

He Was in the Beginning, Part 8
(Joseph)
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This summer we have been journeying through the book of Genesis and so far, we have continually found pointers to Jesus. I don't know about you, but these pointers blow my mind. The intricacies of the stories we have heard afresh is similar to a light bulb turning on. Not that the Bible didn't click before, but now it really clicks and I am able to see new ways of how God interacts with us using ancient words. Today's story of Joseph is no different. I think sometime we can struggle with the stories we have heard over and over again since childhood. We can close ourselves off to learning new things and we can think we have learned everything we can from it. Today my prayer is that God opens up our hearts to view anew the story of Joseph and the implications it has on the rest of God's story. Let's pray: *Heavenly Father, thank you for what you have taught us so far in this series. Thank you that Jesus has been in the plan since the very beginning. Thank you for not abandoning us in our sin, but for providing the way for us to be in relationship with you. Open up our hearts and minds to hear your word anew this day. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of each of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you. Amen.*

We are nearing the end of the book of Genesis and from the very beginning Genesis has been full of drama, plot turns, and action. The story of Joseph is no different. If you recall last week we learned about Jacob and how the Lord got Jacob's attention on his way to his relative Laban. When Jacob arrives there after a series of events and a long time caring for Laban's sheep, Jacob finally leaves with his two wives, the daughters of Laban, Leah and Rachel. From Leah, Rachel, and their two servants Jacob bears twelve sons. Rachel was barren for many years until the Lord allowed her to bear children and thus Joseph was born in Jacob's old age. The story of Joseph can be broken up into three parts: 1) Joseph's father's favoritism and his brothers' hatred, 2) the suffering of Joseph, and 3) the sending of Joseph.

Part 1, his father's favoritism and his brothers' hatred. It was because Joseph was born during Jacob's old age that he was his father's favorite. Generally, we try not to pick favorites from our children. If we do, we do it secretly and we do not tell anyone else. This is not the case in this instance because the book of Genesis clearly and publicly announces, *"Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his other children because he came along when he was an old man. So, Israel presented Joseph with a special robe he had made for him – a spectacularly colorful robe with long sleeves in it."* Today we tell stories of Joseph and the coat of many colors and how his father delighted in him like God delights in his children. However, this coat or robe essentially sets him apart from his brothers and places a target on Joseph for their hatred and jealousy.

Unfortunately for Joseph, his brothers did not feel the same way as his father did about him. They began to despise Joseph. *"But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than the rest, they grew to hate him and couldn't find it in themselves to speak to him without resentment or argument."* Then to make matters worse, Joseph is given two dreams in which all the rest of his family bows down to him. These dreams stir up even more hatred for their brother and so when the opportunity arose they conspired against Joseph as he approaches them. Let's dive into the scripture starting with verse 18. *"They saw him (Joseph) coming even though he was still a long way off. Before he was near enough to hear them, they conspired to kill him. 'Oh, here comes the great dreamer. Let's kill him and throw his body into one of the pits. Then we can tell everyone a wild animal killed him and devoured him. We'll see then what becomes of his stupid dreams.' When Reuben heard the plan, he tried to help Joseph saying, 'Let's not kill him. We don't need to shed any blood to be free of him. Let's just toss him into some pit here in the wilderness. We don't need to lay a hand on him.' Reuben thought perhaps he could secretly come back later and get Joseph out of the pit and take him home to their father before any more harm came to him.*

The brothers agreed. When Joseph arrived, they ripped his robe off of him – the fancy, colorful robe he always wore and that his father had made for him, and they threw him into the pit. Now this pit

happened to be an empty cistern; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat. Soon they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelite traders approaching from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with gum, balm, and a fragrant resin; and they were on their way down to Egypt with their goods. Judah then said to his brothers, 'What profit will it be for us if we just kill our brother and conceal the crime? Come on, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites instead. We won't have to lay a hand on him then. He is after all, our brother, our own flesh and blood.' All of the brothers agreed. As the Midianite traders were passing by, they brought Joseph up out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites for about eight ounces of silver."

This leads us into part 2, Joseph's suffering. Joseph's brothers were rid of their problem and it seems that Joseph's problems were just beginning. He was sold to an Egyptian named Potiphar and even though he had done no wrong, he was thrown into an Egyptian prison due to a false accusation by Potiphar's wife. Joseph spent years in prison. During this time, Joseph must have been in some pretty low places emotionally and spiritually. His own brothers were going to kill him. They betrayed him. He was carried off to a faraway land where no one would stand up for him. He knew no one. He did everything he could to the best of his ability and yet his suffering in a faraway land continued. And yet, Joseph was not alone. Several times throughout Genesis 39 the author tells us, "*The Eternal One was with Joseph (v. 2)*" and (v.21) "*But the Lord remained with Joseph and showed him His loyal love and granted him favored status...*" God was still with Joseph and Joseph hung onto this hope in the God who keeps his promises.

Which brings us now to part 3 of Joseph's story, his sending. Years passed until one night God gave Pharaoh two dreams. Dreams that greatly disturbed Pharaoh. God worked out the circumstances that Joseph would be called upon by Pharaoh to interpret the dreams. In Pharaoh's dreams the entire land of Egypt and beyond would be blessed with seven abundant years followed by seven hard years of famine. God allowed Joseph to accurately interpret the dreams and as reward Pharaoh exalted Joseph and placed him in a position of authority over the land of Egypt. "*Is there anyone else you know like Joseph who has the spirit of God within him? Since God has shown you all of this to you, I can't imagine anyone wiser and more discerning than you. Therefore, you will be in charge of my household. All of my people will report to you and do as you say. Only I, because I sit on the throne, will be greater than you. I hereby anoint you head over all of the land of Egypt.*" Finally, after years of misfortune everything seems to be going his way. Joseph manages all the grain throughout Egypt and during the abundant years saves grain that will be distributed during the famine.

After seven years, the famine begins and the author returns us back to the land of Canaan and the family of Jacob. "*So, the sons of Israel decided to go down and buy grain along with many others, because the famine had reached the land of Canaan. Since Joseph was in charge of Egypt, he was the one responsible for selling the grain to the people who came from various lands. When it was their turn, Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the ground. The moment Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them even though nearly twenty years had passed since last, he saw them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke gruffly to them (Genesis 42: 5-7).*" The human side of us is thinking, yes! Now is his chance to get justice and pay back from his brothers. Now they will have to answer to Joseph for what they did to him. However, if you recall the story does not go this way.

Instead, Joseph puts his brothers through a series of tests until he eventually reveals himself to them in Genesis 45:4-8. "*I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Don't be upset any longer because of what you did. You see God sent me here ahead of you to preserve life. For famine struck this land two years ago, and there are five more years in which there will be no plowing or harvesting. God sent me here ahead of you to make sure you and your families survive this terrible ordeal and have a remnant left on earth. So it wasn't really you who sent me here, but God: the same God who made me an advisor to Pharaoh, master of his household, and ruler over everyone in the land of Egypt.*" And thus, Joseph forgives his brothers, which is what many of us generally get out of the story of Joseph. Don't get me wrong, this is a wonderful story of forgiveness, but there is so much more we can get out of it.

For you see, the three-part story of Joseph is a foreshadowing of the One who would save all of mankind. The story of Joseph is meant to point us to how Jesus offers us forgiveness. What I found really interesting when I began reading for this week is that unlike the rest of the main characters in Genesis, Joseph is not a direct ancestor of Jesus. Jesus is not from the line of Joseph, but rather from his step-brother Judah. So why does the author of Genesis devote a third of his writing to tell us the story of Joseph. Well, it is in order to show the readers that following God is not always rainbows and sunshine. Following God can also mean going through dark valleys and we may have to suffer. It is used to help us understand why Jesus was the Messiah even though he suffered.

At the beginning of this series we looked at Luke 24 where the resurrected Jesus is explaining to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus about how all of scriptures pointed to him. In Luke 24: 25 Jesus tells them, *"Come on, men! Why are you being so foolish? Why are your hearts so sluggish when it comes to believing what the prophets have been saying all along? Didn't it have to be this way? Didn't the Anointed One have to experience these sufferings in order to come into his glory?"* Then I can imagine him telling them about the story of Joseph and how God intended his suffering for the saving of many people. I think at that point the light bulb may have started to flicker on. For Jesus' ministry can be also summarized in three parts: 1) his father's love and his brothers' hatred, 2) his suffering, and 3) his sending.

Just as Joseph was dearly loved by his father Jacob, Jesus would be and was dearly loved by his father, his heavenly father. Matthew 3: 16-17 gives us this account of Jesus' baptism. *"Jesus emerged from his baptism; and at that moment heaven opened, and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon Him, alighting on His very body. And a voice from Heaven said, 'This is My Son, whom I love; this is the Apple of My eye; with Him I am well pleased.'*" It does not get any more public than that, and I am sure word got around to everyone including the Pharisees about what happened that day. And so, just as Joseph's brothers hated him and conspired to kill him, Jesus' brothers (the religious Jews) would also hate Jesus and plot to kill him. This is told to us in the very beginning of the Gospel of John. John 1:11 says, *"Even though He came to His own people, they refused to listen to and receive Him."* Even Jesus' own brothers, his own blood, did not believe in him. *"Jesus' own brothers were speaking contemptuously; they did not yet believe in Him, just as people in His hometown did not see Him as anything more than Joseph's son (John 7:5)."* People refused to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. They could not see how the son of a carpenter could be anything more than that. Much like how Joseph's brothers could not see how one day they would bow down to him.

This leads us back into part 2 of the story, their suffering. Remember from earlier how Joseph was stripped of his robe, beaten, mocked, and thrown into a pit. Sound familiar? Matthew records this account of Jesus' suffering in Matthew 27:28-30, *"The governor's soldiers took Jesus into a great hall, gathered a great crowd, and stripped Jesus of his clothes, draping him in a bold scarlet cloak, the kind that soldiers sometimes wore. They gathered some thorny vines, wove them into a crown, and perched that crown upon his head. They stuck a reed in his right hand, and then they knelt before him, this inside-out, upside-down King. They mocked Him with catcalls saying, 'Hail, the King of the Jews!' They spat on him and whipped him on the head with his scepter of reeds..."* After both men were beaten and mocked, they were thrown into a pit. For Joseph, it was a physical pit and you may be wondering what the significance of the pit or that Jesus was not thrown physically into a pit. What is interesting is that Jews of that time believed that when a person died their spiritual being would go to Sheol, which can be translated as 'the pit'. Joseph was thrown into a pit, Jesus was thrown into The Pit. And yet both men, would be lifted up out of the pit by God for the saving of many lives.

Finally leading us to part 3, their sending. Joseph and Jesus were resurrected and lifted up to be sent ahead by God to prepare the way for their families. God sent Joseph ahead into Egypt to make room and make the way for his family (of which the chosen offspring of God would come from) to be saved from the famine ahead. Remember what Joseph told his brothers in Genesis 45, *"God sent me here ahead of you to make sure you and your families survive this terrible ordeal*

and have a remnant left on earth. So it wasn't really you who sent me here, but God: the same God who made me an advisor to Pharaoh, master of his household, and ruler over everyone in the land of Egypt." Jesus also told his disciples that he was going on ahead of them in John 14. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus answered, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

Joseph endured suffering and was sent ahead to save the lives of his family and the ancestors of Jesus. Jesus endured suffering and was sent ahead to save the eternal lives of us, you and me. Hebrews 12:2 encourages us to, "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." It was for the joy of what was yet to come that Jesus suffered. He took on the weight of the world's sin so that multitudes of people would be saved and reconciled with God. He knew God's vision and he trusted. Joseph trusted God during his suffering even though he did not fully understand the joy that would come out of it. He held on to the dreams God gave him and he trusted that God would bring them to fruition.

During my time of studying for this week a scene from the Disney movie Aladdin popped into my mind? Now this is not unusual because about once a day I will use a Disney reference somehow. However, the timing of it and its reoccurrence was what caught my attention. Two times in the movie the street rat Aladdin and the Princess Jasmine are trying to escape (either the royal guards or just the palace in general). During these two scenes Aladdin reaches out to Jasmine asking, "Do you trust me?" I believe that God does the same thing with us. He asks us as followers if we trust him even in the pit? Are we following Jesus' command to his disciples to trust God and to also trust him? Do we trust God in the good and the bad? That is the true lesson from Joseph and Jesus. They are examples of what it looks like to trust in God through immense difficulty and suffering. Too often we are quick to say God has abandoned us in our suffering. We are quick to dismiss God when things do not go as we have planned. Somehow we have this notion that when we are following God that there will be no pain or suffering. How quick we are to forget that we are only saved by the suffering of the one man who followed God perfectly and joyfully.

Last week, Meagan mentioned to me an interview she listened to featuring the family of Pastor Tony Evans. The interview was based around the sudden death of Pastor Evans' niece and how we can still have faith after such tragedy. Throughout the interview, Pastor Evans kept talking about the hope that he has in Jesus and how it is that hope in which he wants to share with others. When we believe in Jesus he becomes our anchor in times of joy and suffering. Where else or to who else can we turn to in times of tragedy besides God and Jesus. It is only through Jesus that we have hope and confidence in the time to come.

We all have had 'pit' experiences, we have experienced suffering and some of us are probably in the 'pit' right now. If that is you right now do not be discouraged, because like Joseph, God is with you. The psalmist writes in Psalm 23, "even though I walk through the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me." God is in the midst of the pit. As we sang earlier, "who stands in the fire beside me?" Jesus. Jesus is with you. Trust him. Turn to him. Hang onto him. Keep trusting for Jesus has gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us in heaven with him. Let us look again at Hebrews 12 this time verses 2-3, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Brothers and sisters, Jesus did not endure such pain to leave us to endure our pain by ourselves. No, he endured it so that one day we can go and live with him. He endured it so he could walk beside us in our pain and trials. When it feels like we have been thrown into the pit, the lion's den, the fire, whatever trial we are going through, we

need to cling to him. He is there with us. "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10)." God is reaching out to us with his right hand asking, "Do you trust me as Joseph and Jesus did?" May our reply be 'yes'.

Let us pray, Lord, thank you for this truth today that even in the trials and the pits of our lives you are there with us. You have not abandoned us in our struggle, but you have provided the way for us to be a part of your kingdom come. Forgive us for not trusting you as we should. I lift up all those who are struggling that you would reveal your presence to them today. That they will see you and cling to you. Open up our hearts to trust you more. Give us eyes to see you in our lives. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

As we close we are going to continue in a state of prayer to God using the song "Lord, You have Promised Me" remembering that all the promises of God find their yes in Jesus. May we sing more than words, but a prayer back to God.

Lord, You Have Promised Me

Lord, You have promised me,
that Your right hand will take a hold of mine. (repeat)
I need You, Lord, Oh, I need You, Lord.
I need Your hand to take a hold of mine. (repeat)

Lord, You have promised me,
that Your right hand will take a hold of mine. (repeat)
I trust You, Lord, Oh, I trust You, Lord.
I trust Your hand to take a hold of mine. (repeat)

Lord, You have promised me,
that Your right hand will take a hold of mine. (repeat)
I love You, Lord, Oh, I love You, Lord.
Tomorrow I will love You even more. (repeat)