

Average Joes

Faithful in Spite of Adversity:
Genesis 37

Joseph in the Story of Genesis

The book of Genesis tells two main stories: the history of the world (1-11) and the history of Israel (12-50). The Joseph story comes at the end of the book of Genesis (37-50). With Genesis 12, God begins a new work in the world through one man, Abraham. God chooses Abraham from all the people in the world to be the beginning of a new race of people, God's chosen people, the Israelites. God promises Abraham three things: a nation, a land, and a blessing (12:1-3; 13:14-17). The rest of Genesis begins to unfold how that promise is going to occur.

As we read Genesis, we realize that it's going to take an amazing work of God for this promise to come true. Abraham, while a man of great faith in God, is also a man prone to sin. The same goes for his son Isaac. Isaac's love for his son Esau and his wife Rebekah's love for their son Jacob nearly tears the family apart. Jacob, whom God chooses to carry on the promise that was made to Abraham is not the godliest man either. His story is characterized by treachery and deceit.

At this point you might be wondering if God chose the wrong family to start his great nation. Despite their failings, however, the patriarchs of Israel slowly learn to trust God and live by that faith.

By the time of Joseph's story Jacob and his sons are living as strangers in Canaan. Although this is the land that God has promised to Abraham's descendants, they are too small (and seemingly too dysfunctional) to take possession of the land.

At this point in the story of Genesis we begin to wonder, how will God turn this little family into a great nation? When will this family learn that they should always trust God? How will God use them to be a blessing to the whole world? It's with these questions in the background that we come to the story of Joseph. Through Joseph, we see how God will continue to fulfill his promise to Abraham and through him redeem the world.



Digging
Deeper

September 13, 2009

*You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for
good to accomplish what is
now being done, the saving
of many lives.
Genesis 50:20*

*Digging Deeper is always
available for download at
www.alpinechurch.org*

Themes in the Joseph Story

Joseph is the patriarch with which modern readers can identify most easily. He is a spoiled brat who through adversity develops into a mature and competent leader. He is the unfairly persecuted boy who eventually becomes top man and shows magnanimity to his persecutors. He is the one despised and rejected by his family who ultimately is the agent of their salvation and countless others. More than that, the story of Joseph shows how God's secret providence is behind the darkest deeds of men and works to their ultimate good. It is thus both a very realistic story and also profoundly optimistic. It is little wonder that it has delighted generations of hearers.

But certainly it was not included in the Pentateuch merely to entertain and encourage ancient Israelites. It has a most important theological message and, indeed, is integral to the plot and theme of the Pentateuch.

First, the story of Joseph links the history of the patriarchs with their settlement in Egypt. It explains how Jacob and his sons, who had been living in Canaan, came to settle in Egypt, from where centuries later they left to go first to Sinai and then back to the land of promise. The Joseph story also continues to unfold the partial fulfillment of the promises made to the Israelite patriarchs. In the story the family of Israel grows from twelve to seventy, and Jacob sees in each of his sons a great tribe, but by the end of Genesis this has not been fully realized. Finally, we see that through Joseph "all the families of the earth" begin to "find blessing" (Gen. 12:3). This is apparent to Potiphar, who noticed that "the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands" (39:3), but even more so when worldwide famine struck, for then "all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain" (Gen. 41:57). Through Joseph's efforts, not only was his own family saved from starvation, but also the Egyptians and many neighboring peoples were delivered. So also in this respect the promise to Abraham was partially fulfilled (Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 358).

The story of Joseph plays a pivotal role in the Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy). The story relates back to God's promise to Abraham in Gen. 15:13-16 and also prepares the reader for Israel's upcoming exodus from Egypt. It also emphasizes dreams, because when several of God's leaders were in bondage in foreign countries, God appeared to them by this means. You can see the parallels in the accounts of Abraham, Daniel, and the dreams of Joseph, Jesus' earthly stepfather. This section also shows how the seed of Israel was preserved (50:20) in spite of famine in the land. Although the ground was still cursed (Gen. 3), God continued to protect his own people. Jacob was buried in the land, and Joseph would be also. Although this section ends with a coffin, that fact is not bad. Joseph's command to take his coffin to the Promised Land represents the hope of God's future visit to the world (50:24) to make possible the salvation of mankind (Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, Tyndale, 20).

Background for Joseph

When the account of Joseph begins, Jacob and his family have been back in the land of Canaan for about a decade. They have resumed their vocations as itinerant herders. The favoritism that Jacob felt for Rachel has apparently transferred to her older son, Joseph, for Jacob bestows special status on Joseph. Most scholars acknowledge that status, not just favor, is what the special coat represents. Nevertheless, the description of the coat remains obscure. While the traditional interpretation that it was a coat of many colors is still popularly held, most commentators favor something more along the line of a full-length coat or a long-sleeved coat, either of which would indicate that Joseph is management, not labor (John Walton, *NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, Zondervan, 662-663).

The “richly ornamented robe” (37:3) that Jacob made for Joseph visually illustrates the father's preferential love for Joseph. As such the writer continually returns to the coat throughout the remainder of the story as a way of reminding the reader of this central issue in the narrative (37:23, 31, 32, 33). Jacob's preferential treatment of Joseph was the central problem that initiated the action of the story, for it angered Joseph's brothers and turned them against him (37:4). Eventually their anger resulted in the plan to do away with him altogether. But first, adding to their hatred, Joseph recounted to his brothers two dreams, both of which end with the image of his brothers bowing down to him. The picture of the brothers bowing down to Joseph foreshadows the conclusion of the story where, because he is ruler of the land of Egypt, his brothers bowed down to him. Thus on that occasion the narrative reminds us that Joseph “remembered his dreams about them” (42:9).

Ironically, however, the manner in which the book of Genesis was composed suggests that the picture of Joseph and his brothers foreshadows even further the relationship between Judah and his brothers as pictured in Jacob's words in 49:8, “Judah... your father's sons will bow down to you.” The picture of Joseph is transcended by that of Judah, just as the blessing that the sons of Joseph received in chapter 48 is transcended by that of Judah in chapter 49 (John H. Sailhmer, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis*, Zondervan, 226).

The details of the brother's plans are given as well as their motivation. Behind their plans lie Joseph's two dreams. Little did they suspect that the very plans that they were then scheming were to lead to the fulfillment of those dreams. In every detail of the narrative the writer's purpose shows through, that is, to demonstrate the truthfulness of Joseph's final words to his brother: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (50:20) (Sailhamer, 229).

The dreams in this chapter are the first of three pairs of dreams that are found in the Joseph story (see 40:1-41:36), but the only pair that is dreamed by Joseph himself. Joseph's own dreams foretell his own career and particularly look forward to his brothers' coming to Egypt to buy food and their bowing down before the lord of the land, who, unknown to them, is their brother Joseph. Like Pharaoh's two dreams, which are said to be one, it seems likely that both of Joseph's dreams are making a single point, namely that his family will one day bow down to him, not that they will do so on two occasions. The doubling of the dream suggests, rather, the certainty of fulfillment, that “the thing is established by God” (41:32).

However, while the later pairs of dreams are officially interpreted by Joseph with God's help (40:8; 41:16, 25, 28), there is no mention of God in 37:5-11. This makes it uncertain whether Joseph's dreams are revelatory or merely the product of his own inflated ego. Clearly this is how his brothers viewed the dreams, so they simply served to fuel their existing hatred of him (Wenham, 351).

Favoritism has a long history in Jacob's family. Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob, Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau, and most pertinently Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (25:28; 29:30). His old love for Rachel is now transferred to Joseph, Rachel's son. It is therefore hardly surprising that “they hated him,” but that it is said three times (verses 4, 5, 8) indicates the intensity of their feelings. Once again, parental attitudes are emerging in the children. Leah is twice described as “hated,” so in turn her sons “hate” (29:31, 33) (Wenham, 350).

Geography

From their home base in the Valley of Hebron (37:14), Shechem is just over fifty miles, and Dothan is about fourteen more. The journey would have taken Joseph four or five days. Dothan, a large city, was occupied during this period. It is by a valley that cuts through the Carmel range, joining the coastal plains and the Jezreel Valley.

In this area, cisterns were either hollowed out of limestone bedrock or dug in the ground and lined with plaster. Since most of Israel's rainfall is confined to three of four months of the year, these cisterns collected the rainwater and made it available during the dry period. It was not unusual that during part of the year they were dry, making them an available temporary jail for Joseph while his brothers decided what to do with him (Walton, 665).

Home Group Questions

1. Share about a time when you felt God's presence. What were your life circumstances at the time? How did feeling God's presence change the way you looked at your life?

2. Why does God tend to shake us of the things that make us comfortable?

3. Why do many people fall further away from God when they face adversity?

4. What can we do to prepare ourselves for adversity?

5. Do you think it was necessary for Joseph to go through his experience of being sold into slavery?

6. How does understanding God's promises to us help us through times of adversity (see Hebrews 13:5)?

7. Read Psalm 23. What do we learn about God's presence from this passage?

Questions for Personal Application

8. How will you respond to the adversity that comes in your life? Will you see God's presence through your trials? How have you responded to adversity in the past? How can this help you prepare for future trials?