

JOSEPH: THE DREAMER

The story of Joseph is amazing. Joseph is “used” to further Israel’s destiny. The unfolding of events can be understood in terms of the normal forces and patterns we are familiar with: jealousy, lust, guilt, hunger, and so forth. Yet a higher purpose and intelligence is at work behind the scenes. We do not see or understand it all, but neither does the story make any sense without it. Many things run counter to all normal expectations. The humans are doing their thing: focused on survival; making choices they think will serve their ends at the moment; busy with their feelings and hopes and desires. And while many of their actions are not admirable, some of them truly are. (Judah, one of Joseph’s brothers, is wonderful at one point, for instance.)

But what if we start thinking that Joseph’s story is reflecting truth and reality? What if there really is a living God working behind the scenes of everything we know and see that is going on here? Even with Joseph’s story all laid out before us, the influence of God is subtle, often hidden, and at times quite invisible. Even so, Joseph’s life is not long enough to answer most of our questions. We know, for instance, that in a few years all of Joseph’s people will be slaves in Egypt. With the miraculous support of God, Joseph saves his people – but for how long, and to what purpose? All too soon, as Exodus says, *“There came a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph.”* And this Pharaoh will soon be commanding that all the male babies of the Hebrews must be slaughtered. (Exodus 1:8-22)

Nevertheless, if you believe the story of Joseph, you have had it! You cannot ever be the same or see things in the same way – not ever again. Most of the people around you do not expect that their lives or that your life will have any lasting significance. Oh sure, in some little ways, with a few who know you, for a little while. But that is hardly to claim that Yahweh the Omnipotent is present behind all human history, or that your life is part of Yahweh’s purpose and plan. But if God really was active and involved in the life of Joseph, what about now – and what about you? Has something turned God off since the time of Joseph?

The story of Joseph raises questions around concepts like “providence” and “predestination.” (Is there a difference?) God will have God’s way one way or another, sooner or later – if there really is a God. We can cooperate or resist, or we can just try to stay out of the story.

Lots and lots of people in our time are trying to say and believe that there is no story, except for the one they are trying to write for themselves.

But we need to get back to Joseph's story. Next week we will talk about the Joseph who has become the Grand Vizier of all Egypt. Today I want to talk about Joseph the Dreamer. Not talking about a boy who does lots of daydreaming; we all know some of them. Joseph has an unusual gift. Like many high gifts, it often feels like a curse, especially when Joseph is too young to know where it comes from or why he has this special connection to God.

The biblical account mentions two dreams that Joseph has as a young boy. These come before the Scripture passages we just read. Then there are two dreams that fellow inmates have when Joseph is in prison, and Joseph is able to interpret them. Next week we will come to two dreams that Pharaoh has, and no one can interpret them – until they call in Joseph.

As a young boy, Joseph is troubled by his dreams. Where do the dreams come from? It's hard to have special gifts. Many people hear the story of Joseph as a boy and conclude that he was an egotistical, spoiled brat. That is the opinion his brothers have of him. I am unable to hear the story that way. When we are young, we assume that everybody around us has all our gifts and all the same awareness that we have, plus their own special gifts and abilities beyond that.

Joseph dreams that he and his brothers are out in the field binding sheaves, when all at once his sheaf rises and stands upright and the sheaves of his brothers gather around and bow in homage before his sheaf. (Genesis 37:5-8) Is he stupid enough to tell that dream to his brothers? And of course, this makes the brothers furious. They are already annoyed enough because their father Jacob has given Joseph a long-sleeved tunic – a robe signaling that Joseph is a scholar – while their short-sleeved tunics are suitable for normal laborers. (The coat of many colors is more accurately translated “a coat with long sleeves.”)

Then Joseph dreams that the sun, the moon, and eleven stars are bowing down to him. (Genesis 37:9-11) Clearly this means that his father and mother as well as his brothers will bow down to him. Even his father is annoyed at this dream, and some of us are already yelling at him: “For God's sake, Joseph, keep quiet about your dreams! Don't tell anybody.”

But these dreams are very troublesome to Joseph. They are not his inventions, nor are they his desire or intention. He is not making them up; they are coming to him. This is more troublesome and scary to him than to his brothers or his parents. He is telling his dreams in the hope that somebody can help him to understand what they mean. It will drive him to become the great interpreter of dreams that he later becomes. They have nothing to do with Joseph's ego. They are about how Joseph's life will unfold, but nobody will realize this for many years to come.

Joseph is far more aware than most people are; he pays more attention to and cares more about what God may be doing than most. His early dreams announce the plan, but they are far from clear at the time. Are God's purposes carried more by those who trust that God *has* hidden purposes, or do all of us carry God's purposes whether we mean to or not? What about our *own* lives? Do we expect God to be doing unusual things with them? Do we expect surprises and surprising twists and turns along the way? Are surprises ever easy to adjust to, whether they seem to us to come with blessings *or* curses? Some of us like to plan, to be well organized, to feel like we are being effective and responsible. Who wants some "God" to keep jiggling the strings, throwing things off balance, introducing plans or purposes that we have not thought about – and without even asking us?

In any case, Joseph is a very conscientious man. Wherever he goes, he is soon put in charge of managing things. Back home it makes his brothers jealous. As mentioned, that's the problem with his coat of long sleeves (not of many colors). It means Joseph keeps the books. He runs the family business for his father. But it will be the same with Potiphar or in prison or with Pharaoh. We always see this thread running through Joseph's life. His very name means "may God increase." Of course, this is only on the surface – on the outside of life.

Back to reality: Who is Jacob's firstborn son, the one who is supposed to end up head of the clan? Reuben, of course. The thing between Jacob and Esau was bad enough, but where does Joseph come in the line of descent? Why is Joseph put in charge and the favorite of his father? Joseph is the eleventh-born of Jacob's sons. Is it obvious that he is more intelligent and more gifted than the first ten sons? It *is* obvious that Joseph is the firstborn son of Rachel – and Rachel, of course, is Jacob's great love. It is not very wise of Jacob, we would say, to make his favoritism so obvious. And it is not surprising that the first ten sons resent, envy, and hate Joseph.

When opportunity comes, the ten brothers sell Joseph into slavery to a passing caravan bound for Egypt. It was a close call: Their first choice had been to murder Joseph. But their greed trumped their hatred, so the story continues. The brothers dip Joseph's coat in the blood of a goat they have killed, they tear the coat up a bit, and when they get back home, they tell their father: "See what we found? We never saw Joseph. We don't know what happened to him. But here is his coat." Reuben did not want Joseph killed and was trying to rescue him. And Judah was the one who proposed that selling him was better than killing him. But it no longer matters. Joseph is gone – sold into slavery and carried down to Egypt. The ten brothers have made a pact now, and they have agreed to keep their dark secret forever.

Of course, Jacob is bereft. Nobody thinks about Joseph's dreams any longer. They think all of that is over. They think they have gotten rid of the dreams along with Joseph. But authentic dreams are not easily undone. Unbeknown to Jacob or anyone in his clan, Joseph is slowly succeeding in Egypt – beyond anyone's wildest imagination. It does not come easily or automatically. Joseph faces temptation and deceit. Being faithful and obedient costs him his secure position in Potiphar's house and gets him thrown into prison. And in prison, Joseph succeeds again. He is soon managing the prison, and there he interprets more dreams. But he himself is forgotten by everyone who matters – even, it would seem, by God. The "forgotten man" theme is full of pathos. You know how it goes, but we will tell it again anyway.

Despite the betrayal and vengeance of his brothers, Joseph has worked his way out of a hopeless hole. He is the trusted servant of Potiphar, and Potiphar is the commander of the special forces who guard Pharaoh himself. Joseph has proved himself so competent and trustworthy that Potiphar has put him in charge of managing all the affairs of his household. Joseph is now comfortable, trusted, effective, and very good at his work. But then a little lust on the part of Potiphar's wife, and it all comes tumbling down again. Joseph did not play it right, did he? Not according to the standards and values of our time. A little caution, a little subterfuge, and he could have "had it all." By the way, if Potiphar had believed his wife for one second, Joseph would have been dead, not just sent to the special prison for those out of favor with Pharaoh. Potiphar is only "saving face." Nevertheless, Joseph's life now looks hopeless again: a dark place, a dead end, a total failure – and it was not even his fault. Trust God? Oh right! Easy for us to say. And of course, trusting God is always hardest when it is most necessary and truly important.

Even being God is “no bed of roses,” as they say. How do you get Joseph from Potiphar’s house to being the Grand Vizier of all Egypt? God has bigger plans for Joseph than just managing Potiphar’s household. But why would Potiphar ever let Joseph go? Joseph is too good a servant; he is making Potiphar’s life better than it had ever been before. So how to get Joseph back on track – back to the destiny God has in mind for him? There is no way – except through prison. And what is God saying? “Please Joseph, do not get discouraged. Do not get depressed. Everything is fine. You just have to be patient and keep calm and trust me a little longer.” Only a few more years now.

Does God cross his fingers when this is the message that has to be sent to any of us? How easy it is to ruin everything at such a time. And Satan is sitting there licking his lips in anticipation. Patience? Endurance? Faithfulness when the light is not the kind you can see? How many of us love this kind of testing?

It could not have been easy for Joseph either. Joseph has done everything right, including staying straight and trustworthy to Potiphar. Yet he ends up disgraced and thrown into prison. Where is the light at the end of the tunnel? Nevertheless, it soon becomes clear that Joseph does not give up. Soon he is put in charge of managing the prison. But from all outer evidence, it still looks like his life is over, sidetracked – has hit a dead end. For how many months or years is Joseph stuck there in prison? What good will ever come of his efforts, his prayers, his hard work, his faithfulness? Surely his dreams had just been the meaningless imagination of an overly romantic little boy.

We are not given any access to Joseph’s thoughts and prayers at this point. Is he sad, deeply depressed, tempted to give up on God – or at least on his own life? We are not told. But then one day Pharaoh’s butler (cupbearer) remembers that Joseph had interpreted some dreams quite accurately in the past. Now Pharaoh himself is troubled with dreams. So they send for Joseph, and sure enough, God is still with him. God gives him the insight to understand what Pharaoh’s dreams mean. Out of nowhere – well, out of prison – Joseph becomes the man of the hour and ends up ruling all Egypt. He becomes the most trusted servant of Pharaoh himself. I don’t know – is there a lesson there? I certainly have no desire to live in Egypt, but is there a lesson there?

Moving on: The brothers are still controlled by their guilt, even after all these years. They do not see themselves as carriers of the promise – carriers of God’s Covenant with Abraham. They just want

to survive and take care of the family farm, look after and honor their aging father Jacob, and keep their dark secret: they have lied about Joseph's death; they have sold Joseph into slavery because of their jealousy; they have a pact to keep forever quiet about it. That is the kind of thing that freezes life in its tracks. That puts life on hold, at least for them. They have no thought that Joseph's dreams are still alive and real. But neither are their own lives going anywhere.

Meanwhile, Joseph is not dead. Joseph is even out of prison, and now Pharaoh is trusting him more and more. Things are just fine at the moment. But in seven years, that will all change dramatically. Joseph knows this because of Pharaoh's dreams. We will pick up the story again next Sunday. In the meantime:

- 1.) Do you have any special dreams?
- 2.) Have any of you ever had to deal with jealousy and some people close to you thinking you were being egotistical, when you were only trying to figure out what God wanted of you?
- 3.) And finally, the big one: have you ever had to go through a dark time – a prison, it felt like – because God had to break you out of one phase of life, where you thought things were going pretty well, but there was no other way to get from there to God's real purpose for your life?

At such times, "trust" is not just a pretty word – not just a nice idea to put on the fireplace mantle. Trust becomes the core of your life – or you will lose everything.