

Armagh Baptist Church – Sunday 15th January 2012 – 11:00am

'Joseph: Prince of Egypt'

2. Joseph – Sold as a Slave!

Genesis ch.37:14-36

Introduction

Last week, in our introduction to this new series on Joseph, we saw how...

Joseph was a **Man of Integrity** – no sin was ever recorded of him in the Bible. He might have come across as just a wee bit proud in the early part of this chapter, but nevertheless he is never actually accused of any sin in the Bible.

He was a **Man of Privilege** – who was exalted over his brothers for a reason. His father loved him more than the others. He gave him a coat of many colours to set him apart as the heir - the Prince in Jacob's family; Privileged!

Joseph was also a **Man of Destiny**. God had a plan for his life: to save many. This was revealed to Joseph in his dreams at the beginning of this chapter. His brothers got the message that one day Joseph would **rule** and **reign** over them. His Father even got the message that one day the whole family would **bow down** to Joseph. Now, how all that was going to happen, still remained a mystery. But by the end of the chapter we get a clue: Joseph arrives in Egypt!

Joseph was also a **Man of Obedience** – He was willing and ready to go, and do exactly what his father Jacob asked him to do in vs.12-14. He was sent to find his brothers, who were tending their father's flocks near Shechem.

Little did Joseph know, but this was going to be his down-fall!
Little did his father Jacob know, but he was sending his beloved son into an awful situation. Because that very day, Joseph would end up being sold as a slave, by his own brothers! He would find himself in the Superpower of Egypt!

Let's pick up the story from where we left off last week, half way through v.14. We're told that when Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him what he was looking for?

1. Joseph's Search (vs.14-17)

Joseph had come to seek the lost – he'd come to search for his brothers, on this mission that his father had sent him on – he was looking for his lost brothers. And that's exactly how Joseph responds to this man in v.16

'I'm looking for my brothers.

Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?'

The man is very helpful. He says that the brothers have moved on from the Shechem area. In fact he had overheard them say that they were going to Dothan. So Joseph goes the extra mile, in fact an extra 15 miles, in search of his brothers, and sure enough he finds them near Dothan (v.17). Dothan was 15 miles further North than Shechem. It was in an area that the family hadn't been before. But Joseph just went on searching until he found them.

Yet again we have a picture of Jesus. The one who was sent on a mission, by His Father, from heaven, into this sin-cursed world. He didn't just have a quick look around, then give up and go back to heaven. No, he spent 33 years here on this earth, because *'he had come to seek and to save the lost.'* (Lk 19:10).

And even now Jesus still doesn't give up searching until he finds each one of us individual lost people and draws us to himself for salvation. Joseph didn't give up until he found his brothers. Jesus doesn't give up until he reaches and saves us either. Then he puts us on his shoulders, and comes home rejoicing, because he has found the sheep that was lost. Has he found you yet? Why are you still hiding from the Lord? Jesus is looking for you until he finds you!

2. The Brothers' Scheme (vs.14-20)

As Joseph approached Dothan, I'm sure he noticed the vast flocks of sheep, before he was able to pick out exactly where his brothers were. But it's not too long before they can spot him coming in the distance. It was probably ***the coat of many colours*** that made him stand out, from the drab colours of the fields all around him. And that's what they hated most about him – all that 'coat of many colours' had come to symbolise for them!

- How he was more loved than they were.
- How he was more important than them.
- How he was the prince and they were the paupers.
- How he got to look after their father's affairs around home; but they were the workers out in the fields for days and nights on end!

That speck of colour moving across the hillside, looming larger on their horizon, was just filling them all over again, with more hatred and jealousy. And so, it's not long until they begin to talk among themselves about what they will do to him, when he gets there.

'They saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him!' (v.18)

It wasn't just a matter of roughing him up a little, or giving him a good hiding, their hatred and jealousy had smouldered away long enough inside them now, that it had turned to thoughts of getting rid of him – thoughts of murder!

It's just like their ancestor Cain, away back in Genesis ch.4, when he became jealous that Abel's offering had been accepted by God, and his hadn't. His jealousy grew into hatred, until one day when they were out in the fields: he just took him, struck him, and killed him - the first murder in the Bible. Well here, another group of brothers were plotting to kill their own brother! For the same reasons: jealousy and hatred. The same sin was in their hearts.

'Here comes that dreamer!' they said to each other. (v.19)

'Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams!'

Do you see what's really got to them? - ***It's Joseph's dreams.***

Twice they mention the dreams: '*Here comes that dreamer!*' (v.19) and '*Then we'll see what comes of his dreams!*' (v.20).

The first dream about their sheaves bowing down to his, and the other one about them as the sun, moon and stars, bowing down to him!

They had really got under their skin. How dare he suggest that they would bow down *to him* of all people! That was the last thing on their minds! But they thought if they killed him, then the dreams would come to nothing. How could they bow down to him, if he was dead!

So that's what they wanted, that's what they had schemed in their heads. And now they had their chance – they were going to get rid of him for good!

It was just like the Pharisees, the religious leaders of Israel in Jesus' day, the Shepherds of Israel – the Elders of Israel - the Tribal leaders. Remember how we've been hearing about them in Matthew's Gospel on Sunday nights? It didn't matter how much good Jesus did in terms of his preaching and teaching, his ministry of healing people who were sick, and blind and lame, it didn't matter how many demons he cast out, or how many times he proved that he was the Son of God come in the flesh to seek and to save them, they still just would not believe in Him. They became filled with jealousy because he was becoming so popular among the crowds of people. Their jealousy turned to hatred until we got to that turning point in the first book of the New Testament, Matthew's Gospel, last Sunday night (ch.12:14):

'But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.'

That's exactly what the first heads of the Tribes of Israel were doing here, away back in the very first book of the Old Testament. They were plotting how they might kill Joseph. Nothing had changed in nearly 2000 years in between!

Their plan was very clear: We'll kill him. We'll throw him into an old cistern. And we'll say that a wild animal has devoured him. Then all his dreams will come to nothing.

But just then, the firstborn brother, Reuben, steps in with a suggestion...

3. Reuben's Suggestion (vs.21-25)

(v.21) *'When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.'*

Now why would Reuben try to step in to save his half-brother Joseph? Maybe it was because he was the firstborn that he felt he had to step in to try to stop his brothers doing something they might regret? Reuben was the firstborn of Leah, but Joseph was the firstborn of Rachel. As such there was probably more rivalry between them, even than the rest!

In fact, back in ch.35:22 you might remember that Reuben had sought to stake his claim as the firstborn by sleeping with his father's concubine, Bilhah, just after Rachel's death. That was his way of claiming his rights to his father's inheritance. It was an awful thing to do, and it was the reason that Jacob basically 'wrote Reuben out of his will'. By the time Jacob gets to blessing his sons, Reuben has been demoted in Genesis ch.49:3-4.

But maybe Reuben thought that rescuing Joseph (who had taken on the mantle of the firstborn from him), and taking him back to his father, might be his way to get back into his father's good books? Who knows? At least he tried. But he could have tried harder...

The next two in line would have been Simeon and Levi, but they too have forfeited their rights to their father's inheritance, because they took revenge on all the males in the City of Shechem for what had happened to their sister Dinah, when she was raped there. So they don't seem to feature in this story. They are among those trying to get rid of Joseph. Their hearts are filled with jealousy and hatred as much as the rest. Maybe they were the ring leaders? After all, they had taken human life before, so maybe they thought nothing of killing their own brother now.

But when Joseph arrives, he walks straight into their trap: The brothers quickly seize him, and the first thing they do is to strip him of his richly ornamented robe – his coat of many colours – the thing they had grown to hate the most about him: his status symbol. And then, rather than killing him, they do what Reuben had suggested, and they just throw Joseph into an empty cistern, a deep pit that would usually hold water in the rainy season. But fortunately for Joseph, the cistern was dry, and he's left to languish in the pit. There was no water in it for him to drown, but neither was there any water in it for him to drink – after his long walk in the heat of the day.

But the brothers couldn't care less! They just sit down some distance away, to eat the meal that Joseph had probably just brought to them from their father.

As they were eating, they looked up and saw a caravan of camels coming towards them. You see: Dothan, Shechem, Bethel, Bethlehem and Hebron all lay on a major trade route, right down the centre of the Promised Land of Canaan. This would have been like the motorway of those days. People like these Ishmaelites or Midianites would travel this highway regularly taking goods from Haran in the North to Egypt in the South – the main market for their goods and crafts. They were coming down the road, with their camels loaded with spices, sweet smelling things like balm of Gilead, and myrrh. They were on their way to take it down to Egypt to sell and do business.

They were Ishmaelites – descendants of Ishmael, Isaac's half-brother – the one born to Abram and Hagar. So they were like second or third cousins to Joseph and his brothers.

They were also known as Midianites, because of Midian were they lived, to the South East of the Promised Land. (What would now be Saudi Arabia).

When the brothers see them coming, one of them, the next in line, Judah comes up with an idea to spare Joseph's life - sell him into slavery instead! So in a very real sense Judah became Joseph's saviour!

This is significant, because before the Book of Genesis comes to an end, we will be told that the Messiah, our Saviour, will not come from Joseph, but he will in fact come from the Tribe of Judah – he will be known as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah! (Genesis 49:8-12 esp v.10).

But let's look at...

4. Judah's Salvation Plan (vs.25-30)

Judah puts himself forward to plead for his brother's life.

Had it not been for Judah's plea, Joseph may well have been left to die of thirst and starvation in that old dried out cistern. But Judah stepped in.

He asks his brothers:

'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?' (v.26)

Later, his descendant, Jesus, would shed his blood to cover up our sin!

But Judah goes on to give his brothers another option:

'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.' (v.27)

Once again he mentions blood – *'our own flesh and blood'*.

The writer to the Hebrews makes the point very clearly in ch.2, that in order to be an adequate Saviour for us, Jesus had to have the same flesh and blood, as we have – he had to share in our humanity. He had to be 'our brother', otherwise he could not do what vs.14-15 says:

*'Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and **free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.**'*

Judah's plan involved sparing Joseph's life; it involved selling Joseph as a slave to the Ishmaelites instead. But his brothers agreed to his plan (v.27).

So when the Midianite merchants reached them, the brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for 20 shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites. Who then travelled on down the road, taking Joseph with them, to Egypt!

Again the parallel with Jesus' life is clear. He too was sold for the price of a common slave. Nearly 2000 years later, he was sold for just 30 pieces of silver. That was the price that Judas agreed with the Religious Leaders who

had plotted to kill Jesus. Judas betrayed Jesus into their hands for 30 pieces of silver. That didn't spare Jesus' life (as it did for Joseph). In fact it was what led to Jesus' death on the cross for your sins and mine.

But ultimately that was all part of God's Plan of Salvation for you and for me. Jesus had to die, on the cross, for our sins, otherwise we could never be saved, and made right with God.

Likewise back in Old Testament times, God was taking Joseph down to Egypt for a reason. Within 20 years, Egypt, and indeed the whole world, was going to be plunged into a severe worldwide famine. God was going to use Joseph to save his people then, from physical death and starvation. Just as Jesus would one day save us from eternal death and condemnation, in Hell.

The parallels between Joseph and Jesus are amazing!

But what about Reuben? For some reason he seems to have been off looking after the sheep while Judah came up with his plan to spare Joseph's life. Obviously Reuben had kept his plan a secret from his brothers. He was going to rescue Joseph from the pit himself, and secretly get him back to his father, and take all the credit for saving him from death, and so get back into his father's good books. But that's not what happened.

By the time Reuben got back to the pit, the brothers had already got Joseph out of the pit, done the deal, sold him to the Ishmaelites, and Joseph was already well on his way to Egypt! But Reuben didn't know that yet.

So immediately he tore his clothes, and went back to his brothers saying, *'The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?'* Or what will I do now? As firstborn, he felt his father would hold him personally accountable. So he has no other option than to go along with the brothers' scheme.

So in v.31 they take Joseph's coat of many colours, slaughter a goat, and dip the robe in the blood. Once again there is a hint here of blood covering up sin. The brothers were trying to make out that a wild animal had killed Joseph. In so doing they were trying to cover up their own sin, and pull the wool over the eyes of their father – (just as Jacob had done to Isaac many years earlier). That's exactly what they try to do when they get home in v.32. Here we see...

5. Jacob's Sorrow (vs.31-35)

The brothers take the blood sprinkled robe back to their father Jacob at home in Hebron, and they tell him, in such cold and callous terms:

'We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe.' (v.32)

They sound like police officers calling with the father of a murder victim!

It's hard to believe that sons could do this to their father.

It's obvious that there wasn't much love lost between Jacob and his sons.

His favouritism of Joseph over the years has put a real rift between them.

Of course Jacob recognised the coat in v.33, saying:

*'It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him.
Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.'*

Notice that the sons don't really say very much at all. They just present their 'evidence' and leave Jacob's mind to run away with him, and come to his own conclusions: which was of course what they wanted him to think, that Joseph had been mauled by a wild animal. You can imagine the pictures and images that would have gone through Jacob's mind as he said, '*Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!*' What an effect it must have had on this doting dad!

In the very next verse, Jacob tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and mourned for his son for many days.

He believes that his beloved son is dead, but he has no body to prove it, just a blood stained coat of many colours.

If you think yourself into Jacob's shoes, you can begin to imagine how the 'families of the disappeared' have felt for many years. People whose loved ones were abducted by terrorists during Northern Ireland's Troubles, and for decades they never knew what had happened to them. Until recently representatives of those Terrorist organisations began to come up with information about what had happened to those bodies so many years ago. You can think of the pictures on the TV news of JCBs excavating bog lands, and beaches to try to find bodies that had been buried many years ago! What an awful torture that must have been for mothers and fathers and other relatives of those who just disappeared without any trace?

Well that is what it was like for Jacob. His favourite son, his most beloved son, Joseph, just disappeared off the face of the earth, because he, Jacob, had sent him on an errand to find his brothers. If only Jacob had just kept Joseph at home! He would have been kicking himself for *ever* sending Joseph out that day. He would have been living and re-living those last words he said to him. He would have been going over the '*if onlys*' for years to come: heartbroken!

He was absolutely distraught – he refused to be comforted. Verse 35 tells us that all these 2-faced sons, and his daughter and probably grandsons and grand-daughters tried to comfort him, but Jacob just pushed them all away – he refused to be comforted.

'No!' he said, 'In mourning will I go down to the grave to my son.'

In other words he wished he could die too, so he could be with his son again! Jacob wept for his son for a long time to come.

Little did he know, at this point in the story, that around 25 years later, he would see his son again – not as a body being pulled out of a make-shift grave – but as Second in Command in Egypt – alive and well all those years!

And that's how this chapter leaves the story of Joseph, with just one verse referring to...

6. Joseph's Slavery (v.36)

'Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.' (v.36)

Not only had Joseph been sold by his brothers to Midianites or Ishmaelites, now they sell him on, in one of the first recorded cases of people-trafficking, probably making a profit on him in the process in a slave market in Egypt – and he ends up as a slave in the household of Potiphar – one of Pharaoh's officials in Egypt – in fact he's the Captain of the Egyptian Guards.

There is a hint here that Joseph, the favourite son of Jacob, a humble Hebrew, is now within touching distance of probably *the* most powerful man in the whole world at that time. Joseph is suddenly at the heart of the universe. But he's not there as a prince or a king, he's there as a common slave!

What about his dream of all his brothers, and indeed his father, coming and bowing down to him? What about his dream of ruling and reigning over them? Where has all that gone now? Had he misunderstood those dreams, or did he still believe them? Would he hold onto what God had already revealed to him? And would those dreams one day still come true?

Conclusion

It's at this point that the Book of Genesis takes a break from the story of Joseph for a whole chapter, because in ch.38 the focus turns to Judah.

Remember last Sunday we asked the question about who the Messiah might be? Remember we asked: *Could it be Joseph?*

Well, we're being kept in suspense. Like all good stories, all the loose ends will come together in the final chapter. For now, we are kept guessing. Could it be Joseph? Or could it be from Judah, that the Messiah will come?

Judah has stepped in at just the right time in this chapter, ch.37, and in so doing he has saved Joseph's life. Is that a clue that Judah is going to be the Saviour of the World? Or will it still be Joseph?

For the next couple of chapters Judah and Joseph will be compared and contrasted. Who will come out on top? Who will be the Messiah? Who will be the Saviour of the World? We know today that the *only* Saviour is Jesus!

But as we leave ch.37 today, we are left wondering how these brothers can possibly sleep at night? How can they live with themselves? How can they watch their father go deeper and deeper into depression, without letting it slip somewhere along the line, that his beloved Joseph is still alive?

'Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!'

Q. Is there something you need to come clean about in your life, before God?