

Joseph and the Colorful Coat • Genesis 37-50

What do you do when everything in life seems to go wrong? What do you say when everyone is against you? How do you handle it when life isn't fair?

Long ago and thousands of miles away a boy named Joseph was born into a nomadic Middle Eastern family. His father, Jacob, was an old polygamist with a dozen children from two wives and two concubines. Each wife favored her own children, creating an atmosphere of greater-than-usual sibling rivalry. But there was no doubt that Jacob's favorite was Joseph.

Who knows exactly why? Some think it was because the father was so old when Joseph was born. Whatever the reason, Joseph was the favorite son and everyone knew it. Favoritism nurtured resentment, especially in a culture where the oldest was supposed to get the preference.

Any doubts about the father's favoritism disappeared when Joseph turned seventeen. Jacob publicly presented Joseph with an expensive and colorful coat, a gift unlike any gift he had ever given any of his other children. It was beautiful. It made Joseph stand out from everyone in the community, and certainly from everyone else in his family. I suppose you could say it was the ancient equivalent of the father of a large family giving one son a Ferrari for his seventeenth birthday while the rest of the children have to ask permission to drive the family pick-up truck.

Joseph's older brothers never did like him, but now they hated him. Every time they saw him wearing that coat their anger and jealousy began to boil. Since there was nothing they could ever do to measure up to their father's favoritism, they decided to make up lies and bad reports about Joseph. They said he was a lousy shepherd. They twisted and spun every conversation so that nothing kind was ever said to him or about him.

It hurts deeply to be hated by your own family, to have those you want to like you dislike you. It's hard when everything you do and say is twisted into

something negative. No matter how hard you try or what you do, nothing is ever good enough.

As if all these relationships were not bad enough, Joseph added fuel to the fire. You see, Joseph was a dreamer. And one day he reported two of his dreams to his brothers. In the first dream sheaves of grain were out in a field. Each of the sheaves belonged to one of the brothers. Joseph's sheaf of grain stood up tall and all the other sheaves of grain bowed over to honor Joseph's sheaf. Then he told them his second dream in which the sun, moon and stars each represented different members of the family. They all bowed down to Joseph.

No one needed to be clairvoyant to interpret these dreams. It was obvious Joseph was the sheaf and the other sheaves that bowed down were his brothers. Even worse than that was that the sun, moon and stars that were bowing down were his mother, his father and the rest of his family. Everyone was deferring to him as if he were royalty. It didn't increase his popularity around the family dinner table!

His brothers' anger turned murderous. Had it not been for the veto of an older brother named Reuben they would have murdered him. Instead, Reuben convinced them to sell Joseph into slavery when a caravan of Midianite traders came by. And that is exactly what they did. For twenty shekels of silver they sold their baby brother into slavery.

But what would they tell their father back home? They certainly couldn't say they sold him into slavery. So they came up with another plan.

They killed a goat and dipped Joseph's fancy coat into the blood. Then they took the bloodstained coat to their father. The immediate assumption was that some wild animal had torn him apart and had eaten his

body. In a single conspiracy they had rid themselves of the hated coat and the hated brother.

Never did they anticipate the depth of grief that Jacob would have for his assumed-to-be-dead son. It is a terrible thing to lose a child. The brothers just could not understand. No matter how hard they tried

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or what they said he would not be consoled. But rather than tell the truth, those brothers must have considered their father's pain to be worth it.

Meanwhile, the caravan traveled to Egypt. They were slave traders and it was time to make a profit on this healthy seventeen-year-old. They sold him to an Egyptian named Potipher who was the captain of Pharaoh's palace guard.

Joseph was a teenager, all alone and lonely. He spoke a different language. He was far from home, family and friends. He had no hope or possibility of ever buying his freedom. He was a country boy forced to be a domestic slave in the city. He wasn't underpaid—he wasn't paid at all. Joseph was a slave. He must have been absolutely frightened and miserable.

Have you ever been in a job you didn't like? Have you had a boss who was mean and arbitrary? Did you dread every day's responsibilities? Were you paid less than you were worth? Did you feel trapped with no means of escape? Did you fear that you would be stuck for the rest of your life in a place you hated to be? No matter how bad any of our jobs have ever been, we have to assume that Joseph's was ten thousand times worse.

Joseph faced the same decision every worker in difficult employment must make: to be miserable and complain, or to make the best of a bad situation and do his best possible work? What would you do? Joseph didn't complain. Joseph honored his God and his boss in a very bad and dishonorable job. Joseph gave his best to an employer who did not deserve it.

And God blessed Joseph. God liked his attitude and God liked the work he did. God gave Joseph success. And Potipher, his boss, was impressed. Potipher was so impressed with Joseph that he promoted him to become the Chief Operating Officer of Potipher's estate. He became the top slave, although he was still very much a slave.

Then an amazing thing happened. Because God blessed Joseph and because Joseph worked for Potipher, God's blessing went to Potipher and everyone who had contact with Joseph. God's blessings flowed over to the entire household and estate. Because of Joseph times were good at the Potipher estate. Even though Joseph didn't want to be there, even though Joseph shouldn't have been there, he was a blessing to others. That is just the way it

should be for those who are faithful followers of God.

Yet just because he did what was right didn't mean anyone else would do what was right. Sometimes we think our right behavior will cause others to behave in the right way. Don't count on it! It is possible to do everything right, to please God and to bring out the worst in others.

The problem was Potipher's wife. She was sexually attracted to Joseph. He was young, handsome and had a great build. She watched him every day and wanted to go to bed with him. She tried to seduce him, but when he didn't respond to her she came right out and said, "Come to bed with me, Joseph."

What would you expect Joseph to do? What would you do? He was young and sexual. He probably wanted to say "yes." He had every hormone pushing him then that anyone of similar age and circumstance has pushing us today. Joseph had to choose between what was sexually attractive and what was moral. He had to choose between lust and God. It is the choice of every generation. Do we seize the opportunity and enjoy the moment? Or do we be the moral person God wants us to be? Joseph said "no."

Mrs. Potipher was rejected and offended. Who did this slave think he was, anyway? Did he find her unattractive? She was angry about his refusal. So, if she couldn't bed him, she would destroy him.

She waited for a day when no one else was in the house and she tried one more time. "Come to bed with me," she said. She grabbed his clothes and pulled him toward the bed. Joseph literally ran away from that temptation. But she held on to his outer coat and, when he was out of the house, she screamed, "Rape!" She had his clothes to prove it. Who was Potipher to believe? His wife? Or a Hebrew slave?

Potipher was outraged. This young man had betrayed him. He had trusted Joseph. He had treated him as if he were part of the family. And now look what he had done.

It's painful to do what's right and be blamed for doing wrong. For Joseph there was no trial, no opportunity to defend himself. He was presumed guilty. False accusation led to unjust imprisonment in the palace dungeon. Not to await trial. Not to serve a sentence and then be released. In all prob-

ability this was more like death row.

How would you feel if this happened to you? How would you react? Would you be tempted to be very angry with God and everyone else? Would you hate your family, your boss, your accuser, your guards and everyone else? Would you give up on ever doing right because it doesn't work and never gets you anywhere but into more trouble? Would you be sick of trying and sick of hoping and sick of waiting?

To the contrary, Joseph resolved to do the best he could in what had obviously become a worsening situation. He resolved that he would live for God, even in prison. Joseph committed to do what was right even if everyone else did what was wrong.

But God had not abandoned this young prisoner. God was there in prison with him. In prison he met two other people who once held important positions in the palace of the Pharaoh. One was the cupbearer to the king and the other was the king's personal baker. The cupbearer was traditionally the person who would taste the king's food to make sure it wasn't poisoned. He was the monarch's last line of defense against assassination. But usually the cupbearer became much more—a trusted advisor and confidant of the Pharaoh. In those days, displeasing the ruler in any way was a sure ticket to jail or execution. We don't know what the cupbearer and the baker did, but they were in serious trouble.

There in prison, in the midst of their troubles, both the cupbearer and the baker had strange dreams. Joseph was familiar with dreams because he himself was a dreamer. But he knew that he could determine their meaning only with God's help. Joseph was convinced God was there in prison with him and that God would help him even if there was a lot of evidence that suggested God had abandoned him. In other words, his faith in God was strong in spite of the circumstances. And so he offered to interpret the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker.

Although they were extreme interpretations, they were as opposite as could be. To the cupbearer he said, "What your dream means is that in three days you will be released from the dungeon and be

restored to your lofty position at the side of Pharaoh." That was very good news. But to the baker he said, "In three days you will be decapitated."

Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him and do what he could to help get him out of prison. But when the cupbearer got his old job back he was so glad that he forgot about Joseph.

It's hard to imagine that much more could go wrong for young Joseph who wasn't quite so young any more. Years passed. He had repeatedly done what was good and right and the results were increasingly painful. I suppose he must have had his moments of hopelessness and despair, but they are not reported. What is said is that he was repeatedly a man of integrity and determination. He was going to remain faithful to God no matter what happened.

Two years later there was a dramatic turn of events. Pharaoh had two strange dreams in a row. The first dream was his cow dream. Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile River

when seven sleek fat cows came out of the river. Then seven ugly sickly cows came out of the river. The skinny cows ate the fat cows.

Dream number two was his grain dream. In it seven big healthy heads of

grain grew on a single stalk. Then seven thin heads of grain sprouted. The seven thin heads of grain ate the seven fat heads of grain.

Pharaoh called in all his wise men and magicians and demanded an interpretation. They had no idea what the dreams meant. Then the cupbearer remembered the Hebrew guy in prison who was really good at interpreting dreams. He told Pharaoh and Pharaoh ordered that Joseph be brought to him. The guards quickly cleaned him up and brought him to the king.

The young man from a rural nomadic family stood before the most powerful man in the world—and he was ready! He fluently spoke their language. He understood the culture. He was acquainted with the cupbearer and the captain of the palace guard. He had been tested in the long hot flames of adversity. Most of all, he was a man of God.

Joseph spoke with stunning clarity and confi-

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dence. He took no credit for himself. He acknowledged God from the start. Joseph explained that a single interpretation applied to both dreams. Egypt would have seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine. If they managed the prosperity well they would be prepared for the adversity to follow. Everything about him and his words evidenced credibility and integrity. Pharaoh believed him and staked the economic well-being of his empire on Joseph's words. He promoted Joseph to chief economic and agricultural officer. He granted him enormous authority and power. Eventually he made him the Prime Minister of Egypt.

One day Joseph is in prison; the next day he is in the palace. One day he is in poverty; the next day he is in prosperity. One day he is a slave; the next day he is a prince. One day he is powerless; the next day he is the second most powerful man in the entire Egyptian empire.

An old axiom says that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Very few leaders handle power well. Most people, when they get money, become greedy, careless, and even reckless. Most people, when they get power, become selfish and ambitious. Very few handle great wealth and great power well.

So here was the question: Could God trust Joseph to use his new power for good? Joseph had demonstrated that when he had nothing he would be faithful to God. But what if he really didn't need God anymore? What if pain was turned to pleasure? Poverty to prosperity?

For seven years he had the power and position as his forecast came true. There was so much grain that they couldn't stuff it all into the barns. They built more barns until they couldn't keep ahead of the cycle.

The test came with the famine. Drought and hunger spread across the whole region. The barns of Pharaoh were full. Joseph was a hero. His power increased every day with every decision. But the drought wasn't limited to Egypt. It included his family of origin back in Canaan. They were running out of food. By now his brothers were years older and his father was a very old man. Not knowing where else to turn for food, Jacob sent his sons to the only place where grain could be bought—Egypt.

When they arrived they appeared before Joseph. They didn't recognize him. There was no reason why they should. They thought he was dead. He had a different name—in Egypt he was called Zaphenath-Paneah. He spoke a different language using an interpreter to communicate with them. He wore different style clothes and had the trapping of wealth and power. They had no idea who he was.

But Joseph knew them. And Joseph had to decide what he was going to do. What would you do if you unexpectedly had unlimited wealth and power over those who had most hurt you in life? How would you treat those who mistreated you if you came to a position of control? Would you use it to get even?

At first Joseph struggled with what to do. But it wasn't long before his character shined brightly. Joseph forgave them. He blessed them. He prospered them. He gave them food, protection, land and wealth. He used his power for good.

Joseph suffered lots of pain and problems in his life. There were many years when everything appeared to be hopeless. In the very worst of times Joseph simply did the best he could with what he had. And most of the time he didn't have much.

On that amazing day when his brothers realized that the powerful Prime Minister of Egypt was actually their kid brother they had hated and sold into slavery, they were scared to death. They assumed he would have them executed or enslaved. But Genesis 50:19-20 tells us:

But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

What a stunning perspective of faith on all the circumstances of a difficult life! Joseph understood that what others intend for evil, God uses for good.

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