

A Lesson from the Life of Joseph

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Joseph was a man who suffered years of adversity and suffering through no fault or wrongdoing of his own. He was hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, and imprisoned, though he had done nothing to deserve any of these things. As we study the life of Joseph, we will see that all of this suffering came about in his life, as it did in the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, “by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).

Joseph remained faithful to God through all of the hardships he endured, even though he could have had no idea at the time why God had allowed these things to happen to him, or what good could possibly come from any of them. We will see that through all of the unjust sufferings Joseph endured, God was working in his life to prepare him and to bring him to the place where he would do the work that He had determined Joseph would do in His service, work which would bear fruit to His glory.

The ways that God has worked in the lives of His servants to accomplish His will through them are all recorded in the Scriptures for our instruction and edification, so that we as His people might have insight into some of the ways in

which He may work in our lives as well, as He accomplishes His will for each of us. And His will for each of us is that we will bear fruit to His glory, fruit that will last (John 15:16).

Joseph Favored by His Father, Hated by His Brothers

In Genesis 37-50 we find the biblical account of the life of Joseph, where we read of the sufferings and adversities that he experienced as God was bringing him to a place where he would be instrumental in saving and sustaining the entire family of his father Jacob through a seven year famine that occurred throughout the land of Canaan where Jacob lived, and in Egypt also. It is through the natural lineage of Jacob's son Judah that Jesus Christ Himself was born into the world through the Virgin Mary as recorded in the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

Joseph was a young man of seventeen when his troubles began. He was Jacob's favorite son, as we read in Genesis 37: "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms." (Genesis 37:3-4).

It is hard to imagine that Joseph was not aware of the special favor his father had for him, and that his brothers resented him for it. Nevertheless, he had two dreams that he told to them, which increased their animosity toward him.

Joseph's first dream is recorded in Genesis 37:5-8. In this first dream Joseph and his brothers were in the field binding together sheaves of grain. Suddenly Joseph's sheaf stood up, and the sheaves of his brothers all gathered around his sheaf and bowed down before it. When his brothers heard his dream, they were angered at the thought of Joseph ruling over them, and their hatred for him grew even greater.

Joseph also told his second dream to his brothers, and it as well did nothing to endear himself to them. This second dream is recorded in Genesis 37:9-11. In Joseph's second dream, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowed down before him. Joseph also told this second dream to his father Jacob. When he heard the dream, Jacob rebuked Joseph at the thought that he, Joseph's mother, and his eleven brothers would all bow before him. Joseph's brothers continued to be

jealous of him, and even though Jacob rebuked him for telling the dream, he kept it in his thoughts.

For Jacob's favor toward Joseph, and for his dreams of exaltation above his brothers, the Bible tells us that Joseph's brothers hated him to the extent that they were ready to kill him. Soon they saw an opportunity to rid themselves of Joseph once and for all.

Joseph Sold into Slavery

Joseph's brothers were out grazing their father's flocks, and Jacob sent Joseph to check on them and bring a report back to him. Joseph left the valley of Hebron and travelled first to Shechem and then to Dothan. As his brothers saw him approaching from a distance, they saw their chance to do away with him as we see in Genesis 37:19-20. They came up with a plan to kill Joseph and then tell their father Jacob that a wild animal had devoured him. With Joseph dead they knew that his dreams of authority over them would never come to pass.

Reuben, Jacob's oldest son, tried to talk the others out of their plan. He suggested that they not kill Joseph but throw him into a dry cistern that was nearby and leave him there to die. Reuben suggested this plan because he intended to later rescue Joseph and take him back to their father. The rest of the brothers went along with this plan. They stripped off Joseph's ornate robe that Jacob had given to him, and they threw him into the cistern. A short time later they sat down to eat.

Then the brothers saw a caravan of Ishmaelite merchants approaching them, coming from Gilead and on their way to Egypt. At this point Judah had the idea that they should not leave Joseph to die, but rather sell him as a slave to the Ishmaelites. They all agreed and pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver.

Soon afterwards Reuben went back to the cistern to rescue Joseph, unaware of what his brothers had done, because he was not with them when they sold Joseph as a slave. When he discovered that Joseph was not there, he returned to his brothers and exclaimed that Joseph was not in the cistern, and he did not know what to do.

At this point the brothers came up with the story that they would tell their father Jacob about Joseph's disappearance, as we see in Genesis 37:31-34. They took Joseph's robe, which Jacob had given to him, and they dipped it in the blood of a goat they had slaughtered. Then they took the robe back to Jacob, telling him that they had found it, and they asked him to examine it to see if it was Joseph's.

Jacob did recognize the robe as the one he had given to Joseph, and he surmised that a wild animal had attacked him and torn him to pieces. Jacob then tore his robe, he put on sackcloth, which was customary at that time for those who mourned, and He grieved over the loss of Joseph for many days.

When the Ishmaelites arrived in Egypt they sold Joseph to Potiphar, who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. Joseph found favor with his Egyptian master as recorded in Genesis 39:2-5. The Scripture tells us that the Lord was with Joseph and prospered him during the time he lived in Potiphar's house as his servant. Potiphar could see that the Lord was with Joseph and that He gave him success in everything he did. Because of this Potiphar trusted Joseph and put him in charge of his household and all that he owned. The Lord prospered everything Potiphar owned because of Joseph.

Joseph Imprisoned

Despite his loyalty and trustworthiness, more trouble soon came into Joseph's life. As we see in Genesis 39:6-7, Joseph was a handsome young man, and Potiphar's wife soon pursued him to come to bed with her. Joseph rejected her advances, but she kept pursuing him as we see recorded in Genesis 39:11-18.

On a day when none of the other servants happened to be in the house at the time, Joseph went in to do his work. Potiphar's wife then caught him by his garment, demanding that he come to bed with her. Joseph ran out of the house to get away from her, and as he did so, he left his garment in her hand.

In her anger and frustration at having been rejected yet again, she called out to some of her other servants, showed them Joseph's garment that he had left behind, and then she accused of him of trying to force himself upon her. She said that as soon as she screamed for help, Joseph fled, leaving his garment beside her. When Potiphar came home, she told him the same story, and when he heard it, he had Joseph imprisoned.

While Joseph was in prison, the Lord was with him there also. The Lord showed him kindness and granted him favor with the prison warden. The warden, as Potiphar had done before, came to trust Joseph and eventually put him in charge of the other prisoners. He gave him responsibility for running the affairs of the prison, because it was evident that the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Sometime later, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker displeased him, and he had them thrown into the same prison where Joseph was. After they had been in custody for a while, both the cupbearer and the baker had a dream the same night. Each one told Joseph of the dream he had, and Joseph, saying that interpretations belong to God, interpreted the dream of each man.

Joseph interpreted the dream of the cupbearer saying that he would be released from prison and restored to Pharaoh's service in three days. He then asked the cupbearer to remember him and mention his case to Pharaoh, because he had done nothing to deserve the imprisonment that he was suffering. Joseph then interpreted the dream of the baker, saying that he would be beheaded in three days.

When the three days had passed, events transpired exactly as Joseph said they would. The cupbearer was restored to Pharaoh's service. However he did not remember Joseph, but forgot about him and did not mention his case to Pharaoh as Joseph had asked him. Joseph continued to be imprisoned though he had done no wrong.

Joseph Brought before Pharaoh

Joseph remained in prison for two more years, and then Pharaoh had two dreams that troubled him. He sent for all of the magicians and wise men of Egypt, but none of them could interpret the dreams for him.

At this point the cupbearer remembered that Joseph had accurately interpreted his dream and the dream of the baker while they were in prison. When he told Pharaoh about Joseph, the king sent for Joseph, "and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon" (Genesis 41:14). After Joseph shaved and changed clothes he was brought before Pharaoh. Joseph told Pharaoh that he could not interpret the dreams, but that God would give Pharaoh the interpretation.

Pharaoh told Joseph his two dreams. Joseph then gave the interpretation, saying that the two dreams were one and the same. He then said that through these dreams, God had revealed to Pharaoh what He was about to do.

Joseph said the dreams meant that there would be seven years of abundance throughout Egypt, followed by seven years of famine. The seven years of famine would be so severe that they would ravage the land to the extent that the years of abundance would be forgotten. Joseph then told Pharaoh that the reason the dream was given to him in two forms was that God had decided to bring about these events soon.

In view of the God's impending action in the matter, Joseph advised Pharaoh as recorded in Genesis 41:33-43. He said that Pharaoh should find a wise and discerning man and put him in charge of managing the affairs of all Egypt. He then advised Pharaoh to appoint authorities to collect a fifth of the crops harvested during the seven years of abundance, and to store the grain under Pharaoh's authority in various cities. These stores were to be kept for food during the seven years of famine.

Pharaoh and his officials approved of Joseph's plan. When they considered Joseph's wisdom in interpreting Pharaoh's dreams and in devising this plan to save the country from ruin during the famine that was to come, they decided there would be no one better than Joseph to manage this effort. Pharaoh then put Joseph in charge of his palace and the whole land of Egypt, saying that all of the people of Egypt were to submit to his orders and direction. Joseph was made second in command over all of Egypt, subject only to Pharaoh himself.

In Genesis 37:2 we read that Joseph was seventeen years old when his troubles began, and in Genesis 41:46 we read that he was thirty years old when he was made second in command over all of Egypt. In God's time, the suffering and hardship that He allowed to affect Joseph's life had accomplished the purpose He intended. After thirteen years of undeserved suffering in slavery and in prison, within the space of a few hours, Joseph was delivered out of the dungeon and put in charge of the entire land of Egypt.

As Joseph was first put in charge of Potiphar's household, and then in charge of the affairs of the prison and all that went on there, so now he was put in charge of the entire land of Egypt to manage the resources of the land and prepare them for the famine that was to come. Joseph, according to the plan and purpose of his sovereign God, suffered the loss of the best years of his young manhood and

strength, thirteen years from age seventeen to age thirty, first to slavery that came about by the treachery of his brothers, and then to imprisonment that came about by the false accusation of Potiphar's wife, though he had done nothing to deserve either slavery or imprisonment.

Joseph stored up food in storehouses throughout Egypt during the seven years of abundance that followed, as God had given him the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. And then came the years of famine, as Joseph had also foretold.

God's purpose in bringing Joseph to this position of power in Egypt was to save the entire family of Jacob and his sons (Joseph's brothers, who had sold him into slavery years earlier) from the famine that was to spread also to the land of Canaan where they were all living. The events that transpired whereby Jacob, his sons, and their families were brought to Egypt to be preserved through the famine are recorded in Genesis 42-47.

Why All of this Undeserved Suffering in Joseph's Life?

We might question why God chose to bring Joseph to this position of power in Egypt and this place of service for Him by means of all this suffering and adversity in his life. We know that God is all-powerful and that nothing is too hard for Him, and we might ask why He did not bring all of this about in some other way – some easier way. After all, Joseph had done nothing to deserve all that he endured during this process. We might also question why God chose to bring about a famine at all, and why He chose to move His people to Egypt to be preserved through the famine, where they would later be enslaved and oppressed.

One answer to the latter question is given in Romans 9, where Paul quoted from Exodus 9:16, saying: "For Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.'" (Romans 9:17). God would later demonstrate His power in delivering His people from Egyptian bondage with a mighty deliverance, working through His servant Moses as recorded in the Book of Exodus.

We cannot know why God has chosen to bring about the bearing of spiritual fruit by means of suffering in the lives of His people. However, we do know that the suffering Joseph experienced in this process is completely consistent with teachings from the Scriptures that we have considered previously.

Once again, we recall the lesson that Jesus taught in John 12 when He said: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24). When Jesus said that “unless” the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, He was saying that this dying *must* occur in order for the fruit to be born, and that *unless* the death occurred, the grain of wheat would remain only a single seed, bearing no fruit at all.

In John 12:24, Jesus used the analogy of a grain of wheat to symbolize His life and the suffering that He was about to endure at Calvary in order to bear the fruit that God had ordained for Him. And then in the verses immediately following, He revealed that the same principle of spiritual fruit bearing that was at work in His life will also be at work in the lives of all those who follow Him, as they also bear fruit according to the plan and purpose of God for their lives.

In another very similar teaching, Jesus taught that we as His disciples must deny ourselves and take up our cross daily to follow Him (Luke 9:23). This means that we must deny, or “die to”, our own will and what we would choose for ourselves in life, and in place of what we want for ourselves, we are to submit to God’s will and His plan for our lives.

God’s will for all of His people is revealed to us through His word, and His will for each of us individually is revealed through the events, circumstances and conditions which He has ordained for our lives. In other words, God’s sovereign will for each of us individually is revealed through the things that He brings about in our lives and through the things that He allows to “happen” to us. And through some of these we will suffer the loss, or the “death”, of things that we want for ourselves in life.

Jesus taught us clearly in John 12:24-26, and also in Mark 10:35-40, that such sufferings as we have seen in the life of Joseph, and in the lives of other of God’s servants as recorded in the Scriptures, are necessary if spiritual fruit with eternal value is to be born to the glory of God. Nowhere is this principle exemplified with greater glory than in the life of Jesus Christ Himself. And this same principle has always been, and will always be, at work in the lives of each and every one of God’s people, until Christ’s second coming.

The principle that Jesus taught in John 12:24-26 is like a continuous thread that runs throughout the entire tapestry of the Scriptures, from Genesis to

Revelation. This timeless and universal principle of spiritual fruit bearing, ordained by God, is the reason that Joseph had to endure the undeserved sufferings he experienced in order to bear the fruit of saving the family of Jacob through the famine that He brought about. In this service for God, Joseph was instrumental in the preservation of the lineage through which Jesus Christ Himself would be born into the world.

Looking back, Joseph came to understand why God had brought about all of these painful events in his life, as we see when he finally revealed himself to his brothers in Genesis 45. Up to that time his brothers had not recognized him, but now he chose to reveal himself to them:

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Please come closer to me.” And they came closer. And he said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. ***Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God....***” (Genesis 45:4-8, emphasis added).

Joseph had come to understand the sovereignty of God in all that had happened to him, and it was given to him to see the good that God brought about through the unjust sufferings he endured. After Jacob died in Egypt, Joseph’s brothers were once again afraid that he might finally take his revenge upon them for what they had done to him and the misery they had caused. But Joseph understood what God had intended to bring about through it all, and he reassured them as we read in Genesis 50:

But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? ***As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good*** in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19-21, emphasis added.)

In retrospect, Joseph was able to see what God intended to accomplish through the years of his suffering in slavery and in prison, though while he was enduring these troubles, he could have had no idea of the way events would unfold as a result of all that he was going through. ***Joseph had come to understand the sovereignty of God in the things that happen in men’s lives, as we see in Genesis***

45:5-8. He had also come to understand that God is working for good through the events and circumstances which He allows to touch the lives of His people, even when the intent of others is to do harm by their actions. We as believers have this same assurance that everything our sovereign God allows to affect our lives is working together for our good and for our eternal glory.