

Truth for Today

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Lessons from the life of Joseph: Sent to Serve - Genesis 37

Of all the Old Testament pictures of the Lord Jesus the life of Joseph is one of the most remarkable. We do not read of any sin or failure in his life. That does not mean that he did not sin but that the Scriptures do not record any sinful act in his life. Again and again in the story we come across instances which remind us of scenes in the life of the Lord Jesus. More than any other servant, he prospered in everything that he did. Sadly, this only brought out more the hatred of his brothers.

The story begins when he was a lad of seventeen years old. As he was the son of Jacob's old age he was his favourite and he loved him more than the rest of his sons. We read in verse 3, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours; this reminds us of the relationship of the Lord Jesus to His Father. Right at the beginning of his gospel, John says of the Lord Jesus in John 1:14, "And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father".

John tells us more about the person of the Lord Jesus than the other gospel writers and commences the story of the incarnation of the Son with the fact that He was uniquely the object of His Father's love. Just as Jacob gave a special coat of many colours to indicate that Joseph was his favourite, so we read in the gospels of the Father declaring His love for His Son. At the beginning of His public pathway at His baptism, we read in Matthew 3:17, "And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Again on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17:5, "And behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him."

The beauty of that coat would remind us of the perfect harmony that there was in the life of Jesus. Only His Father could see it. Beauty has been described as the harmony of parts or colours. Everything in the life of Jesus was in perfect harmony. He alone maintained what was due to God in devotion and obedience and what was due to men in kindness and love in perfect balance. The grace that He brought into this world was according to truth. The truth that He taught was always in grace. The hidden motives of His heart were only known to God but His acts of kindness and grace were seen by all around Him.

Just as Jacob's love for Joseph brought out the hatred of his brothers, so the love of the Father to His Son, the Lord Jesus, was the basis of the hatred of the Jews. In John 5:18 we read, "Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill Him because, He not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was His Father." Joseph told his father of the evil ways of his brothers. In John 7:7, we read the words of Jesus, "The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil." So we see these two things at the beginning of the story of Joseph that are a picture of the Lord Jesus. Joseph was the delight of his father's heart and gave a true report of the evil ways of his brothers. So the Lord Jesus was the Only Begotten of the Father and He testified of the evil of the Jews.

The story of Joseph is unique in the Scriptures in that it contains three pairs of dreams. The first of these we read of in Genesis 37:7-9. Joseph told his brothers, "For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf." And, "Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me."

I believe this first pair of dreams brings before us the purpose of God in regard, firstly to Joseph, but in its complete fulfilment, the Lord Jesus Christ. The first dream is a scene on earth. The second one is in heaven. Ultimately we know that many years later, Joseph's brothers did indeed have to bow down to him. But the sun, moon, and the stars do not seem to have been fulfilled in Joseph. That could only be in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 1 Paul writes concerning the purpose of God in verses 9 and 10, "Having made known unto us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself: that in the dispensation of the fullness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in Him." We know that of old God often made known His will to men through dreams. The people who dreamed them may not have understood their significance. But we understand that they usually were foretelling of what God was about to do, especially if they were doubled.

The verses we have read in Ephesians speak of the 'mystery of His will. This is because it is only known and understood by those who are led by the Holy Spirit of God. In a coming day when this is fulfilled, it will not be a mystery. Everyone will see it and will acknowledge the Lord Jesus as being supreme, not only on earth, but in heaven as well.

When Joseph told his dreams to his brothers, they hated him even more. Even Jacob his father seemed unable to accept that they would all have to bow down to Joseph. The thing that incensed the Jews more than anything was when the Lord Jesus spoke of the time when He would be supreme in the universe. In the gospel of Mark 14, when Jesus is being examined by the high priest, He is asked in verse 61, "Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" To which the Lord Jesus answered in verse 62, "I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven." Upon this confession they condemned Him to death and began to spit in His face.

Likewise, when Stephen, the first Christian martyr in Acts 7 looks up into heaven and says in verse 56, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" the Jews are filled with hatred. They do to Stephen what they did to his master and stoned him to death. The Jews could in no way accept who Jesus was. When they were confronted with the truth that one day He would be supreme on earth and in heaven, they were filled with hatred towards Him. Yet these prophetic Scriptures have not been fulfilled. But we know through belief in God's word that soon they will all be fulfilled, despite what men and the world may think.

In Genesis 37:13-14, we read of Jacob sending his son Joseph to seek his brothers. "And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here am I. And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the Vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem." Here we come to the verse from which we have taken the title of this talk. Joseph is a picture of the Lord Jesus as sent into this world by His Father. Much later in this story, Joseph tells his brethren in Genesis 45:5, "For God did send me before you to preserve life." Again in 50:20 he says, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." God's hand was over everything that was to happen. It all was to bring about His purpose. Joseph had learned this during his sorrowful early years and what a beautiful character it developed in him. He had no hard feelings against his brothers but recognised that he had been sent into Egypt for a special reason.

Of course, Jacob could not know what the future held for them all, but we see again how Joseph is a remarkable picture of the Lord Jesus, sent into this world with a view to bringing salvation to men. As we read in 1 John 4:14, "And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world." Jacob lived in Hebron, which means 'communion' or 'fellowship'. The Son of God came into this world from that place of eternal fellowship that He had with His Father before He ever created the world. The prophet Isaiah says in chapter Isaiah 6:8, I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me." How similar this is to the words of Joseph in answer to the summons of his father, "Here am I."

When God had the work of reconciling all things back to Himself, which involved the dealing with sin in its entirety, He had One by Him who was willing to come and take up that awful matter. The Lord Jesus came into this world at the request of His Father to do that work of putting away sin even though it involved the sacrifice of Himself.

But when Joseph arrived at Shechem, he could not find his brothers; they had moved on. So we read in verses 15 and 16, "And a certain man found him, and, behold, he was wandering in the field: and the man asked him, saying, "What seekest thou? And he said, I seek my brethren: tell me, I pray thee, where they feed their flocks." So it was that when the Lord Jesus came into this world seeking the blessing of His own, He did not find them as they should have been and consequently they refused Him. We read in John 1:11, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not."

God originally had given His people a land to inherit. He had driven out every enemy and had given them every earthly blessing that could be thought of. But His people were not faithful to Him and forsook His law and His ways. So God gave them up to other nations who took them captive and removed them out of the land that He had given them. So it was that when the Lord Jesus came into this world, His people were not enjoying the blessings of the land. Although they were living in it they were under the control of the Romans and, sadly, many of them were happy to have it so. When faced with the choice of Jesus Christ or the Roman power, they were happy to say, "We have no king but Caesar."

So the Lord Jesus was a stranger in the very world that He had made. His own nation, whom He loved and had come to bless, refused Him and chose a man that was a murderer. So Joseph did not find his brothers where his father said they would be. They should have been at Shechem, which means 'a shoulder', a place of elevation and strength. Instead, they had moved to Dothan, which means 'a dwelling'. God would have kept the nation of Israel if they had remained faithful to God in a place of strength and safety. Instead they had settled down amongst the nations and, in

fact, were subservient to them. The Lord Jesus could not rest in such a scene and so went about doing good on every hand but in no way recognising the Jews as God's chosen people, for they had refused Him. Nevertheless He continued with the work that His Father had given Him to do. That work has made salvation and blessing available to everyone who will trust Him as their Saviour. It will also eventually bring God's earthly people back to Himself and set them up in their own land. So the story of Joseph goes on to show.

Joseph eventually finds his brothers but, sadly, we read in verses 18 and 19, "And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh." We are reminded of that verse, John 11:53, "Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put Him to death." So the brothers say in verse 20, "Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams." Such was the dreadful scheming of Joseph's brothers and yet he had only told them of his dreams. The Lord Jesus in John 8:40 says to the Jews, "But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God." How true it is today that, if we speak to men about the coming of the Lord Jesus to deal with evil and to set up His kingdom on earth then we are scorned and laughed at. But soon that marvellous event will take place! The man of Calvary will take the throne and will rule in equity and righteousness.

Reuben protests about killing Joseph so, we read, "And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him; and they took him and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it." Once again we see how that God's hand was over everything. Many times the Jews would have killed the Lord Jesus but they were unable to do so because 'His time was not yet come'. But figuratively they tried to strip the Lord Jesus of His moral perfection. They often sought to trip Him in His words to have something whereof to accuse Him, but none could find fault in Him. They could never humble Him but sadly, at the end of His perfect life, they were permitted to humiliate Him. They took His clothes off Him and robed Him in garments of mockery. They buffeted Him. They spat in His face. They put a reed in His hand and bowed in mockery to Him. Yet despite all, He answered not a word. Peter says of Him in 1 Peter 2:22-23, "Who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth: who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously."

But although the Lord Jesus suffered much at the hands of men, this was a light thing compared to the depths of suffering He went to when 'God made His soul an offering for sin'. The pit Joseph was put into may have been deep but it was dry. Jeremiah because of his faithfulness was also cast into a pit and he sank up to his armpits in the mud. Jonah when he was cast forth into the sea and was swallowed by a great fish, says prophetically in Jonah 2:5-6, "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever." But none of these men knew anything of the deep waters that the Lord Jesus went into when suffering for us at the hands of God. Psalm 69 says, "Save me, O God; for the waters are come in into my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me." But greater even than the picture that such words may convey to us, who can understand the meaning of those words of Psalm 22 quoted by the Lord Jesus when hanging on the cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

Joseph is not left in the pit. Again we see God's hand ordering everything according to His purpose. His brothers, I believe more concerned with making money than they were with Joseph's life, grasp the opportunity of Midianite merchantmen passing by and sell him for twenty pieces of silver, who take him down to Egypt. Here we see the perfection of Scripture. Joseph was only a lad of seventeen so was sold as a juvenile slave, whereas the One of whom he was a picture was sold for thirty pieces of silver.

The chapter ends with Jacobs's grief at the sight of Joseph's coat soaked in blood- the ploy that the brothers used to deceive him, to try to cover up their sin. They were but men and little thought of the ever-watchful eye that saw everything that they did. But despite this, God was working all things according to His will to eventually save them all alive and bring them to Joseph's feet. Joseph, meanwhile, is sold a second time and comes down to Potiphar's house in Egypt.

The story of Joseph reminds me of that hymn,

*'God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.'*

Joseph had many more sorrowful lessons to learn when 'the iron entered into his soul' but his trust was in God. The hymn goes on,

*'His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.'*

We may pass through painful and bitter times but let us rest on the love that has planned everything for our eternal blessing and remember the words at the end of that hymn,

*'Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain'.*

Amen.

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