

27 July 2014

Foundations: Joseph
Genesis 37-50

And so Jacob came home to Canaan. The Lord had blessed him during the twenty or so years he had lived in Haran. He had acquired flocks and herds and camels and servants and four wives and twelve children. God had also blessed his older brother Esau – so much, in fact, that there really wasn't room in Canaan for that much blessing. Eventually, Jacob moved north to the region around Shechem, and Esau moved east, across the Jordan River to the land of Seir, where his descendants became the nation of Edom. Before long, Jacob had a thirteenth child, a twelfth son. This son was born to his wife Rachel, but the delivery was hard. The boy lived, but Rachel did not live. Jacob buried his beloved wife and called his twelfth son Benjamin.

Now you might think that, having himself suffered under a father who played favorites – Isaac always liked Esau better – Jacob would have tried to be different. But it doesn't usually work that way. If anything, Jacob was worse than Isaac. He had loved Rachel more than any of his other wives, so he loved Rachel's two sons more than his other children. Benjamin was just a baby, but Rachel's first son, Joseph, was just old enough to know he was his daddy's favorite and not quite old enough to know he should keep that to himself. In short, he was a precocious Daddy's-boy snot-nosed brat, and when Jacob gave Joseph a special coat, nicer than anything he'd ever given his other children, Joseph made a point of wearing it whenever they were around. And then there were the dreams.

“Hey, guys! Guess what I dreamed last night?” Joseph called to his brothers. “We were all working in the fields, binding sheaves, and then all our sheaves came to life and stood up, except that your sheaves all bowed down to my sheaf! What do you think it means?” Or again, a little later. “I had another dream, guys! There was the sun and the moon and twelve stars, one for each of us, but then the sun and moon and your eleven stars all bowed down to my star!”

Even Jacob thought this might be a bit much. “Let's not talk so much about dreams, all right, son?”

Now keeping sheep is a nomadic profession. You have to take the sheep where there's grass, which is often miles from home. So it came about one day that Jacob's sons – all except Joseph and Benjamin – were far away from the family tents, so Jacob sent Joseph to see how they were doing. With typical sensitivity, Joseph put on his special Daddy's-boy robe before setting out. This enabled his brothers to identify him from a great distance and, before he arrived, discuss ways to welcome him to camp.

“Let's kill him.” “Yeah, let's kill him.” “Killing him's good.” “I vote kill.”

At that point Jacob's eldest, Reuben, intervened. “It would wrong to shed our brother's blood,” Reuben said. “But we could throw him a pit and let him starve to death. See? No blood.”

“Right, that's better.” “Works for me.” “Good thinking, Reub!”

And so they did. When Joseph arrived, they grabbed him, ripped off his robe, and threw him in a pit to die. Before long, though, a caravan of Ishmaelite traders passed by. “Hey, guys,” said Judah, the fourth son, “killing Joseph is great and all that – I mean, *obviously* – but if we sell him to the Ishmaelites as a slave, we get rid of him and make a profit.” And so it was agreed. The brothers sold Joseph into slavery, spread some goat's blood on Joseph's coat and took it back to their father. “We found this,” they said. “Do you recognize it?” Assuming that a wild beast had mauled Joseph, Jacob went into mourning, declaring that he would go to his grave in grief, and would be dead soon. (Spoiler alert: Jacob's going to live at least another twenty years.)

Meanwhile, Joseph became a slave. The Ishmaelites had been on their way to the great empire of Egypt, and they sold him to one of the Egyptian Pharaoh's high ranking officials, a man named Potiphar. But, as Genesis 39 puts it, "The Lord was with Joseph, and he became successful." Everything Joseph did seemed to go well, and gradually Potiphar gave more and more responsibility to his young Hebrew slave. Finally, he just left everything in Joseph's hands and put household matters out of his mind. In retrospect, this may not have been his best move, inasmuch as part of the household was his wife who, evidently, was bored. And Joseph, we are told, was good-looking. Potiphar's wife was nothing if not direct: "Lie with me!" she said.

Joseph replied, "No, my lady! Do not ask such a thing! Your husband has trusted me with all that is in his house. In fact he's put all things under my control, elevating me over all the other servants." I'm not sure why all that was necessary for him to say; maybe he just liked saying it. But the gist was that he refused. And when she asked again, he refused again. And when she grabbed hold of his tunic, he slipped out of it and ran away, leaving it in her hands. Having been spurned by a slave, she got angry. "Help! Help!" she shouted. When the other servants appeared, she said, faintly, "That *Hebrew* just assaulted me! See his tunic?" And when Potiphar returned that evening, "That Hebrew that *you* brought home assaulted me today! See his tunic! Do you recognize it?"

Joseph just couldn't win with coats. He was thrown into the royal jail and left to rot. But once again, "The Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made it to prosper." Soon the head jailer made him a trustee, then chief trustee, then basically just the real jailer while the official jailer slept in or went out to play cards. Once again, Joseph had risen to the highest possible position in his context. It was just a pity that his context was the dungeon. But one day two servants of Pharaoh joined him in jail, under suspicion of treason. One was a cup-bearer, and one was a baker. Their first night, they both had disturbing dreams, and Joseph found them the next morning discussing what they might mean. "Do not interpretations belong to God?" Joseph asked. "Tell me what you dreamed." Then he gave them interpretations. He told the cup-bearer that within three days he would be restored to his position, and he told the baker that within three days he would be hanged. And it all turned out exactly as Joseph said.

The cup-bearer was restored, then, but as soon as he was out of prison, he forgot all about Joseph. It wasn't until two years later, when Pharaoh himself had a puzzling dream, that the cup-bearer would remember. Pharaoh dreamed that seven fat cows came out of the Nile only to be swallowed up by seven gaunt cows. Then he dreamed of seven fat heads of grain that were swallowed up by seven dry, blighted heads. None of Pharaoh's wise men could tell him what the dream might mean, and that was when the cup-bearer remembered Joseph. "Your highness? Two years ago, when I was in jail on that little misunderstanding, there was this Hebrew prisoner there who interpreted dreams."

Joseph was dragged out of prison. His prison rags were thrown away and a new suit of clothes given to him, and he was led to Pharaoh, who demanded, "Can you interpret dreams?"

"No," Joseph said. This may actually be the first humble thing we've heard Joseph say. "Only God can do that. But it may be that God could work through me. What did you dream?" Pharaoh explained his dream to Joseph, who nodded slowly. "The dreams are one," he said. "With the same interpretation. The land is about to have seven years of great plenty – bumper crops. But then there will be seven years of such famine that the years of plenty will be forgotten. The dreams are a warning, so that you can act now to prepare."

"Prepare? How?" asked Pharaoh.

"During the years of plenty, put as much as possible of the grain aside. Build new storehouses. Collect the surplus and save it for the lean years." Pharaoh looked blank, and Joseph said, "Maybe you should appoint someone else to be in charge of that."

And that was how Joseph became the second-in-command in Egypt. Once again, the Lord was with him, and once again he rose to the highest position available in his context. But this time, his context was the most powerful empire on earth.

In some ways, this feels like the end of the story. In America, where so many of our stories are about individual success, perhaps it would be. But not in the Bible, so let us go on. As Joseph predicted, Egypt had seven years of unbelievable bounty, but Joseph was disciplined about saving as much as possible from the good years – that’s another way you can tell this isn’t an American story – and so when the lean years began, exactly when he had said, there was surplus grain for food and seed. But the famine wasn’t just in Egypt. The whole Middle East was hungry – all the way up to Canaan, where Jacob and his sons still lived.

“Sons,” Jacob said. “I hear there’s grain in Egypt. Take money and go buy some, so that we can live. All of you go . . . well, not Benjamin, of course. Benjamin stays with me.”

So Jacob’s ten oldest sons went to Egypt to buy grain, and when they arrived, they were ushered into the presence of the man in charge: Joseph. Joseph knew them at once, but none of the brothers recognized the tall, smooth-shaven Egyptian prince who stood before them. Why would they? Speaking in Egyptian, Joseph called for a Hebrew translator.

“Sir?” the brothers asked, bowing deeply before him, “we have come here to buy food.”

“I think you’re lying,” Joseph said. “I think you’re spies.”

“What? No! No, we aren’t spies! We’re family. Brothers!”

“You don’t look alike.”

“But we are. Different mothers, but one father.”

“And that father . . . is he still alive?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any other brothers?”

“Two, sir. Well, one. One is dead, and the youngest is with our father.”

“Is he?”

“Yes, sir.”

“No, I think you’re spies. Put them in jail.”

Joseph left them in jail. It looked as if he was about to get his revenge, but then after three days he had them brought out. Through his Hebrew translator Joseph said, “I still don’t believe you, but I can’t prove you’re spies. So, I’ll let you buy food and go home now. But if you come back, prove you were telling the truth by bringing your youngest brother with you. Without him, don’t bother coming.”

Joseph could wait. He knew there were years of famine still to come. Sure enough, when that grain ran out and Jacob’s family grew hungry again, Jacob called his sons together and told them to go back to Egypt. “We’ve got to take Benjamin this time,” said Judah.

“No! Not my only remaining son!” cried Jacob.

“Smooth, Dad,” said Judah.

Reuben, the first born, said, “Father, let us take Benjamin. If any harm comes to him, you may kill my own two sons!”

“Brilliant, Reub,” said Judah. “Killing his grandkids will be a great comfort, I’m sure.” Then Judah turned to his father and said, “Benjamin will be fine. I pledge it on my own life.”

Jacob had no choice. The brothers returned to Egypt, and once again were taken to Joseph, who examined Benjamin in silence. It was really him. He was still alive. Joseph looked again at his brothers, curious, but still his face showed nothing. “Very well,” he said. “Maybe you were telling the truth. Bring the grain! Fill these men’s packs!”

But as the packs were being filled, Joseph had his own jeweled cup hidden in Benjamin’s pack, and hardly had the brothers started home before Joseph’s men swooped down on them and placed them under arrest. Sure enough, the “stolen” cup was found in Benjamin’s gear.

“So,” Joseph said. “A thief. The rest of you may go home, but this one will become a slave here in Egypt.” It was the brothers’ chance. They could get rid of Benjamin exactly as they had gotten rid of Joseph.

At that point, Judah spoke. “Sir? Please. No.”

“Why not?”

“Sir,” Judah said quietly. “My father had but two sons by the wife he loved. One is gone, and it nearly killed my father. This is the other. If he loses him, he will die. Please, sir. Take me as your slave instead. Let Benjamin live.”

Joseph kept his face impassive while he gestured for all his Egyptian servants to leave. When they were gone and the doors closed, he spoke in Hebrew, “You’ve changed, Judah.” The brothers stared. “It’s me: Joseph. Is father really still alive?” Still they stared. “Look, you meant evil to me. And it *was* an evil thing to do, no matter how annoying I was. But God used your evil for good. I’m here now to save our family. We’ve got five more years of famine to go, but if you move here to Egypt, you will live, so that God can keep the promises he made to Abraham, to Isaac, and to our father Jacob. The Lord is with us. It doesn’t always feel like it, but he is. Trust me on that.”