

“A Many-Colored Story”

Genesis 37:2-4, 26-28; 45:25-28; 50:15-20¹

Hello! My name is Joseph. You can call me “Joe.” I’m from Israel. Actually, Israel is my father! The nation of Israel is named for my Dad. Is that cool, or what?

I was the eleventh of twelve sons. Dad had two wives—that was common in our day, though I don’t recommend it. Their names were Leah and Rachel. Dad loved Rachel best, but she had a hard time getting pregnant, so when I finally came along, it was an EVENT.

The Old Testament records many examples of favoritism in families. This favoritism led to disasters every time, and our family was no different. Because I was Rachel’s first-born, Dad really did love me best . . . and he made no secret about it. He even had a special coat made for me to show how special I was to him. Growing up in such a way, I was thoroughly spoiled. Once I had two dreams in which my brothers—and even my parents—bowed down to me; and I arrogantly told them so!

One day when I was seventeen, Dad sent me to Dothan to check on my brothers as they kept the flocks. They saw me coming, and said to themselves, “Let’s kill the dreamer and be rid of him.” Reuben, the oldest, talked them out of killing me outright. He suggested that they throw me into an empty cistern and leave me to die on my own. Reuben actually intended to come back to rescue me.

Well, they left me screaming “muddy murder” in the cistern and sat down to dinner. As they ate, a caravan came along bound for Egypt. Judah said, “Hey! Let’s sell Joe to the caravan and send him to Egypt! We’ll make a little money, be rid of him, and we won’t have to kill him.” Sounded like a plan, I guess, so sell me they did. They took my coat, tore it up, smeared goat’s blood on it, and told Dad a lion must have killed me. Dad grieved for me for years.

When we got to Egypt, the caravan sold me as a slave to a man named Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s palace guard. Potiphar used me as a household servant. I’d never had to do anything like that back home, but I decided to do my best. Hard work paid off, and before long, Potiphar made me his business manager. I ran the affairs of the whole household.

When I was a young man, people thought me handsome . . . Potiphar’s wife certainly did. Day after day she pestered me to have sex with her, and day after day I refused. It wasn’t that she was ugly—I understood the temptation well enough! It just wasn’t right.

One day, I was working in the house and it was just the two of us. She grabbed me and tried to wrestle me to the bed, but I ran away, leaving my coat in her hand as I did. It was dumb to be in the house with her, and it was stupid to leave the coat. She used that to frame me, and Potiphar threw me in prison. I was lucky that he didn’t have me executed.

After a while, the prison warden made me his manager, as Potiphar had done. My efforts to make the best of a painful situation paid off again. Some time later, two of Pharaoh’s servants—his Butler and his Baker—ended up in prison. They’d been in prison a while when they both had strange dreams on the same night. As I made rounds the next morning, they both looked gloomy, and I said, “Hey, guys, what’s up?” Both told me about their dreams, and they moaned that they had no one to interpret them.

“Interpretations belong to God,” I said. “Tell me your dreams.” “My dream was about a grape vine with three branches,” the Butler said. “As I watched, the vine blossomed and grew,

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 28, 2019.

and I took juice from the vine to Pharaoh. “That’s good news,” I said. “That means that you’ll soon be restored to your old job.”

This encouraged the baker, and he told me his dream. “My dream was that I had three baskets of pastry on my head for the king, but birds kept swooping down and stealing it.” “That’s not so good,” said I. “I’m afraid that means that the king will soon have you executed.”

Things came true as I’d said, and, as the Butler returned to work, I called out, “Hey, would you mention me to Pharaoh? I’ve done nothing to deserve this dungeon.” He didn’t do it, of course.

Later, Pharaoh had two disturbing dreams, and he called his magicians and wise men to interpret them, but they could not. The Butler finally woke up: “My Lord, I’m reminded of my shortcomings. Some time ago you put the baker and me in prison, and a Hebrew prisoner interpreted dreams that we had there. What he said came true.” So off I went to the king.

Pharaoh said to me, “I’ve heard that you can interpret dreams.” “I can’t do it,” I replied, “but God will interpret your dreams for you. Tell me about them.” The dreams were about cows and corn. As Pharaoh told me the dreams, God helped me to see their meaning.

“My Lord,” I said, “the seven fat cows you saw stand for seven years of very fine crops. The horrid cows that ate the fat cows are seven years of famine. The dream about the corn means the same. God has told you this twice because it will happen very soon. What you must do is to choose someone to collect 20% of the nation’s harvest for the next seven years and store it up against the famine.”

“Whoa! That’s important news!” Pharaoh said. “Since God has made all this known to you, I hereby put YOU in charge of the whole land of Egypt.” “Whoa,” indeed! From prisoner to prince in five minutes. They began to dress me in royal clothing, and I tried not to faint.

I was thirty years old when this happened. I’d been in Egypt at that point for thirteen years: thirteen years of slavery and imprisonment; thirteen years that God needed in order to work some new character qualities into my life so that I’d be ready for the time of crisis. God just might be up to something like that in your life, too.

Sure enough, the seven good years came and went, and the years of famine began. The famine affected Canaan as well as Egypt, and Dad heard that there was food in Egypt. He sent my ten older brothers to Egypt to try to buy food, but he kept my brother, Ben, behind. (There’s that favoritism again.)

When my brothers arrived, I recognized them immediately. After all, they still lived in the same place, did the same work, and spoke the same language. But they didn’t know me, since I was dressed like a king and spoke the Egyptian language. Besides, they’d long ago assumed that I was dead.

I decided to mess with them a little to see whether or not their hearts were still the same as before. “You’re spies!” I cried out. “You’re not here to buy food. You’re here to spy out our country!” “No, my Lord!” they responded. “We’re all brothers, sons of an aged father. One of our brothers is dead, and the youngest is at home with our father.”

“We’ll see about that!” said I. “The only way you can prove that you’re not spies is to bring your other brother here to me.” And I threw them all in prison for three days. I must confess that I enjoyed the moment.

On the third day I called them in again, and repeated my demand that they bring their youngest brother to me. They said to each other, “Surely we’re being punished because of what we did to Joe. We saw how distressed he was when he begged us for his life, but we wouldn’t listen; that’s why this distress has come upon us.”

They didn’t realize, of course, that I understood what they said. Tears came to my eyes as I remembered that long ago afternoon when my slavery began. That was more than twenty years ago, now. Twenty years is a long time to bear the guilt of murder. It was a good sign, though, that they were feeling the guilt.

I let nine of them return home, but I kept Simeon in prison as insurance that they would come back. I also had my steward, Hosni, put their food money back in their grain sacks. When they stopped for the night and began to feed their animals, they discovered the money . . . and they were afraid.

When the nine got home, they told Dad what had happened, and about my demand for their youngest brother. Dad said, “Why in the world did you tell them about Ben?!” “How were we to know what he was going to do?” they responded. “He pressed us about it, and we were afraid.”

The food eventually ran out again, of course, and Dad wanted to send my brothers back for more. They reminded him of my demand, and Judah said, “Dad, I myself will guarantee his safety. If I don’t bring Ben back to you, I’ll bear the blame before you all my life. As it is, we could have gone and returned twice.”

“If it must be,” Dad said, “take some balm, and honey, and myrrh, and almonds, and pistachio nuts as a gift to this man. And take double the money, so you can pay him back.”

When I learned that my brothers had returned, I told Hosni to bring them to lunch at the Palace. My brothers were frightened by this. “It’s an ambush,” they said. “He’s going to get us because of the money.” They went to Hosni and told about the money and offered to pay it back. “No problem,” he said. “Your God has blessed you. Your bills are paid.”

When my brothers arrived, I asked them, “How is your aged father? Is he still living? And is this your brother?” When I saw Ben I was moved to tears and had to leave the room. I hadn’t seen him in so long. I had Hosni seat my brothers in the order of their ages, which raised eyebrows, you may be sure.

Well, we carried out our business, and I sent them on their way—with Simeon, this time. I had Hosni put their money back in their sacks again, and I had him put my own silver cup in Ben’s sack. When they’d gotten some distance from town, I sent Hosni after them.

“What’s the deal, guys?” he said. My master has been very kind to you, and you’ve stolen his special personal cup.” “NO!” they answered. “We are honest men. Didn’t we bring your money back? If one of us has stolen your cup, he will die, and we will all become your slaves!” “Very well,” Hosni said.

I’d instructed Hosni to inspect the sacks from the oldest to the youngest. The money was in each sack, as it was supposed to be, and of course my cup was in Ben’s sack. It was a horrified and dejected group that trudged back to the palace.

Judah spoke first. It had been Judah’s idea to sell me to the caravan. “Please, my Lord,” he began. “When we were first here you pressed us closely about our family, and you refused to sell us any more food unless Ben came back with us. As we told you, Ben’s mother had two sons, and they were the favorites of our father. Ben’s older brother is dead. I’ve promised my

father that I'll bring Ben back safely to him. If I return without Ben, Dad will die of a broken heart. Please, Sir, let me be your slave, and let Benjamin return to our father."

I could stand it no more. They had passed the test. "Leave us alone!" I said to the Egyptians in the room. When we were alone, I said, "*I am Joseph. I am your brother*, whom you sold into slavery." Was that good news? Nope. They were absolutely terrified. Now, after what they'd done to me, here I was, alive, with all the power of Egypt, and with plenty of motive for revenge.

"There's no need to be afraid," I continued. "You meant evil to me, but God meant it for good. It was to save thousands and thousands of lives that God sent me here ahead of you. Now, go home and tell Dad that I'm alive. There are five more years of famine ahead. I'll send help back with you, so that you can bring your families to Egypt until the famine has ended."

It would surely have been interesting to hear their conversation going home. Finding me was good news and bad news. Now they had to tell Dad what they'd done long ago. When they got home they said, "Dad, Joseph is alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt." And when Dad recovered from this shock, he said, "It is enough. Joseph is alive. I'll go and see him before I die."

Well, that was a glad reunion, you may be sure! Dad lived in Egypt for seventeen years. I was 56 when he died. Just before his death, Dad called us all together for his final blessing. That's all recorded at the end of Genesis, but one of the blessings was really important. It was the blessing Dad gave to Judah: "*The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs, and the obedience of the nations is his.*"

Somehow, God had told Dad about Jesus.

We buried Dad in Canaan, in the field of Machpelah, with our ancestors. After we got back to Egypt, my brothers became afraid again. "What if Joe has been waiting for Dad to die to pay us back?" they wondered. I cried when they told me about their fear, and I told them again, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. You are forgiven. We are brothers."

I lived for more than fifty years after Dad died. I'd been the very first Hebrew in Egypt, but there were several million of us when Moses led our people back to the Promised Land four hundred years later. And they carried my bones with them.

Well, now you know the story. So what? Here's the "so what." Looking back, I see four principles at work in my life:

1. Favoritism is always destructive.
2. Humility is better than arrogance.
3. God rewards faithfulness.
4. God is at work in ways beyond our knowing.

The last two points are the most important. You may have noticed that before I was in prison I dreamed dreams. Afterward I interpreted them. Suffering transformed my life.

As I reflect on my earthly journey I ask myself, "What if I had given up? What if I had given in to sexual opportunity? What if I had become bitter at betrayal and abandonment? What if I had refused to forgive? What if I had missed the blessing?"

In your life, too, God is at work preparing your path in ways far beyond your imagining, and God's purpose in your life is Love. The Bible says, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

A couple of weeks ago, when my great-grandfather Abraham was with you, he told you that our lives with God are a lot like a relay race. Today, God continues to search for persons who will pick up the baton and join the race. Jesus has come. Jesus is coming. Will you follow him?