

Learning from one man's journey

The story you are about to read is one man's journey through many painful and dark years in a strange land – one he later called, “the land of my suffering” (Genesis 41:52).

His name is Joseph. He was a *late born son* to his father Jacob who took particular delight in this young boy. He was a reason for Jacob to be happy. He gave him a reason to live.

But the fatherly love Joseph enjoyed became poison in the hearts of his older brothers. They clearly noticed dad's favoritism and resented Joseph for it.

Joseph was loved and then hated for being loved.

He was loved disproportionately, which stirred up sibling resentment (some parents are unaware that they favor those who satisfy them the most).

But Joseph did not choose to be the object of

parental favoritism or sibling hatred.

Instead, the choices of others (his father and brothers) plunged Joseph into unimaginably difficult circumstances.

Joseph's life will run through a series of abrupt and confusing setbacks that were beyond his control.

A large and important part of his life will appear to be defined by the misdirected love of his father and the bitter envy of his brothers.

Joseph's story is one of suffering, perseverance and recovery.

And the way Joseph endured and overcame his adversity is a great example for people who battle hardships, particularly when their troubles come from the wrongful treatment inflicted on them by others.

This is an invitation to journey through one man's story and to learn from his responses to life's painful turns.

What you are about to hear could change your life.

Those who struggle with discouragement and despair or with resentment and forgiveness or with restoring broken relationships will especially benefit from the truths woven through the life of Joseph.

And those who counsel others facing these struggles will be better equipped to help them.

Joseph's story teaches us how to protect our hearts from anger and the poison of bitterness and despair.

Even more, Joseph will guide us in relating to God when life appears to be controlled by other people and prayer doesn't lead to any immediate change in our circumstances.

This is a training manual in a story.

Joseph was a man who had many reasons to justify an angry and bitter life. But he made choices in response to his sufferings and his choices shaped his life *and profoundly affected others*.

It always works this way.

Suffering is an unavoidable reality for all people. But how we respond to our trials is another matter.

Joseph did not deny his hardships. He said, "God has made me forget all my trouble..." "... because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering." (Genesis 41:51,52)

Joseph's life - Joseph's life unfolds in five main scenes.

1. Life in a dysfunctional family
 2. Life as a slave
 3. Life as a prisoner
 4. Life as a ruler in Egypt
 5. Life at the family reunion
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Scene 1- Life in a dysfunctional Family

It all began for Joseph with a dysfunctional family. Joseph came from a large family. He had many brothers but his father loved him more than any of them. Like most people, Joseph's earthly journey would be shaped by the responses of others. Favoritism from his father came with benefits but soon turned tragic.

Joseph became the object of venomous sibling jealousy (see: Genesis 37:11). When only seventeen years old, "his brothers hated Joseph because their father loved him more than the rest of them. They couldn't say a kind word to him" (Genesis 37:4). As an object of two opposite human responses (parental favoritism and sibling envy and hatred), Joseph was plunged into unimaginable circumstances.

Making matters worse, Joseph had those dreams portraying his brothers as his future servants. Later these dreams proved to be divine revelation but perhaps with youthful naïveté, he shared his dreams with his brothers and they responded, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said” (Gen. 37:8).

One day, without worrying about Joseph’s well being, his father Jacob sent him to check on his brothers. When his brothers saw Joseph coming from a distance, “they plotted to kill him.” “‘Here comes that dreamer!’ they said to each other. ‘Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these wells and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.’” (Genesis 37:18-20).

Instead of killing him, “When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe — the richly ornamented robe he was wearing- and they took him and threw him into a well.” But “the well was empty; there was no water in it” (Genesis 37:23-24).

Another brother said, “Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed. “So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the well and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt” (Genesis 37:27-28).

This act of hatred (inspired by envy) changed the direction of Joseph’s life for a very long time (It will be at least 15 years until he sees his father again).

Scene 2- Life as a slave (Genesis 37:12-28)

At the vulnerable age of seventeen, Joseph was ripped from his family and sold into slavery -- at the hands of his very brothers.

We can be sure that slavery to the Ishmaelites was no picnic. Separated from his home and parents at a young age, Joseph was thrown into a life of uncertainty, loneliness and severe hardship.

An occasion for resentment and bitterness? Yes! How would Joseph resolve this bizarre twist of circumstances? How would he protect his heart from anger, bitterness and hatred? More importantly, how would he trace the hand of God in the painful mess of life?

Joseph’s brothers lied to their father about his disappearance. “They got Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the robe back to their father and said, ‘We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son’s robe.’ He recognized it and said, ‘It is my son’s robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.’”

“Then Jacob tore his clothes, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. ‘No,’ he said, ‘in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son.’ So his father wept for him. Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard” (Genesis 37:31-36).

In what feels like a casual stroke of the historian’s pen, we learn that, “*Meanwhile* the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.”

From one human owner to another, Joseph’s life appears to be defined by the evil actions of his jealous brothers.

During these dark days, do you think Joseph missed his home and his father and mother? Did he pray for release and an opportunity to go home? Of course he did. But, as the years passed, so many experiences would be lost and never regained. **Think of what could be lost from age 17 to 32!**

But far from family and all that was familiar, Joseph maintained his faith in God, his care for others and an amazingly deep personal integrity.

These should have been some of the best years of life. Youth merges with adulthood, career, marriage and family, and the blessings are multiplied as they are shared with extended family. But Joseph didn’t even know if his family was alive during these years.

How many times did he pray to be restored to his family? Why did his prayers go unanswered for so long? How could he trace the hand of a good God in what he would later call, “the land of my suffering” (Genesis 41:52)?

It isn’t difficult to imagine Joseph’s heartache from missing all those years with his family. **Loss is one of the hardest human experiences.**

Did he resolve matters with God through *many dark nights of the soul*? We know Joseph’s father wept and mourned for his son many days and refused to be comforted” (Genesis 37:34). No doubt, Joseph also wept and prayed--- pouring his broken heart out to God (we see his deep emotion at the reunion).

Did God meet him as “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles”? (II Corinthians 1:3,4). Repeatedly we are reminded of God’s presence with Joseph.

- But what did God’s presence mean if it never resulted in a trip home?
- Did Joseph stop praying for the one thing he wanted more than anything else? How did he protect his heart from turning in on itself in bitterness and despair? What did he do with his pain?
- And, more importantly, what did he allow his pain to do to him?

There is no way to regain lost years. As those years passed, Joseph's heart could have easily grown bitter or turned to a sense of futility and despair.

In this world, it doesn't take long to collect your share of losses.

Have you ever felt tempted to add up your losses?

Although blessed in many ways, I have had my share of setbacks and trials. I have also walked closely with many who have suffered more intensely than me.

When the sun stays hidden for years, the mind easily wanders into a tunnel of despair and the heart can slowly turn to resentment and bitterness.

One person, describing such an experience said, "If you could lick my heart, it would poison you."

When setbacks and losses multiply, the optimism of youth easily becomes the pessimism and despair of age.

We must fight against this drift into discouragement and despair.

"We need to stop wasting God's time rehearsing our pain and start leveraging the opportunities before us." (CL)

Joseph's story will help us find our way out of the tunnel. He will teach us how to respond when it feels like the Sun stays hidden for years. He will guide us away from the bitterness that poisons hearts and destroys lives. As you follow Joseph life through all five scenes, you will be personally encouraged and better equipped to help others navigate the losses of life in a fallen world.

Scene 3 - Life as a prisoner

Genesis 39:1-4 - "Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned."

Shifted to different human owner, Joseph found himself in another painful set of circumstances beyond his control. Joseph had the "misfortune" of being "well-built and handsome" (Genesis 39:6a). This made him the object of lust and false accusation. As the story continues, "After a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me!'" (Genesis 39:6b-7).

This was a very real and dangerous test for Joseph. Sexual temptation is real for all men. But Joseph responded with a kind of principled integrity that sets a great example for all men.

Of course, doing what was right did not mean that he would be blessed circumstantially. Joseph paid a severe price for his obedience.

Follow *closely* the line of reasoning he used for refusing to give in to sexual temptation. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:8-9).

Guided by three great principles -- Trust, Reputation and Ownership, Joseph stood firm against temptation.

Did God bless him for his obedience? Should we expect obedience to bring blessing? Did it for Jesus?

Joseph stood his ground *even as things intensified* from sexual temptation to sexual harassment. "And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her" (Genesis 39:10). The persistence of this woman would not be deterred and Joseph couldn't do anything to change what would happen as a result.

Often in life we become the object of other people's passions. Joseph was the object of parental favoritism, sibling envy and hatred and then lust and false accusation by Potiphar's wife.

Another abrupt change occurs for Joseph. "One day he (Joseph) went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, 'Come to bed with me!' But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants. 'Look,' she said to them, 'this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.' She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story: 'That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house. When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, 'This is how your slave treated me,' he burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined" (Genesis 39:11-20).

Have you ever been falsely accused?

It is a very painful experience. It cuts into a person's heart. When we do the right thing only to be misrepresented, slandered and wrongly charged, temptations toward self-pity, resentment and despair are hard to overcome.

How would Joseph respond to this abrupt and undeserved turn in his life? Would he be confused? No doubt! Would you have been?

Could you hear his prayers, "Dear God how could this happen to me?" "Haven't I suffered enough?" "How much can one man take?" "I tried to do the right thing and look where it landed me!"

We don't read much about Joseph's struggles but we must not treat him as if he didn't. I am sure he wrestled through a number of dark nights of the soul. Have you had any dark nights like this?

Shortly we'll notice that Joseph did not take lightly or completely forget the wrongs committed against him. Joseph was human and battled feelings common to all people.

But, again, I suspect that through a series of deep, dark nights of the soul, Joseph reaffirmed his conclusions about God and life (we will see these soon).

Once again, he faced options. We always do in our trials. Joseph needed something to lift him from the temptation to self-pity and despair; resentment and bitterness.

If he had chosen these responses, the story would not have been the same — for him and for many others (Genesis 45:7; 50:20). Our responses always have generational consequences.

Take note of how things went for Joseph in prison: "But while Joseph was there in the prison, *the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness* and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because *the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did*" (Genesis 39:21-23).

Notice again that the Lord's presence with Joseph and the blessings of God's kindness and Joseph's success (whatever it looked like) **did not** translate into immediate release from prison.

- So what did God's kindness look like in prison?
- How did Joseph experience it?
- Did he question whether God cared?
- Did Joseph pray for release?

We know his desire for release and memory of his suffering never left him. Some time later he would interpret a dream for a new prisoner that indicated this prisoner would soon be released. Then he said to the prisoner, “But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and *even here* I have done *nothing to deserve* being put in a dungeon” (Genesis 40:14-15, emphasis mine). His sense of justice was clear.

The prisoner was released just as Joseph said. No doubt, this inspired renewed hope in Joseph that he would be release from prison. Yet to Joseph’s trial was added the additional pain of being forgotten.

With a simple stroke of the historian’s pen we read, “The chief cupbearer (the prisoner who had been released), did not remember Joseph; he forgot him” (Genesis 40:23).

It hurts to be forgotten.

Could you hear his prayers? “Please God, cause him to mention me.” “Don’t let me be forgotten in this place.” “I have had so much evil committed against me, I am not sure I can take much more.”

But again, with another simple stroke of the pen we learn that, “When two full years had passed...” (Genesis 41:1), Joseph would finally be remembered.

Have you ever had to wait *two full years* for something? Why two full years? How did Joseph guard his heart against discouragement and despair? Was God not good and great enough to lift him from this dungeon?

At the risk of being repetitive, allow me to again emphasize that through a *series of deep dark nights of the soul*, Joseph had to reaffirm his conclusions about God and life. He needed something to lift him from temptation to self-pity, resentment and bitterness.

Ultimately, we see that he resisted the temptation to resign to fate --- to stop believing that God cared. There was something stronger that held and guided Joseph through his many abrupt changes and dark years of doubt and discouragement?

But it also protected Joseph from a darker prison — the prison of anger, resentment and bitterness. More than that, (and how important this is), Joseph’s *chosen* perspective blessed many people and preserved a remnant for Israel (Genesis 45:7; 50:20). (I keep coming back to this as life does)

Scene 4- Life as a ruler in Egypt

Genesis 41 - "When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream... In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him. ... So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."

Another abrupt change was in store for Joseph. After two long years, Pharaoh had a disturbing dream and he wanted an interpretation for it. The cupbearer told him about Joseph's ability to interpret dreams. Joseph was called out of prison to interpret Pharaoh's dream. It revealed a dangerous famine coming over the entire area. Joseph was chosen by Pharaoh to prepare and lead Egypt through this time of trial.

Follow the amazing turn of events: "Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.' So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.' Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, 'Make way!' Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt'" (Genesis 41:39-44).

Scene 5 - Life at the family reunion

Joseph's elevation to a powerful position in Egypt set the stage for reunion with his family. Again, with simple stroke of the historical pen we learn that "Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Genesis 41:46). Joseph was a seventeen-year-old boy when it all began. Thirteen long, lonely, confusing and difficult years had passed. Joseph missed his family but didn't even know if they were alive.

Through providential circumstances (see: Genesis 41:56-57), Joseph's brothers had to come to him for food. Joseph recognized them immediately but concealed his own identity. "As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he asked" (Genesis 42:7).

Through a series of interesting encounters with Joseph, we learn that his brothers had not forgotten the wrong they had done to him. Although perhaps not completely intentional, Joseph seems to lead them to a place of repentance. Those who think Joseph was getting even with them by the various things he put them through should pause to reflect on what he could have done as second in command in Egypt. The matter of forgiveness had been settled years before this encounter. If it had not, the good hand of God could not have rested on Joseph.

Joseph reveals himself to his brothers:

“Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one **you sold** into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that **God sent** me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. “So then, **it was not you who sent me here, but God.** (Genesis 45:1-8a).

These words reveal the stronger and deeper commitment that held Joseph through all his dark, confusing and painful years. By faith, Joseph embraced a deep commitment to the providential goodness of God over the evil intentions of people.

Genesis 50:15-21 - We see the same emphasis again after Jacob died.

“When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” So they sent word to Joseph, saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: ‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, *Joseph wept*. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said. But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. ***Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*** So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your

children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them” (Genesis 50:15-21, emphasis mine).

Yielding to God’s control:

It is not easy to understand God’s control when evil people seem to be in charge and our lives are profoundly affected by their actions. The Lord Jesus our faithful and merciful High Priest understands this by experience (see: Acts 2:22-23; 4:27-28). When we yield to God’s sovereign control (Daniel 3:16-18; 4:34-35; Proverbs 3:11-12; Hebrews 12:5-7,11-12), it liberates us. It frees us to follow Jesus in radical kingdom obedience: “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28).

Like Joseph, we can be free *under God* from the poison of bitterness and consuming control of revenge. We can also be free from participating in the multiplication of evil.

Is there power available for us to absorb the loss and return a blessing instead (see: I Peter 3:9). If we choose to require restitution or other measures of accountability, we can be free to do this without a vindictive or vengeful motive. Most importantly, we are *free* to open the door to reconciliation with our offenders.

New Testament mentions of Joseph

“By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones” (Hebrews 11:22).

““Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace. “Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. 12 When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. 13 On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. 14 After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all” (Acts 7:9-14).