

The Joseph Story | Broken Family/Beautiful Plan

Descent and Refining

Rev. T.J. Campo

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Genesis 39

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. ²

The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. ³ **Now his master saw that the LORD was with him** and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. ⁴ So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. ⁵ It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD'S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field.

⁶ So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. ⁷ It came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." ⁸ But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. ⁹ "There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" ¹⁰ As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her.

¹¹ Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. ¹² She caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside. ¹³ When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, ¹⁴ she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed. ¹⁵ "When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled and went outside." ¹⁶ So she left his garment beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷ Then she spoke to him with these words, "The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me; ¹⁸ and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside." ¹⁹ Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," his anger burned.

²⁰ So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail. ²¹ **But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him**, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. ²² The chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. ²³ The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because **the LORD was with him**; and whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper.

This is our third week looking at this long story at the end of Genesis. It's almost one third of the entire book. It's the TENTH and final "toledot" as it's called in Hebrew, meaning "generation" which is the way the whole Book of Genesis is organized. Chapter 37 starts with the words, "These are the records of the generations of Jacob" i.e. this is the story of Jacob and his sons – the great grandsons of Abraham who became the heads of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

We've already seen in the first two teachings that this is NOT a particularly happy or well-adjusted family and they ARE, in fact, *a deeply broken family* with multiple marriages and favoritism and sibling rivalry and *jealousy that eventually becomes violent*.

Today, we want to look primarily at the chapter we just read in the Joseph Story but also at least refer to the chapter we skipped (38). We skipped it because we covered it last year in a series called *Scandals in the Line* (which is still Online...if you care to look at it) but we don't want to forget that very sad and ugly chapter because it reminds us *that the Joseph Story is also the Judah Story*. The Tribe of Judah, as we'll see IS the Messianic Line. *Judah is Joseph's older brother* and he is the chosen leader...but he abdicates that role and *in the vacuum...* Joseph becomes the placeholder. Joseph is the substitute or *stand-in* until Judah owns up to his calling.

Last week, the brothers took their father's spoiled favorite and sold him to a caravan of slave traders. Then there's a whole long chapter devoted to Judah (kind of a "*meanwhile-back-at-the-ranch*" scene) and THEN we pick up in today's chapter (39) *right where we left off*. If we look at the whole story, we get a vision of what God does to us...I mean what is His purpose for us?...What goal is He working toward in our lives...in the here-and-now? And how does knowing what that goal/purpose IS...how will a clear vision of that inform our daily lives? Let's look at: 1) The Story in Context 2) A Study in Contrasts

This is a pretty famous episode, "Joseph in the House of Potiphar". Rembrandt depicted a couple scenes and one of the etchings is pretty rough. And to set the stage again: the spoiled, favored son, Joseph, is made supervisor to all his older brothers. He then has dreams (that are actually *inspired by God*), dreams where Joseph is exalted and powerful and where all his family sees Joseph's glory. And Joseph sort of brags about these revelations and that's when his brother's say, "He's gotta go!" And that's when the older brother Judah proposes the scheme to sell Joseph to these slave traders and make a buck AND then to *DIP* the "Technicolor Dreamcoat" in blood and tell Father Jacob that his pet must have been eaten by wolves. So Joseph goes down to Egypt and is sold at an auction as a slave. AND I WONDER what Joseph was thinking when the brothers actually went through with it! *I wonder what Joseph was THINKING about those very vivid DREAMS.*

I'm thinking of these talent-show contestants who are utterly certain that they are the next superstars and then Simon Cowell says, "You are possibly the worst singer I've ever heard!" AS he walked away on his long journey DOWN...DOWN...into Egypt did Joseph think, "*You guys are kidding...right? Guys? Brothers? What about those dreams??*"

And then we skipped a whole chapter about Judah and *then* we pick up where we left off with Joseph arriving in Egypt.

And the chapter we skipped (38) actually covers many years. It traces the fate of Judah while Joseph is in Egypt. It begins with Judah leaving the family. Maybe he was disgusted to be a part of such a band of pirates and barbarians (*I remind you that this was the family God had chosen to save the world and out of which Jesus Christ would be born!*) So, he leaves the “brothers” and marries a pagan woman. (“The pagans sacrifice their babies...but we wait til they grow up...so what’s the difference?”)

Then they have three sons and the oldest son is really a horrible person and marries a pagan woman named Tamar but *then he dies*. Then, according to the custom, Judah, the dad, gives the second son to father children by Tamar (so she can have protection and a family as she ages) but this son refuses to father children and instead uses Tamar for sex...like a thing. Then he dies. Two sons DOWN.

Now Judah decides, “This girl is bad news” (like a black widow) so he withholds the third son. Then Tamar who really wants to be included in this family (not because they’re honorable folks...*but evidently because she knows something about them and their God*) Tamar dresses like a temple prostitute with a veil over her face and offers her services to Judah but he’s broke so she makes him leave his driver’s license and debit card as collateral. And he does it because he’s that kind ‘a guy.

Later, she turns up pregnant and Judah (who has no idea that he’s the father) gets all self-righteous and chauvinistic and *wants the death penalty for Tamar*, and THAT’S when she produces the collateral that he left behind...HIS DRIVER’S LICENSE and debit card. She says “I’m pregnant from the man who owns these.”

And suddenly JUDAH...has to face his own sin...and his horrible hypocrisy and chauvinism and his abdication of his role as leader in the family and he admits, “She is more righteous than I am...” AND as we saw last year the child born from that pregnancy is included in the family tree of Jesus Christ.

AND THIS seems to be the moment...*when Judah’s turnaround began*. The guy who plotted Joseph’s sale into slavery and plotted *the big lie to Dad* (that left Dad so broken that he NEVER recovered) this guy, Judah, now begins to change...and later we’ll see the real fruit of that transformation.

THEN, the writer takes us DOWN into Egypt to see what’s been happening during these same years, what’s been happening with Joseph.

Joseph must’ve been wondering about those DREAMS! The dreams said that he was gonna be a star... was going UP...but *instead* he went DOWN, into the pit and DOWN, DOWN, DOWN into

Egypt. He must've wondered if those dreams were not real... maybe just delusions of grandeur/faerie tales. Maybe they were not Good News from God!

And then...he went UP...was purchased by a very powerful, wealthy man! Things are looking up! Maybe those dreams were from God!

AND *where God was missing from the last time we read about little Joe* (ch. 37) – you may remember from last week that there was NOT a single reference to God in that whole chapter! BUT THAT IS NOT THE CASE HERE! In fact, the covenant Name of Israel's God shows up eight times here (and only once more in the rest of Genesis) – the writer wants us to know, “the LORD (YHWH) was with Joseph” and it's repeated four times in this one chapter.

God is not missing here and even the pagans know *there's something special about this young man*. In fact before long, Joseph is in charge of everything in Potiphar's house. He only has to put the food in his own mouth – everything else is done for him!

And THEN, with everything in his charge...and that word, “everything” and “all”, repeated again and again...NOW Joseph who went down to the pit and down, down, down into Egypt...now things are looking up and he MUST'VE thought, “Ah-HA! I *KNEW* those dreams were from God! I always *KNEW* they'd come true!”

And THEN there's this situation (a desperate housewife!). He gets tested and responds to this sexualized violence with words that are... *from the dream*, “my master...has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?” (8-9) (“For the grace of God has appeared... instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly...”[Titus 2.11])

“See?...That dream is come true! God HAS lifted me UP and I know who I am...How can I do this? I can't!”

And then... she assaults him. *THEN* the perpetrator plays the victim (as perpetrators often do!) and then Joseph goes down again...down, down, down into the dungeon...into the pit (40.15) .

And what must he have thought?

“Was that IT? Were those dreams fulfilled in that moment of triumph...those days when the LORD was with me...when the God of my fathers made everything I did to succeed? Is it over now?”

And yet by the time the chapter ends, Joseph is once again coming up! V. 21: “The LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness (*hesed*) to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer.” Here's yet another pagan who sees “this kid is special! There's something ABOUT him!”

Now when we contrast these two chapters and two stories we see some really important differences and similarities. For one thing, the abdicator, Judah, is a pig! He's a moral disgrace and he's sexually perverse. He feels like it's ok to use women and resort to prostitutes...on credit nonetheless! Yuck!

And in contrast to Judah is Joseph who's filling the role that Judah abandoned and is a man of great integrity and sexually faithful.

AND yet...while there's some glaring contrasts, it's clear that the LORD of the Covenant is transforming them both. He engineers everything so that Judah must confront his own badness...and this signals the start of his transformation. And the transformation will continue...til the end. Wait to you see what grace does to the Judah, the perverse, violent abdicator by the end of the story!

And Joseph too! If he was spoiled and coddled and way too chatty and indiscreet at the start – already, he's learning to be much more judicious with his words. His longest speech in this chapter is vv. 8-9!

And notice the contrast WITHIN the life of Joseph, how God takes him up and down, high and low first exalted and then debased: into the hottest fire and then into the coolest water. And why? Why does he bounce back and flourish so wildly after these devastating betrayals and failures? Why does he get NOT bitter but BETTER?

The Missing-Factor...what seemed to be missing last week and is so OBVIOUS and repetitious this week: the LORD was with Joseph (4x!) We can't miss it!

God is with him. God is giving Joseph what Joseph does not deserve. The LORD is with him. Immanuel – God is with us! This is what makes the difference.

This is what makes Joseph's life (and Judah's life) not just haphazard and "you know...life has its ups and downs and I'm trying to get by..." No. For these two brothers, VERY different in many ways, huge contrasts...but for both of them... and for all who know this God, it's Immanuel, God is with us. God is moving our lives toward a destination. God is not only directing all of history and especially His movement, the church...but God is directing ME!

General providence becomes PERSONAL providence. And the way to know it is Immanuel! God came to be with us in Jesus Christ, "and they shall call His name IMMANUEL," which translated means, 'GOD WITH US.'" (Matt 1.23)

"The LORD was WITH Joseph" (4x!). The same God who showed Himself to be with this ancient broken family is the God who eventually came to be manifestly WITH us in Jesus Christ when He stepped into our brokenness and took the fall for us. In Jesus Christ, "God with us" lived the life we failed to live and died the death we deserved to die. And this same God is the God who

comes to us and to our messed up families today. He is with us and He wants to be the Difference to our families that He was to theirs.

And what difference does it make to have “God with us”, Immanuel? What difference does it make to know this Way to God and to believe in Jesus Christ, Immanuel? “Well, when God is with us it all goes well...Right?” Uh...not exactly...and yet more than we can possibly imagine!

See Joseph was still betrayed and still got hurt...and still went into that dungeon (Up-down-high- low- prosperity and poverty) but he was learning the secret that the Apostle Paul would later learn: (from his Letter to the Philippians) “still I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (Phi 4.12-13)

See Paul wasn’t “faster than a speeding bullet” or “able to jump tall buildings in a single bound” but he was able to walk with God and know a sense of profound inner peace and contentment AND to know his purpose and place in the world AND Paul maintained this sense of peace and inner well-being independent of external circumstance – “filled or hungry.”

Like Joseph, the highs and the lows had a tempering effect in his life. Like Judah, Paul was being transformed as he faced his sin (1 Tim 1.15) and got daily grace from Immanuel, God with us, Christ who strengthens me.

And like Joseph and like us... for Paul and for all Christians...sometimes it all feels like a dream. God has in the Gospel promised to exalt us. He swears by Himself that we will be seated with Him forever and EVEN that we are NOW seated with Him. My true self is there waiting for me to sort of step into the place reserved for me...and I am called to live in light of that. And sometimes it feels like a dream...as I’m sure it felt to Joseph.

But as I live in the discomfort of faith (not SEEING as I want to but only trusting) ...and as God brings me through the highs and lows, “going hungry or ...having abundance” God who came to be with us in Jesus Christ, Immanuel, that’s what assures me that all things are indeed working together to make me more like Jesus Christ...changing this Judah into a Joseph...preparing me for the place, the role, the identity God has ordained for me.

Each day becomes an anticipation: how will the transformation progress today? Be it a high or a low, Jesus Christ is the answer, He is how I know that this day will work for good and for my glorious transformation.