



MAKING JOE

From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh

Genesis 37, 39, 41-48, 50

Review of the Storyline

When we left the Bible Storyline last week, the God who created this spectacular universe and our world was on the move in a remarkable new way. Having seen humanity turn from its original intimacy with him and become unthinkably wicked, God had finally wiped the slate clean and begun again. This time God set about accomplishing his purposes through one strategic family. He called a man named Abraham to leave behind all the familiar securities of his home in Ur – a place located in what we now call Iraq – and sent him off on a historic walk of faith. Leading Abraham to the land of Canaan we now know as Israel, God cultivated a special covenant with him. If Abraham would do as God commanded, God would bring forth from him and his wife Sarah a vast new nation through whom God promised to bless the world and, one day, renew the entire creation.

And, thus, the great story of the Patriarchs of Israel moved on. To Abraham was born two sons -- Ishmael (the father of the Arab people) and Isaac (the father of the Jewish people). To Isaac and his wife Rebekah were born the famous fighting twins – Esau and Jacob. Jacob, the younger and shrewder of the two, was later given by God the new name “Israel” and fathered a dozen sons who became the heads of the famous twelve tribes of Israel – a people whose journeys figure so prominently through the rest of the Old Testament and set up the events of the New Testament.

But what I want to underline today is that the story almost never got that far. The storyline of Abraham’s family almost reached a literal *dead end* with the generation of those twelve sons. You see, as Jacob and his wife Rachel were raising their family, a terrible famine was coming – a desolation that would likely have ended the story of the children of Israel 4000 years ago, had it not been for what God went on to do through the life of one of Jacob’s twelve kids. I want to think with you on that story this morning, draw a couple of practical applications for us all, then send us on our way.
[Prayer of Illumination]

Beginning with Bitter Beans

We pick up the amazing Bible Storyline today – in Genesis 37 verse 2. The scene is the Israeli family farm in Canaan, about 1898 B.C., three years after Abraham has died and Jacob [a.k.a. Israel] has taken over as Patriarch of the family.

Now, **“Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers... and he brought their father a bad report about them.”** Hard to



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believe, I know – a kid ratting on his siblings, but the families we read about in the Storyline aren't as perfect as ours are, so just bear with them. The narrative goes on: ³ **Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him.**" Andrew Lloyd Webber aside, we don't actually know whether it was a Technicolor Dreamcoat, or even a coat of many colors at all. The far more important fact here is that Dad had a particularly sweet spot in his heart for the eleventh of his twelve kids and, sadly, it showed – with TWO very bad results.

First of all, Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph sparked a terrible sibling jealousy, as gets spelled out in the next verse: ⁴ **When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.** The second bad result is that Jacob's preference for Joseph spawns some personal arrogance in young Joe himself. The earlier ratting on his brothers is one sign of this quality, but it gets worse as the story goes on to describe: ⁶ **[Joseph] said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: ⁷ We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."**

Now Joseph is like that kid we've all known who's born with natural good looks and remarkable leadership qualities who never has a bad hair day. You know the person I'm talking about – the one who just seems to have the golden touch at school or sports or business. Joseph is one of *those* people. The dream he has is actually a prophecy. It is a picture of the position of authority that Joseph IS actually going to occupy one day. But there is a great difference between knowing that you've been graced with some amazing gifts and making sure that other people know it. How you handle your giftedness can be the difference between being *loved* or being *loathed* by the people around you. It's a lesson that individuals, churches, corporations, and even nations have to learn. But Joseph doesn't get this yet. He handles his blessings badly. Not just here but again further on in the story, Genesis portrays Joseph as grinding into his brothers' faces how one day they'd all bow down to him. : "Hey guys, listen to this dream I had."

Grinding Joseph Down

⁸ **His brothers said to him, "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.** Eventually, the other brothers decide to do away with Joe. ²⁰ **"Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a**



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ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." If you've read the Bible passages for this week, then you know that the eldest brother, Reuben, prevails on the others to stop short of actually killing Joseph and just toss him into a dry well. When Reuben isn't around, however, the other brothers yank Joe out of the hole and sell him to a passing slave caravan run by their Arab cousins the Ishmaelites. The chapter ends with the once-vaunted Joseph dragged off in chains and the brothers going back to their father Jacob. They hand him Joseph's beautiful robe, drenched in goat's blood, and Jacob draws the conclusion that his beloved son has been torn apart by wild animals. The scene concludes with the aging father sobbing in sackcloth and ashes.

And then the Storyline's camera swings hard and zooms into a scene at a slave auction in faraway Egypt. By now, we have to assume, the arrogance of Joseph is broken. His hubris in the certainty of his supremacy and success has been crushed beneath the heel of his own foolish behavior and all it brought on. Joe stands now with head hung low, wrists in chains, waiting to be auctioned off. We've known people like this too, haven't we? Maybe we've *been* people like this. We go along blithely, confident in our course. We're treating other people in destructive ways, but our pride keeps us from seeing it. And then the hammer of judgment falls or the grinder we thought could never touch us, sucks us in. And we're chopped down to size, our ego and self-made plans diced in little pieces. Finally, we know we're not the Masters of the Universe. We're just creatures of the Master. We need grace. We need saving. And we dare to pray that maybe out of God's goodness and not our own there can be another chance.

¹ Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt, Genesis 39:1 tells us. 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. ² The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, ⁴ Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Did you make note of the most important phrases there? Did you notice who the big actor in the story is at this point?

What the Storyline is driving home here is that it is not our giftedness and our place that is the appropriate focus of life. It is the great Giver and his plans that must remain the focus. It is **"the LORD"** who makes and breaks sons and slaves, servants and Pharaohs. This consciousness of being always in the hands of God – of depending upon him and of seeking to have our lives be a rising aroma that honors him – this is



MAKING JOE

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the crucial quality of those who get wonderfully used by God – as we're going to see illustrated again and again in weeks ahead.

The message here is that Joseph is starting to get his focus right. The result is that God now raises him to a place of influence again. Genesis 39:4 reads: **Potiphar put [Joseph] in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.** ⁵ **From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph.** Note that we're seeing here an evidence of the growing fulfillment of the promise that God made to Abraham back in Genesis 12: ³ **I will bless those who bless you... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."** The hand of God's blessing is now stretching out through Joseph the Canaanite to the household of Potiphar the Egyptian and soon will reach further still.

Pouring on the Hot Water

But the making of Joseph is not over. As the story turns, Potiphar is married to a Desperate Housewife and she does not consider her husband's new employee merely an Average Joe. Potiphar's wife makes a pass at Joseph but he refuses to do the wrong thing. It's a spectacular flash back to Eden, if you think about it. Joseph has the run of the garden. **"Everything [my master] owns he has entrusted to my care... My master has withheld nothing from me except [this one thing] – you... How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"** It's a recapitulation of the moment of decision that Adam and Eve had when faced with the temptation to seize the forbidden fruit, only Joe gets it right – because he's begun to get that life is not about his privileges, it's about God's will being done.

But the righteous choice Joe makes, ironically, gets him cast out of the Egyptian Eden. This, again, is a great theme we see often in the Bible. Doing the right thing by God can set you back with man or with woman. In this case, Potiphar's wife is a woman scorned. She claims that Joseph had made a pass at her and this sends Joseph back down into the pit of despair again and into even worse hot water than he was before. There's no older brother Reuben to come back and bail him out. Joe is hundreds of miles from home, thought to be dead, and likely on his way to dying in prison.

But, do you know the amazing reality that Joseph discovered next? God was in the hot water. Through a remarkable chain of circumstances you have already read about or can read about in Genesis 39-48, that prison became like a divine coffee cup. The hot water of circumstances Joseph would never have chosen for himself met the grinds of



MAKING JOE

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Genesis 37, 39, 41-48, 50

his character broken open to God and that prison became the final making of Joe. Joseph became an asset in that prison like he'd been in Potiphar's house, rising to the position of chief assistant to the Warden.

Along way, Joseph befriended a fellow prisoner and interpreted his dreams, with the result that when that man was released and returned to his place in the court of Pharaoh the King of Egypt, he remembered Joseph. Joe was called upon to interpret Pharaoh's troubled dreams. The dream foretold a coming famine and the strategy needed to prepare wisely for it. And the end result was that Pharaoh placed Joseph in charge of all the preparations and Lord over the distribution of food supplies when the famine finally came.

The Resulting Rich Brew

There's much more to the story. You can read in subsequent chapters about how God used even the heat of famine to bring Joseph's brothers down to Egypt and how they bowed before the brother they did not recognize, fulfilling the prophecy of Joseph's boyhood dream. We see Joseph cleverly luring the whole family of Israel down to Egypt where he can take care of them. And in a climactic moment, when his brothers finally know who Joseph is, and we see them quaking in fear of his retribution, it is then we hear from Joseph's lips words of amazing grace. **"Don't be afraid...²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."** Do these words remind you of anyone? Can you think of anyone else who others sought to harm yet who pronounced forgiveness upon them: **"Father, forgive them; they know not what they do"** (Luke 23:34). What other beloved Son humbled himself and then was lifted up, so that many lives could be saved (Mark 10:45)?

The story of Joseph prefigures the story of Jesus and moves us one step closer to that ultimate tale of redemption. In the meantime, the Hebrew family was safe for another season. They would outlive the great famine. There in the land of Egyptian plenty, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be fruitful and multiply -- until the time they became so many and strong that they threatened the descendents of Pharaoh. But that's a story for another day.

Here are some questions that the story of Joseph raises for me that may be helpful to you as well...

1. What is the arrogance, blindness, or other sinful pattern God is so intent upon breaking down in me that he'll cast me into a pit, if that's what it takes to get my



MAKING JOE

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attention – and can I view the grinding I experience not as harm but as the working for good in me it is? (Romans 8:28)

2. What is the hot water boiling around me right now that might be designed to release in me the aroma of fresh righteousness and persevering faith?

Because when we're down at the bottom of the cistern or prison of life's cup... when we're soaking in circumstances we worry might drown us... it is more than possible that more than the forces of harm are at work. If we humble ourselves, do what is right, and keep trusting the Lord, we may finally discover that what is actually happening is not destruction but the making of Dan, the making of you -- like for the sake of his glory and the advance of his plan, God once went about making Joe -- a bit more like Jesus.

Let us pray...

Study Guide Link: <http://www.cc-ob.org/pdf/09-28-08StorylineStudyGuide.pdf>