

Joseph – The Early Years

Text: Gen. 37:1-11

Introduction: As we embark on a study of the life of Joseph as a part of our exposition of the Book of Genesis, let's consider a number of introductory points.

- The biblical biography of Joseph's life divides neatly into three segments based on three, time markers given to us in the Divine record of his life:
 1. From birth to seventeen years (Gen. 30:24-37:2).
 2. From seventeen to thirty years (Gen. 37:2-41:46). These years were marked by deep trials and tests as Joseph experiences hurts and injustices at the hands of others. They are also years of preparation for his main life's work that God would use him for.
 3. From thirty to one hundred and ten years (death) (Gen. 41:46-50:26). These last 80 years of Joseph's life are the glory years of blessing and reward.
- We can benefit from the study of Joseph's life from at least four viewpoints.¹
 1. We can look at it *historically* for his life explains the development of the Hebrew race. Without this account of the life of Joseph, we would be in the dark as to how the children of Israel came to be in Egypt as described in the next Book in the sacred Canon (Exodus). God had prophesied to Abraham that his descendants would dwell in a strange land for 400 years (Gen. 15:13-14). The story of Joseph's life shows how that came about.
 2. We can look at it *Providentially*, for here we see the heart of God planning and the hand of God shaping.
 3. We can look at it *devotionally*, for Joseph is a wonderful example of godliness.
 4. We can look at it *typically*, for Joseph is a beautiful type of the Lord Jesus.
- The account of Joseph's life falls under the next "generations" division/heading of the Book of Genesis called "the generations of Jacob" (Vs. 2). "The "generations of Jacob" are mainly occupied with the history of Joseph, because through him mainly was the divine purpose carried on. Jacob is now the head of the chosen family, since Isaac's death (Gen. 35:29), and therefore the narrative is continued under that new heading." (Alexander Maclaren)
- The theme of Joseph's life is summarised in the phrase "God meant it for good" and is a living demonstration of the truth of Romans 8:28.
- In this message, we will seek to set the scene by reminding ourselves of Joseph's family background from our previous studies and then consider these opening verses that describe Joseph's life at 17 years of age. Our lesson will be organised under three headings.

I. THE DYNAMICS OF THE EARLY YEARS (GEN. 30-36)

Let's remind ourselves from our studies of the preceding chapters of some of the key features of Joseph's family background. While there were some positive things in Joseph's upbringing, there was much disfunction and difficulty. The influence of the home in the shaping and moulding of a

¹ By Pastor Denis Lyle, Joseph sermon series: God meant it for good, sermon notes.

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child's life cannot be overstated. In Joseph's childhood, he was confronted with:

A. Polygamy in his Father's Marriage

1. Joseph was born as the 11th of 12 children. He would have quickly discerned as a young child that his mother was one of four women in his father's life. Imagine being raised with four mums!
2. No doubt as a child Joseph would have experienced the tension and strife that is the inevitable consequence of polygamy.

B. Problems in his Mother's Life

1. His own mother Rachel had her fair share of problems. Joseph was an answer to her prayers but she also had an affection for pagan gods. While Rachel was attractive outwardly, she had a tendency to be weak spiritually.
2. Those idols were present in Rachel's tent where Joseph spent his early years and could have been very destructive in Joseph's life if he had chosen to pursue pagan worship over the worship of the One True God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

C. Perversion in his Siblings' Lives

As a growing lad, several wicked things were committed by his older siblings:

1. Dinah's defilement with Shechem.
2. Simeon and Levi's murderous rampage of the town of Shechem. It appears that Simeon was one of the main ringleaders in the ill treatment of Joseph described in the second half of the chapter (See Gen. 42:24).
3. Reuben's affair with his step mother Bilhah.
4. The wickedness of the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah as noted in this chapter (Gen. 37).

D. Pain in his Mother's Death

1. To lose one's mother at any stage of life is a difficult trial but to lose one's mother in the early days of youth would be a bitter blow indeed. Joseph was probably around the age of 15 when he stood by his mother's grave at Bethlehem.
2. Little did he realize then that this early experience of suffering was a foretaste of a life that was destined to endure much suffering within the will of God for his life.

E. Practical Lesson to Learn

1. One of the great lessons we can learn from the life of Joseph right here is that by the grace of God, your family upbringing does not have to ruin you. **The dysfunction and damage of your past does not have to define and determine your future!** That does not mean that you won't have burdens and even baggage to deal with as a result of a broken home environment but through salvation and the blessed work of God's grace in your life, you can rise above it and overcome.
2. This is such an important lesson to remember in our day of victim culture where everyone wants to use hurts or injustices of the past as excuses for bitterness and bad behaviour in the present. We are not suggesting that genuine victims should not be the objects of Christian care and compassion but we are saying that no matter

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what injustices, hurts and difficulties you may have experienced as a young person, the grace of God is the answer, not bitterness and indulgence in sinful behaviour.

II. THE DESCRIPTION OF THE EARLY YEARS (VS. 1-4)

Genesis 37 is where the Spirit of God begins to really paint the canvas of Joseph's life for us, commencing the record of his life's story at the age of 17. There are at least two features of Joseph's life that are clearly described:

A. Joseph's Purity within the Family (Vs. 1-2)

The purity of Joseph's life as a **17-year-old youth** is evidenced by his response to the evil activities of his older brothers. The sons of Bilhah and Zilpah were apparently Joseph's main companions at this time in his life, probably because they were close to him in age. That would be Dan and Naphtali, the sons of his own mother Rachel's maid and Gad and Asher, the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid. Look at Joseph's response to his brothers' wicked behaviour.

1. Joseph **refused** the temptation of his brothers' evil example.
 - a. This says a lot for Joseph's godly character at the young age of 17. To say 'no' to temptation at any time in the Christian life is difficult, but it is especially difficult during the days of youth, hence why the Bible speaks of "youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22).
 - b. Joseph's courage to say 'no' to temptation was to become one of the **defining qualities** of his life and testimony. This will particularly come into the spotlight in chapter 39 with the incident involving Potiphar's wife.
 - c. There is a great encouragement for Christian young people in Joseph's godly example. By the grace of God, you don't have to follow the typical road of rebellion and sin followed by the majority of teenagers (e.g., drugs, drunkenness and depravity). By the grace of God, you can be a godly teenager like Joseph and walk the narrow path of truth. Make 17 (and your teenage and young adult years) a spiritual time of revival, not a sinful time of ruin.
 - d. It takes **no courage** at all to follow the crowd into sin (though the world and the devil try and portray it as such) but it takes courage and the power of God through a close walk with God to break out to the right and pursue purity as a teenager.
 - e. Make the heroes of the faith like Joseph your role models and your heroes in your youth, not the sports stars, pop stars and movie stars of this empty world!
2. Joseph **resisted** the influence of his brothers' evil example.
 - a. The temptations of youth are very difficult to refuse from any source (e.g., friends, the world) but they are even harder to refuse when they come from one's older siblings. It is a very natural thing for young people to aspire to follow their older siblings. If following God, older siblings can be a tremendous influence for good and godliness in the lives of their younger brothers and sisters. Conversely, if they are living a sinful life,

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they can be such a destructive influence in their younger siblings' lives.

- b. The Book of Genesis records murder (34:25), incest (35:22), immorality (38:12-18), hatred (37:4), envy (37:11), the selling of Joseph into slavery (37:28), and lying (37:31-33) by these older brothers of Joseph. Despite the bad example of 10 older brothers, Joseph chose to live right for the Lord. What a testament to God's grace and Joseph's walk with God. **It is a reminder that no matter how your older siblings may be living, you can choose to do what is right by God's grace.**
3. Joseph **reported** the wickedness of his brothers' evil ways.
 - a. Not only did Joseph not participate in his brothers' sinful ways, he also did not remain **silent**. He raised a voice of protest against the evil activities of his brothers by appealing to their father Jacob as the authority in the home.
 - b. Silence in the face of compromise and sin is one of the great travesties in the church today. Evil is encouraged to flourish in an environment of silence where godly people refuse to speak up. The Christian church today, with rare exceptions, is all but silent today in the face of shocking apostasy and unspeakable depravity.
 - c. There is a time when it is spiritual to be silent but there is also a time when to be silent is sinful!
 - d. Note: Some accuse Joseph of being a talebearer here but he was not a talebearer for two reasons:
 - i. Joseph was speaking the truth whereas a talebearer spreads falsehoods with a malicious motive.
 - ii. He was speaking to the right person in the situation which was the head of the home. A talebearer discusses issues with just about everyone except the appropriate individual.
 - iii. It is not gossip/slander to communicate the facts of a situation to a God ordained authority who can be a part of the solution.
 - e. Note: No doubt Joseph's purity of life was one of the major causes behind the hatred his older brothers had towards him. If he had just shut his mouth and let them get away with their sin, they might never have done anything to him but he was a reproof upon their sinful ways in life and lips, and they hated him for it. You can get into a lot of trouble when you try and stand between someone and their pursuit of lust!
 - f. "Their hatred shows that his purity had made their doing wrong more difficult. **It is a grand thing when a young man's presence deprives the Devil of elbow-room for his tricks.**" (Maclaren)

B. Joseph's Position within the Family (Vs. 3-4)

Joseph occupied a high position in the family which contributed to his brothers' animosity towards him. He held the position of:

1. The highly favoured son (Vs. 3a)

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- a. This was a **fateful** mistake on the part of Jacob. Partiality in the home, exercised by either parent, always promotes contention, discontent and bitterness.
 - b. This was a **fleshly** mistake for Jacob to make. Joseph was easier to love than the other children! Partiality stems from selfishness on the parent's part. Joseph was seeking to live a godly life and compared with his brothers so he was not a source of pain and difficulty in his father's life. Jacob was a passive father and therefore was even more vulnerable to the sin of partiality. Passive men have a tendency to make personal peace their main priority and so it would be easy for Jacob to make Joseph his favourite as he caused him the least amount of stress. He was also the son of his favourite wife and the son of his old age.
 - i. Note: While a parent may love all of their children equally, it is not always possible to have the same closeness with all of them. A lot depends on the child as they grow into adulthood. If they rebel, your love for them does not change but your closeness with them will be damaged until such time as they get right with God and with you. But that is a scenario altogether different to that of Jacob where he was engaged in carnal favouritism.
 - c. This was a **foolish** mistake for Jacob to make. Jacob knew firsthand what favouritism could do in a home from his own experience. Much of the bitter division between him and his brother Esau in their early years was a result his parents playing the favourites game.² Before you are hasty in condemning Jacob for repeating the mistakes of his upbringing, be reminded that apart from personal vigilance and the grace of God, you will be very likely to repeat the same mistakes of your parents, even if you dislike them!
2. The honoured son (firstborn) (Vs. 3b)
- a. The coat of many colours was given to Joseph not only because of Jacob's affection for him but also to indicate his exalted position in the family. The coat of many colours "marked the owner as the one whom the father intended to be the future leader of the household; an honour normally given to the firstborn son." (Macarthur) The coat symbolized that he was to hold the privileged position of firstborn in the family.
 - b. Why was Joseph given the position of firstborn?
 - i. Reuben forfeited the birthright because of his immorality with his father's wife Bilhah. The reason the birthright did not pass on to Simeon, the second born was because Joseph was the firstborn of the second wife Rachel. It was also given to him because of his godly character. Jacob may well have discerned the early signs of Joseph's leadership gifts which would become so prominent in later life.

² Jacob was his mother Rebekah's favorite son and Esau, his father Isaac's.

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- ii. 1 Chronicles 5:1-2 “Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel, (for he was the firstborn; but, forasmuch as he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph the son of Israel: and the genealogy is not to be reckoned after the birthright. For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came the chief ruler; but the birthright was Joseph's:)”
3. The hated son (Vs. 4)
 - a. The provocation of their hatred (Vs. 4a). Their father's favouritism of Joseph was the catalyst for their hatred. While Jacob had a lot to answer for in this situation, the brothers did not have to go down to bitterness. Remember, God holds us responsible for how we respond to hurts and injustices in our lives. Had they known God and been walking closely with Him; they could have been made better rather than bitter out of the situation. Sadly, they chose bitterness.
 - b. The expression of their hatred (Vs. 4b). Their inward animosity found expression in their attitude and words towards their brother Joseph. “They not only inwardly hated him, but they could not conceal their hatred, but betrayed it by their speech unto him; they could not speak to him on any occasion, but in a cross, surly, ill-natured manner.” (John Gill) Our tongues have a way of revealing what's on the inside!

III. THE DREAMS OF THE EARLY YEARS (VS. 5-11)

At this time in Biblical history, God at times made his Divine Will and Word manifest through dreams. This is not the primary method God uses in the New Testament era as we have the completed revelation of God's Word which is far superior to dreams but at this time in Biblical history it was a means God used at times to communicate with the saints of old. Dreams would become another defining feature of Joseph's life. “The chief incidents of his life turn on dreams – his own, his fellow-prisoners and then Pharaoh's” (Maclaren).

A. The Revelation in Joseph's Dreams (Vs. 5-10)

Both of these dreams drew on familiar imagery from Joseph's life.

There was:

1. The sheaf dream (Vs. 5-8)
 - a. The scene of the dream. Joseph's first dream was set in a field at harvest time when the straw would be gathered into sheaves. In the dream, Joseph's sheaf stood upright and his brothers sheaves bowed down to his sheaf.
 - b. The sense of the dream. The interpretation of the dream was very clear to Joseph's brothers. They understood it to mean that Joseph would reign over them. Of course, that is exactly what was being revealed in the dream by God and was fulfilled literally when Joseph's brothers bowed to him in Egypt, not knowing at that stage that it was their brother Joseph.
2. The star dream (Vs. 9-10)
 - a. The second dream. Each time Joseph came into contact with Divine dreams, they came in pairs. “The meaning of both

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dreams is the same, but the second goes beyond the first in the grandeur of the emblems, and in the inclusion of the parents in the act of obeisance.” (Maclaren)

- b. The scene of the dream. This time the scene is a heavenly, rather than an earthly one. In this dream Joseph sees the sun, moon and eleven stars bow to him.
- c. The sense of the dream. Joseph’s father understood the dream straight away. The eleven stars were a clear reference to Joseph’s 11 brothers and the sun and moon were a clear reference to him and his wife (probably a reference to Leah at this time since Rachel was dead). Jacob as second command in Egypt would eventually be over his whole family in rank and position, including his father.
- d. Note: Joseph may well have lacked maturing in the way he approached the gift God had given him at this time of his life. These were early exercises in that gift that would help prepare him for later but Joseph would need another 13 years of preparation before he would be ready for the life’s work God had in store for him.

B. The Reactions to Joseph’s Dreams (Vs. 8, 10-11)

1. His brothers – a malicious response (Vs. 8, 11a)
 - a. Joseph’s brothers already hated him a lot before this point but hearing his dreams only intensified their hatred even more. Their bitter, hateful envy towards Joseph went from a smouldering flame to a raging fire in their lives. They went from hot to boiling. It was this seething rage in the hearts of Joseph’s brothers that was the motivation behind their unjust and cruel treatment of their brother described in the second half of the chapter. Jim Berg wisely observed, “This bitterness of these brothers is the single hinge upon which the next 14 chapters turn. It is this bitterness that changed the course of history.”
 - b. Two words are used to describe the hostility of their hearts towards Joseph in this passage – they ‘hated’ him (Vs. 4, 8) and they ‘envied’ him (Vs. 11). Envy and bitterness (hatred) are partners. Envy embitters the heart.
 - c. Acts. 7:9 reveals that envy was the driving force behind Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery. “And the patriarchs, **moved with envy**, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him.”
 - d. James warns about “bitter envying” and “strife” in the believer’s heart and the terrible fruit it produces. James 3:14-16 “But if ye have **bitter envying** and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife *is*, there *is* **confusion** and **every evil work**.” Bitter envy in the heart, if not dealt with by the grace of God, can lead to “every evil work”. In other words, bitter envy prepares your heart to commit any sin. Proverbs warns, “A sound heart *is* the life of the flesh: but **envy** the rottenness of the bones.” (Prov. 14:30) It

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further warns, “Wrath *is* **cruel**, and anger *is* outrageous; but who *is* able to stand before envy?” (Prov. 27:4)

- e. Bitterness can be a response to hurts and injustices in our lives but it can also be the byproduct of jealousy. You are so envious of a person that they become an object of hatred and bitterness to you. “Bitterness,” says Jim Berg, “is the discontent of the soul that says I don’t like what God has allowed.”
 - f. It is true that some things weren’t fair in Jacob’s home but jealousy and hatred were not the answer! You will encounter many things that are not fair in a sin cursed world but the sweetening influence of God’s grace is the answer, not the souring influence of bitterness and envy. This is why God’s Word exhorts us in Hebrews 12:15 “Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;”
 - g. Beware of where bitter envy will take you! Joseph’s brothers would even contemplate murder, such was the extent to which their hearts were poisoned by the disease of bitter envy against their brother.
 - h. The crowning example of the evil envy was that of the Pharisees against our Lord (Matt. 27:18).
2. His father – a mixed response (Vs. 10-11)
- a. Jacob’s initial response was carnal (Vs. 10)
 - i. This was a hasty response from Jacob. He should have remembered that God had spoken to him through dreams in his own life. His pride rose up initially to this Revelation God had given his son.
 - ii. Sometimes older saints can be a source of discouragement in the lives of the young who have a desire to do something for the Lord. Be careful how you react to a young believer when they open their heart to you about their desire to serve God! Even if there is immaturity in their youthful ambition, encourage rather than excoriate. Guidance and counsel are usually needed but that is very different to a carnal response that discourages.
 - b. Jacob’s secondary response – spiritual (Vs. 11). Upon further reflection, Jacob realized there might be something to his son’s dreams after all and he pondered them.

Conclusion:

1. Have you had a difficult family background? God’s grace is available to you to lift you so you don’t make the same mistakes. God can use you!
2. Are you pursuing purity in your teenage years?
3. How are you responding to the hurts and injustices in your life? Are you becoming bitter or better?
4. Do you believe God has given you a gift for Christian service? Let God work with you and use you in His time and in His way.