

Lesson 20

Genesis 37, 38, 39, 40, 41az

Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob, and the first son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel (who is now dead). While the older sons grew up amid the strife and struggles of Jacob's life in Haran, Joseph was raised in a quieter time, after Jacob's experience with God at Peniel. It is probable that Jacob confided to this favorite son his own dreams and hopes based on God's promises. All these things would have set Joseph apart from his brothers, particularly the oldest ones.

What reasons can you find in the first 11 verses for the jealousy and hatred Joseph's brothers had for him?

A number of reasons for the brothers' hatred and jealousy may be offered: Quite clearly they were jealous that their father preferred Joseph over them—a preference made tangible in the special robe he gave him. [Various translations “tunic with sleeves,” “long robe with sleeves,” and “richly ornamented robe,” the Hebrew phrase is used elsewhere to indicate a royal garment (see 2 Sam. 13:18). Its length and sleeves would make the wearer unfit for common labor. Whether or not it meant Joseph was exempt from work the others had to do, at the very least it was a sign of his father's preference and set him above his older brothers.]

Why did Jacob prefer Joseph? He was a child of Jacob's old age, vs. 3 explains, but Jacob had other children in his old age. More significant perhaps is that Joseph was the oldest son of Jacob's beloved and now-dead wife Rachel. Joseph's brothers—and particularly the oldest ones—may have worried that Jacob would confer the rights and privileges of the firstborn on his favorite son and pass them by. They also may have hated Joseph because he was better than they, and therefore was preferred for good reason. It is clear from chapters 34 and 35 that the brothers are proud and violent and ruthless, and Joseph's character as it is developed in the rest of Genesis will stand in stark contrast to theirs. In this reading (vs. 2) we learned that reports of their continued exploits were circulating around the neighborhood and Joseph told their father about them. Like any “bad boys,” they would hate this do-good, tattling brother. Joseph's dreams that they would bow before him must have seemed the height of injustice, a final strike against him.

Compare and contrast the reactions of Jacob and his sons to Joseph's dreams. Review Gen. 27:25-29. What does this add to the picture?

Joseph's dreams only added fuel to the fire of his brothers' envy. He was the last person they wanted to bow down to or serve, but according to the dreams, this is just what would happen. It is useful to contrast their reaction to Jacob's. The brothers have no thought for what the dreams might mean beyond their own humbling, and so they hate Joseph. Jacob can't understand the meaning either and wonders; yet he “kept the saying in mind.” He is open to what God has planned. After all, years before his own father blessed him with the words “be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.” Might this one day be fulfilled in Joseph?

How do his brothers react when Joseph appears? What do they plot and why?

Once again, as we saw last time they were in Shechem, Joseph's brothers take matters into their own hands. They are “a law unto themselves.” They let anger get the better of them and decide to kill Joseph—“and we shall see what will become of his dreams,” they say. In other words, because they don't ever want to bow down to this young brother whom they hate, they will prevent the dreams being fulfilled by doing away with him altogether.

Assuming Joseph's dreams truly foretell the future and God's plan for this family, is there anything anyone could do that would derail that plan?

It is one of the great ironies and wonders of the way God works that the very thing Evil hopes will derail His plans, turns out to usher those plans in. The rest of this story will show that what the brothers meant for

Ill — throwing Joseph into a pit and selling him into slavery — is the thing that God uses to accomplish what they hoped to make impossible, his reigning over them. This should remind us of the way God took the very worst that Satan could do to Jesus and turned it into the door to eternal life, the door that Satan was trying to slam shut forever. In this way God uses even evil people and intentions as instruments of good.

Chapter 38 provides a “story of Judah” that is parallel to the story of Joseph in time while being completely opposed in moral tone. It serves to set off the story of Joseph in a number of ways: both leave home, one voluntarily, the other against his will. One leaves to seek his fortune among the Canaanites, the other is sold as a slave to Egypt. One seeks out a prostitute, the other flees sexual temptation. What becomes of these men, who will father the two leading tribes of Israel, is a study in contrast. There is great irony in the outcome, for what appears to be true on the outside (one man moving freely and in control of his destiny; another man enslaved, in control of nothing but his response to the situation) does not take into account the unseen—the will and the presence of God.

What kind of men were Judah’s sons, and what happened to them? What impact would this have on his ability to father a tribe?

Two of Judah’s sons were so wicked, God killed them before they had children. According to custom, Judah should have given his third son to the first son’s wife so the family name would continue, but he was afraid that son would die too so he sent his daughter-in-law home to her father. This left him with one son who was betrothed to a woman he was not allowed near—hardly a recipe for building a family. The wickedness of Judah’s sons makes one question Judah’s ability to “father” properly in any sense of the word—and yet God had chosen Judah to father the tribe that would one day produce the Messiah, and He would bring that about.

At the time of this story, the brother or nearest relative of a man who died childless was obligated to marry the widow to produce children for the first husband. The oldest son then became the legal heir to the dead man’s property (this was later written into law; see Deut. 25:5-10). What was Onan’s sin?

Onan’s sin was preventing pregnancy by spilling his seed on the ground. In doing so, he was taking selfish measures to make sure no child would come between himself and his brother’s property. But it was not just his intent but the act itself that was wrong. Onan was going through the motions of a covenant act while denying it meaning and purpose.

Read Ruth 4:12, 18-22. What is Tamar’s role in “the big picture” of God’s plan of redemption?

Tamar, with her courageous plan to get that which was hers by right but which Judah refused her, became the means by which Judah’s line—the line from which the Savior would come—is continued. This is yet another illustration of the fact that membership in the family of God is determined not by natural order but by God’s providence in determining who will be heir to promise and blessing.

Genesis 39 picks up the story of Joseph where Gen. 37 left off. It begins to chart the ups and downs of his imprisonment in Egypt, a time that prepared him for the position he would soon occupy as Pharaoh’s chief administrator and for the role he was to have in God’s plan for Israel.

Having been sold into slavery, how does it appear that Joseph behaved? Are you surprised by this? How might he have acted instead?

Joseph behaved dutifully, managing Potiphar’s affairs with wisdom and competence. This reveals a quite different character from that of his brothers, who tend to react to trouble in hatred and anger. Where Joseph might have grumbled or complained of injustice, he is silent. Where he might have been sullen or bitter, or done only what was required, Joseph threw himself into doing well each job that was put before him. His eyes are clearly on God rather than on his situation.

How did Joseph meet the test put to him by Potiphar's wife? Why did he respond in this way?

In marked contrast to Judah, who sought out a prostitute on the road to Timnah, Joseph resisted sexual temptation. He did so by first refusing to listen to or even be with Potiphar's wife, and then by fleeing her persistent advances. His motivation was to keep from betraying Potiphar's trust and from sinning against God. When unjustly accused, Joseph did not defend himself. He saved the lady's honor, endured the wrong done quietly and without bitterness or resentment, and evidently decided to leave justice to the Lord.

However responsible a position he held, Joseph remained a slave. What was he to make of the dreams he had so long ago, in which even his family bowed down before him? Chapter 40 features another pair of dreams that will figure in the fulfillment of the first.

Why was Joseph so confident that he could interpret the officers' dreams?

Joseph knew that their dreams were not an intellectual puzzle to figure out but a message from God, and therefore the answer would come from their source, which was God. He was simply a vessel through which God spoke to the Egyptians, even as Israel later would be used by God to speak to other nations.

What did Joseph hope to get in return for interpreting the dreams? Did he get it?

Joseph hoped that being known as one who could interpret dreams would give him favor with Pharaoh and consequently release from his unjust imprisonment (vss. 14-15). His interpretation proved correct, but the chief butler forgot him—and Joseph remained in prison.

Review the major events in Joseph's life thus far, noting how his fortune rises and falls. What would you say is the outstanding characteristic of Joseph in the face of repeated misfortune?

Joseph's life has been like a roller coaster. Once the favored son and a big dreamer, Joseph was sold into slavery. He was given complete charge of a household, but then was unjustly accused and cast back into prison. God gives him the interpretation of two officers' dreams, which should have been a ticket to freedom — yet the chief butler forgot him. Through all of this shines Joseph's constancy of character. It is clear that his eyes are fixed not on his own shifting situation, but on God who never changes. He remains loyal and faithful, and humbly waits.

What was the secret of Joseph's steadfastness?

Joseph has learned from his father a deep trust in the Lord. Joseph may have been a slave but God was with him in his slavery — upholding him with His steadfast love, prospering him and giving him success. God cared for Joseph not by taking him out of slavery but in helping him through it and by transforming it into a vehicle for good. God blessed Joseph in slavery and through his duties: not in spite of them.

Chapter 41

Sold by his brothers at age 17, Joseph spent 13 years as an Egyptian slave. The terms of his imprisonment speak louder about the boy's character than anything else: Joseph impressed his captors so favorably that he was entrusted with the care and responsibility of first a household and then a prison. He is honest, uncomplaining, hardworking, faithful, attentive and--thanks to God's help--effective in all that he does.

Two full years had passed since Joseph asked the chief butler to remember him to Pharaoh. Undoubtedly this seemed a long time to Joseph; yet how did the butler's forgetfulness turn out to be a boon for Joseph?

By forgetting Joseph until Pharaoh's unsolved dreams reminded him, the butler spoke of Joseph when Pharaoh needed him most and at a time when his interpretation could bring him the greatest gain: not just release from prison, but a position of power. Those two additional years of service undoubtedly also helped

to train Joseph for the work he would be doing, and the timing would have impressed upon him that God was in control and was working through all things to accomplish His plans.

Why was Joseph able to interpret something that escaped the understanding of “all the magicians and wise men of Egypt” (presumably the best minds of the country)?

Joseph knew where the dream came from, and thus the interpretation. He had no illusions that he could answer Pharaoh with his own brainpower and admitted as much. But he had confidence that God, who gave Pharaoh the dream in the first place, would also give Pharaoh the meaning. Joseph was an agent or ambassador speaking for God, where the wise men and magicians relied on their own intelligence and imaginations.

What reason does Pharaoh give for putting Joseph in charge of everything?

Pharaoh says in vs. 38 that Joseph is one “in whom is the spirit of God.” He acknowledges that God has made the dreams known to Joseph and is responsible for his discernment and wisdom; therefore Joseph will be the best man to implement the plans.

Joseph was 30 years old when he started to work for Pharaoh. What prepared this man, introduced to us in Gen. 37 as a young shepherd boy, to be second-in-command of Egypt?

Thirteen years of humble obedience and waiting on God, of doing each task before him to the best of his ability regardless of the circumstances, prepared Joseph. It trained him to wait on God and listen for His instructions, making him wise and discerning and prudent. God was with him, not only prospering him but seeing that he got the administrative and character-building experiences he needed so that when time came for him to do the big job, he was ready.

Does good fortune seem to have changed Joseph’s nature or character? Explain your answer.

Joseph seems unchanged by his rise in fortune. Where another man might have taken advantage of his new position to vindicate or enrich himself, Joseph concentrates on the prompt, thorough execution of a policy that is in the best interests of the nation. He doesn’t go about touting himself as the new wisest man in town, or keep the choicest parts of the harvest for himself, or take revenge on those who had wronged him. Instead, he simply does what God has put before him to do, with the same humility and competence that has marked all of his work.