

The Story (2) – Joseph in God's Story

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I. Review and Introduction

A. Two weeks ago we did a flyover of Genesis 1-11, from creation to Abraham. We saw that the eternal God created all things in the beginning, meaning during the six days of the creation week which was the beginning of the universe and all existence other than God.

B. Upon completion creation was pronounced "very good." It was an idyllic and blessed existence; there was no death and all things were functioning in the way God desired. But soon, Satan used a serpent to tempt mankind into sinning against God.

C. The sin plague that Adam and Eve introduced into the human realm, the physical world we inhabit, intensified and spread so that the very good creation was thoroughly corrupted. As a result, God judged the world in his holy and righteous wrath by bringing a cataclysmic worldwide flood that killed all people and all air-breathing land animals and birds. But in his great mercy he spared righteous Noah, his family, and the animals and birds that accompanied them on the ark.

D. We saw that sin came through the flood with Noah and his family into the "new," post-flood world, which reveals the depth and extent of Sin's grip on mankind. Despite the opportunity for a new beginning that God had provided for mankind, we continued on our sinful course, living in rebellion to God.

E. As I said two weeks ago, the creation we experience is not the way it is supposed to be. It is no longer a paradise where all things work together in peace and harmony under God's rule. Instead it is infected with things like anger, division, hatred, violence, destruction, disease, death, decay, lying, stealing, suffering, sorrow, and pain. The flood demonstrates for us that God cannot rescue his creation simply by killing off sinners because Sin has infected everyone.

F. Clearly some kind of extraordinary work was going to be necessary to heal the sin-sick world, to restore the broken creation that it might be all that God intends it to be. And we see that work begin to take shape in the calling of Abram (later Abraham) in Genesis 12. God calls this man and promises to bless him with a multitude of descendants living securely in a bountiful homeland and promises to bless *all the nations of the world through him*.

G. The veiled statement of Gen. 3:15 that a man, a descendant of Eve, would win the ultimate victory over Satan is now narrowed by God's election of Abraham. Of all the people of all the nations, this Messiah who would bless the world through the defeat of Satan is going to come in the lineage of Abraham.

H. I cannot dwell on Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, as the lesson today is to be about Joseph, but note that the family line of the Messiah is further traced through Abraham's son Isaac (Gen. 26:4 – in your offspring all nations of the earth shall be blessed) and through Isaac's son Jacob (Gen. 28:14 – in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed).

II. Joseph's story

A. As most of you know, Isaac's son Jacob had by exploitation and deception taken from his older twin brother, Esau, both the birthright (the disproportionate inheritance to which the eldest was entitled) and the blessing (the covenant blessing, the privilege of being the child of promise), so Esau was intending to kill him. To protect Jacob, his mother, Rebekah, manipulated Isaac into sending him to her brother Laban in Haran to find a wife.

B. There is much that happens to Jacob in and on the way to and from Haran that we must skip over, but while he was in Haran he had six sons and one daughter by wife Leah, two sons by Leah's servant, Zilpah, two sons by Rachel's servant, Bilhah, and finally had a son by his beloved wife Rachel. When she had given birth, Rachel said (Gen. 30:23), "God has taken away my reproach," and she named the son Joseph (Gen. 30:24), saying, "May the Lord add to me another son!" Joseph means "May he add."

C. After Joseph was born, Jacob worked for his uncle Laban another six years. He then, in accordance with God's directive, moved his family back to his homeland, the promise land. (It was on that journey back home that Jacob was given the name Israel.) The Lord did indeed grant Rachel another son, but that was after Jacob and his family had returned to Canaan. As they traveled from Shechem to Ephrath (Bethlehem), Rachel died outside of Ephrath giving birth to Jacob's twelfth son, Benjamin. The family continued on to Hebron where Jacob's father Isaac was still living at the time.

D. The story of Joseph occupies roughly the last quarter of the book of Genesis. It begins in Genesis 37 where we are told that Joseph at age seventeen was tending Jacob's flock with his older brothers. He was "with" or "helping" the sons of Bilhah (Dan, Naphtali) and Zilpah (Gad, Asher) and apparently became aware of conduct on the part of his brothers that he felt obligated to report to his father. This event probably is recounted to provide an opening glimpse of young Joseph's character; he is a dutiful son who puts faithfulness to his father above popularity with his brothers.

E. Jacob (Israel) loved Joseph more than his other sons because he was a son of Jacob's old age, as was Benjamin. They were Jacob's last two sons, the sons born of his beloved Rachel who was barren until Jacob's later years. I assume Joseph was the favored son of Jacob's old age because Rachel had died giving birth to Benjamin, so the joy of his birth would have been mixed with bitterness. Jacob made his favoritism of Joseph open and obvious by making him a special and distinctive robe. Whether the robe was multicolored, richly ornamented, or simply had long sleeves is disputed, but it clearly was special and distinctive and was a visual testimony of Jacob's preference for Joseph. The result of this blatant favoritism was that Joseph's brothers hated him so intensely that they could not speak kindly to him.

F. Their hatred for Joseph was magnified when he told them of his dream that when they were all out binding sheaves in the field his sheaf stood up and all their sheaves bowed down to it. When he told his father and brothers about another dream in which the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing before him, even his father rebuked him for airing the idea that they would all bow before him. Genesis 37:11 says, "And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind."

G. One day Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brothers who were out tending Jacob's flock in Shechem. He learned they actually were in Dothan, about fourteen miles north of Shechem, so he went to them there. His brothers saw him when he was still far off and decided they were going to kill him and throw his body into a cistern (a pit for storing water that was dug into limestone and plastered). Reuben, the eldest son, persuaded the brothers to hold Joseph in a cistern instead of killing him, presumably by arguing that that would give them more time to think about what to do with him. In fact, Reuben was planning to rescue him. So when Joseph arrived they stripped him of his hated robe and threw him into an empty cistern.

H. Unfortunately for Reuben's rescue plan, his brother Judah saw a caravan of Ishmaelites/Midianites (the people fit both designations) heading to Egypt and persuaded the brothers to sell Joseph to them as a slave. To cover their evil deed, they slaughtered a goat, dipped Joseph's coat in the blood, and then took it to their father as proof that an animal had devoured Joseph.

I. The Ishmaelites/Midianites sold Joseph to Potiphar, a high-ranking officer of Pharaoh. Genesis 39 recounts that, by the Lord's blessing, Joseph rose to prominence in Potiphar's house and wound up being in charge of Potiphar's entire household. He was trusted with everything.

J. Joseph was a well-built and handsome young man (Gen. 39:6), and after a while Potiphar's wife flat out propositioned him when they were alone in the house.

1. Now this is a real test of his faithfulness. Given that he was a young, unmarried man, and given how this come-on would have stoked the male ego, I am certain there was a part of him that would have loved to hop in bed with this woman. It would have been a tremendous temptation. All that physical pleasure, and it would have been their little secret.

2. It is because I feel sure the temptation would have been so great that I so much admire Joseph's response in Gen. 39:8-9 (ESV): "*Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. ⁹ He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?*"

3. Here is a living faith in God, a faith that dictates his conduct despite how much part of him may have wanted to do wrong and despite the fact his sin would go undiscovered by other people. He refused to break faith with God; that commitment trumped all else. As the song goes, "Lord, give us such a faith as this!"

K. And this was not a one-shot deal. Genesis 39:10 says that Potiphar's wife pressed him day after day trying to break down his resistance, trying to seduce him, but Joseph would not listen to her.

L. One day when they were alone in the house, she grabbed Joseph's garment and said "Lie with me." Joseph just took off and literally ran out of the house leaving his garment in her hand. She then falsely accused Joseph of having tried to rape her, claiming he had left the garment behind when she screamed, so Potiphar threw him in prison. The fact Potiphar did not have him killed may indicate he had some suspicions about his wife's story or it may simply be an indication that the Lord protected Joseph.

1. Joseph certainly was in no position to try to defend himself. It would be his word against Potiphar's wife, and accusing a man's wife of being unfaithful without proof is not a wise course of action, all the more when you are a foreign slave and he is a powerful man in the country.

2. You can imagine that being thrown in prison after having honored God by resisting a powerful temptation might be a blow to Joseph's faith. Here he is being faithful to God and he winds up suffering as a result! But, as you know, Joseph's faith is deeper than that; it trusts in God even when he acts in ways that make no sense to us at the time. Indeed, his faithfulness in the matter of Potiphar's wife was after he had been sold into slavery. This is before the outlines of God's larger work began to come into view.

3. This is where so much of the struggle of faith happens in life, between my state of suffering and my understanding of its role in any larger plan. Can I continue to trust that God has me in his hand when I cannot see what he possibly can be doing? Suffering in that "dark space" tests a person's faith.

M. By God's blessing, Joseph is eventually put in charge of the prisoners, just as he had risen to prominence in Potiphar's house. Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker were thrown into Joseph's prison. One night they both had dreams, which Joseph interpreted. He told the cupbearer that in three days he would be restored to his position, and Joseph asked the cupbearer to convey his innocence to Pharaoh when that happened. He told the baker that he would be hanged in three days. Both interpretations came to pass, but the cupbearer forgot to tell Pharaoh about Joseph.

N. Two years later, Pharaoh had a couple of troubling dreams that no one could interpret for him. The cupbearer told Pharaoh that Joseph had accurately interpreted his and the baker's dreams, so Pharaoh sent for Joseph.

1. Joseph, by the revelation of God, told Pharaoh that his dreams meant there were coming seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine, and Joseph suggested that Pharaoh initiate a grain conservation and storage program so that he would have grain during the famine. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of the project because his ability to interpret the dreams showed that God was granting him extraordinary discernment and wisdom.

2. Joseph was 30 years old at that time (Gen. 41:46). He was given an Egyptian name (Zaphenath-paneah) and an Egyptian wife and then traveled around Egypt storing up grain.

O. When the famine hit, it was so bad that people from the entire region were coming to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph. In Genesis 42, Jacob sends his sons, except Benjamin, to Egypt to buy grain. Not surprisingly, they did not recognize Joseph as their brother. It had been many years since they had seen him, he was using an interpreter, and he was in a position they could not have imagined.

P. Joseph manipulated the situation to get them to bring Benjamin to Egypt. He told them they could confirm their story and thus prove they were not spies by bringing to him the younger brother they claimed had remained in Canaan with their father. I think he is looking to see if they had learned anything about the bond of brotherhood and what it means to love their father through the dastardly thing they had done to him. Were they now different, were they the kind of people with whom he could be reconciled, or would they treat Rachel's only other son, Benjamin, with the same lack of love they had shown to him and again break their father's heart?

Q. Benjamin eventually was brought to Egypt. Joseph sent them on their way but planted his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. He then sent his servants after them to discover the planted cup, and he brought them all back under the accusation they had stolen from him. Joseph told them they could return to their father but that Benjamin had to remain as his slave. Judah, the brother who conceived the idea to sell Joseph into slavery, begged Joseph to take him instead of Benjamin because his father could not take the loss of his only other son by Rachel.

R. Joseph now saw his brothers as men with whom he could be reconciled, men who had learned that Rachel's sons are no less their brothers and are too precious to their father to be treated otherwise. Judah was now willing to be a slave rather than allow that fate to befall Benjamin, quite a turnaround from the person who orchestrated Joseph's sale into slavery. Joseph ordered everyone out and then in a tremendously emotional moment revealed himself to his brothers.

S. Joseph's deep faith in God is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in his statement to his brothers in Gen. 45:5-8 (ESV): ⁵ *And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.* ⁶ *For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest.* ⁷ *And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.* ⁸ *So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.*

1. He continued to trust in God through the years when it was not clear what God was doing. He was sold as a slave and then saw his faithfulness rewarded with years of imprisonment, but he continued to trust that his life was in God's hands.

2. When God allowed him to see the pivotal role he was playing in the preservation of the covenant people, he allowed him to see his faith vindicated. God let him see how privileged he was to suffer as an instrument of God's blessing.

3. We often cannot see what God is doing in our circumstances, and we are tempted to doubt if he is at work, but we need to hold to him in the darkness. If we are not allowed to see in this life how our struggles fit within God's larger picture, we will see it someday.

T. Jacob and his family settled in Egypt and lived under the blessing of Joseph's rule. Jacob died there at the age of 147 (Gen. 47:28). His body was embalmed and then taken to Canaan for interment in the cave of Machpelah at Hebron. Joseph died in Egypt around 54 years later at the age of 110.

III. Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38

A. As I said, the Joseph narrative begins in Genesis 37 and occupies the remainder of Genesis (through chapter 50), but inserted as Genesis 38 is the seemingly odd story of Judah, one of Joseph's brothers, and Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law.

1. In brief, Judah's Canaanite wife bore him three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. The eldest son, Er, married Tamar, but the Lord put him to death because of his wickedness. The middle son, Onan, refused to fulfill his duty to impregnate his brother's widow so as to provide an heir for Er and children to care for Tamar in her old age. Onan presumably did not want Tamar to have children because without them Er's estate would pass to him. Onan's misconduct displeased the Lord, who put him to death as he had the wicked Er.

2. Judah tells Tamar to wait until his youngest son, Shelah, is old enough to marry her, but after Shelah had grown up and had not been given to Tamar as a husband, she realized that Judah was not going to make good on that promise. So after Judah's wife died, when he would be particularly vulnerable to sexual temptation, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and was impregnated by Judah without him knowing who she was. Judah gave her several personal items as security for his later payment for her "services."

3. When it became obvious that Tamar was pregnant, Judah wanted her put to death for sexual immorality, but she then produced the personal items he had given her as proof that he was the one who had impregnated her. In Gen. 38:26 Judah confesses, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah."

B. I think account is here, embedded in the Joseph narrative, to signal the significance of Judah's lineage. That lineage was in jeopardy with two sons having already been killed and the last being withheld from his brother's widow, and act of defiance that God would hardly bless. But Judah's lineage was preserved despite his wrongdoing through Tamar's action.

C. As we see in Gen. 49:8-10, it is from Judah that the ruler will come who will defeat the Lord's enemies. In other words, the Messiah, the offspring of the woman who will triumph over the serpent, will be from the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, *and Judah*. So Joseph's preservation of the covenant people is cast as being especially significant in its preservation of

the Judah subset of those covenant people. Indeed, Mat. 1:3 and Lk. 3:33 include in the Lord's genealogy Perez, one of the twin sons that Judah had by Tamar (Zerah being the other).

IV. God's Mysterious Ways

A. Notice the time frame of God's working. A couple of centuries have elapsed from his promise to Abraham, and yet he was working as sure as I am standing here.

B. And notice the inscrutability of his ways, as Paul exclaims in Rom. 11:33. Why gather Israel's descendants in Egypt to preserve them from the danger of the famine instead of making it rain where they were? You see, God is weaving a tapestry from a perspective that only he has. We are embedded in the fibers and so often cannot see why he does what he does, but stories like Joseph leave no doubt that he is weaving regardless of whether we can see it.

V. Joseph's End

A. Genesis 50:24-25 (ESV) states: ²⁴ *And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."* ²⁵ *Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here."* Heb. 11:22 states: *By faith Joseph, when at the end of life, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel and gave instructions regarding his bones.*

B. At the end of his life, Joseph expressed his continuing faith in God. Though he and the entire family of Israel had lived in Egypt for many decades, he trusted that God would be true to his promise and would one day bring them into the promise land, the land he had sworn to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

C. Joseph's instruction was that when that day came that his bones were not to be left behind. Exodus 13:19 (ESV) states: *Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here."*