisoner turned out well, and he became the prison "trustee." Then came what he *thought* would be his big break: Pharaoh's butler and baker were thrown into the same prison, both had dreams, and God gave Joseph the interpretation of both dreams. Joseph shared the interpretations, but after the fates of both the butler and the baker came out as predicted, the butler -- though restored to freedom and Pharaoh's favor -- forgets to put in a good word for Joseph.

Ever have to *wait* for justice, for freedom, for opportunity? It was *thirteen years* between the time Joseph was sold into slavery and the time his real heaven-sent opportunity came: when *Pharaoh* had a dream which the professional dream interpreters couldn't fathom, and the butler remembered that there was a prisoner in Pharaoh's dungeon who could interpret dreams.

The now 30 year old Joseph had his big break, and he made the most of it. His God-given interpretation of Pharaoh's dream was that Egypt would have seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine -- and he added that Pharaoh ought to take advantage of this "heads up" from God to "select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt," and take 20% of the harvests from the seven prosperous years and store them against the coming famine.

Pharaoh looked at Joseph and said, "I know just the guy for that job," and in the blink of an eye Joseph was liberated from prison, liberated from slavery, made Secretary of Agriculture and Prime Minister of Egypt, given a wife from an Egyptian noble family, all the bling he could wear...you get the picture. And, oh, yes, part of his job was to issue permits (or not) to *foreigners* who wanted to come to Egypt to buy food. People from places like, say, Canaan.

So it was that one day after the famine had hit both Egypt and Canaan, when the now mature Joseph was enthroned in full Egyptian regalia and assisted by a translator to talk to foreign supplicants, into his audience chamber to ask for permission to buy food during the famine in Canaan came...*his brothers*, who (in fulfillment of his boyhood dreams), bowed down to him. He recognized them, but they did not recognize him.

Joseph was the right hand man to an absolute monarch whose subjects thought he was divine. There were no limits for Joseph: no Bill of Rights, no Geneva Convention,

no ACLU, no Red Cross, no foreign embassy, no nosy reporters, nothing. He could have done *absolutely anything* to whatever foreigners came knocking -- simply have them imprisoned indefinitely on trumped-up charges, have them executed, have them killed by his soldiers “while resisting arrest” on their way out of town -- or something slow and painful.

Joseph was *an adult survivor of child abuse* who suddenly had his abusers in the palm of his hand. (I think being threatened with murder and then sold into slavery qualifies as abuse.)

What would you have done?

What if you suddenly had absolute power over whoever it is who has hurt you the most in *your* life? What would you do? And what if you had suffered as much as Joseph, and for 13 long years? What would you have done?

What Joseph does first is play a “cat and mouse game” with his brothers, imprisoning them briefly on charges of spying -- long enough for him to overhear them saying “this is happening to us because of what we did to Joseph.” What goes around comes around. And then he orders them to bring their youngest brother, Benjamin -- Joseph's only full brother and the only one not part of the plot against him -- to his presence in Egypt, or they would not be allowed to buy food again. And when Benjamin comes on their return trip, Joseph has his own silver cup planted in Benjamin's saddle bag, arrests the brothers and then says he will imprison only Benjamin, his father's new favorite. The brothers know that if Benjamin does not return home, their father -- who they deceived and broke his heart years ago already -- will now probably die of a broken heart.

Joseph waits to see if the brothers will abandon Benjamin to his fate the way they delivered him to his fate years before. *Have they changed?*

Then *Judah* -- the very brother who had created the plan to sell Joseph as a slave - - steps forward and offers to be a slave to Joseph forever if he will let Benjamin go free and go home to their father. Judah has changed.

Joseph can no longer control his emotions when he sees the transformation in his brother. He orders all his attendants out of the room -- including his translator -- and then for the first time he faces his brothers directly, from his throne, and speaks to them directly, in Hebrew: **“I am Joseph...I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into slavery.”**

Can you imagine the terror in the hearts of his brothers? Can you imagine what they thought might be in store for them?

But no; this, at the last, is a story -- a *true* story -- not just about God's providential care for Joseph during the long years of his imprisonment, and about God's miraculous provision of an opportunity for him to change his fortunes radically. This is a story about **grace** and **forgiveness**, and of Joseph's realization that his own years of suffering were indispensable to God's plan for deliverance. If Joseph had not been a slave in a prison in Egypt he would never have been in a position to interpret Pharaoh's dream and then change and be in charge of Egyptian policy and save the lives of many

people -- *including the lives of his brothers and their families and their father* who, together with him and his sons, comprised the entire future nation of Israel.

To the utter astonishment of his brothers, Joseph forgives them and invites them all to move to Egypt to some choice land, after they go back home to pick up their old man -- Jacob -- and their children. “Guess what, Dad? Joseph is still alive and is Prime Minister of Egypt!” Ever been surprised? I doubt if you've ever been as surprised as Jacob was. Maybe the presence of the stretch limo with license plates “Egypt 2” come to pick him up in his drive way made him a believer that this was so.

Can people change? Is forgiveness possible? Is God at work to bring good from evil? Let us read this ancient story and see God at work in it. Then, let us ask to be a part of God's writing this story anew in our time with us.

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