

# *Revisiting Joseph's Story*

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A few years ago, my husband Matt and I watched a video series on parenting by Chip Ingram. He said that one of the most important things we can teach children from a young age is how to suffer well. In some way at some time our children will suffer— we are wise if we will teach them how to suffer well. He went on to say that one part of doing this is to tell them over and over from the time they are little, the Old Testament account of Joseph, the son of Jacob— sold into Egypt by his brothers.

But perhaps it is not just children who need to be taught how to suffer well. The biography of Joseph moves me deeply. I think it is a story Satan would like us to ignore and gloss over— limiting it to childish images of colourful striped coats and funny dreams. Perhaps it is not just children who need to hear and ponder the story of Joseph again and again.

## *The story of Joseph*

The story of Joseph is told over the course of more than ten chapters— at the end of Genesis. Not everyone may know the story and so I will tell you the short version...

The short version is that God promised Abraham countless descendants. One of these descendants was Jacob. Jacob had many sons but he showed special love and favouritism for Joseph. He gave Joseph a special and beautiful coat, and some commentators say this was a sign that he intended to transfer the special inheritance rights of 'first born' over to Joseph. The other brothers were embittered against Joseph. They hated him even more when he shared two special dreams with them— one where they were harvesting wheat and the brothers' bundles of wheat bowed down to his and another where the sun, moon and eleven stars (representing the eleven brothers) were bowing down to him.

In their jealous hatred, the brothers plotted to kill Joseph. However, the eldest convinces them to merely throw him in a pit. Then another brother, Judah, seizes the opportunity of a passing band of Ishmaelite traders to sell Joseph as a slave.

Joseph is sold as a slave in Egypt to Potiphar. There he works hard and does right and God is with him and prospers Potiphar. Potiphar puts Joseph in charge of his whole estate. But Mrs. Potiphar lusts after Joseph and repeatedly asks him 'day after day' to sleep with her. He refuses absolutely, declaring his unwillingness to betray Potiphar and to sin against God. In her rage over this rejection, Mrs. Potiphar schemes and accuses Joseph of attempted rape. Potiphar is furious and throws Joseph into prison.

The Bible says the Lord was with Joseph and caused him to be favoured in the prison where his hard work and diligence resulted in him being put in charge of all the other prisoners. We do not know how long he was in prison but it was many years. One day he sees two prisoners who had formerly worked for the Pharaoh looking particularly sad because they have had perplexing dreams. Acknowledging that God holds the interpretations of all dreams he asks them to share what they dreamed. God gives Joseph the interpretations. The one man's dream means he will be executed. The other man, Pharaoh's cup-bearer, will be released three days later and restored to his position of trust. Joseph beseeches the cup-bearer to remember him and perhaps use his influence to help free Joseph.

The interpretations prove true, but tragically the cup-bearer forgets Joseph. Two years pass. Pharaoh has two dreams— strange dreams— fat cows are swallowed by starving cows and fat, full heads of grain are swallowed by sickly thin ears of grain. No one can give the Pharaoh any meaning of the dreams. But the cup-bearer suddenly remembers Joseph and in a dramatic made-for-movie scene, servants race to the prison, snatch Joseph and wash him up and shave him and dress him in clean clothes and suddenly he is before Pharaoh. God gives Joseph the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. The fat cows represent seven years of prosperity and abundant harvest and the thin cows represent seven years of famine so severe it will make everyone forget the abundance.

Pharaoh is in awe of Joseph's wisdom and his connection to the divine, and in a matter of hours Joseph has gone from forgotten foreign prisoner to second-in-command of all of Egypt. Joseph immediately begins an extensive food storage program so that seven years later when famine strikes there is not only enough food for the Egyptians but Joseph is able to sell food to people from surrounding nations who are also suffering the famine.

And who should come and stand before Joseph to buy food one day but his brothers? They don't recognize Joseph but he knows them. Joseph kind of messes with them— testing them and sending them home. But eventually, in an amazing expression of forgiveness and love, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, and in the end he makes provision for his brothers, his father and all their families to come to Egypt to live out the famine under his protection and provision.

But that is the short version. So make sure you take time to read it on your own soon!

### *Suffering should not surprise us*

The story of Joseph can help to re-align our understanding of suffering. It can correct the distortions we so easily fall into and ground us on a foundation of truth that better enables us to respond to suffering.

Do we sometimes find suffering unfair?  
I think it seems unfair to us when those who do right  
are repaid with suffering.

We are sickened by the treacherous act of Joseph's brothers, but somehow Joseph carries on. In Potiphar's house as a slave Joseph chooses to do his best work and to work for the good of his master Potiphar. He meets the temptation of Potiphar's wife with integrity and holiness and what is his reward? Falsely accused, he is thrown in prison. More suffering.

Something in us revolts against that. Unconsciously we slip into the belief that if we do right we will be rewarded and the path will be clear of trial. John Piper points out that we sometimes even use this as an argument for why people should follow Jesus— that following his teachings lead to a generally better life. **THIS IS NOT A BIBLICAL IDEA.** The Bible says we should not be surprised by suffering.

The Bible reminds us that God's people are not at home here on earth. 1 Peter 2:10 tells us we have become the people of God and goes on to call us 'aliens and strangers' in this world. Hebrews 11 tells of the OT heroes of faith and calls them 'strangers and exiles on the earth.' Those who have been studying Matthew with us on Wednesday mornings, have learned repeatedly that the Kingdom believers are made part of is not an earthly kingdom. Philippians 3:20 says that our citizenship is in Heaven.

If this is not our natural habitat, our real home, it follows that when we reflect our real home it will not necessarily be well received here. In fact many times there will be a clash. Matthew 5:10 says that we are blessed when we are persecuted '**FOR DOING RIGHT.**' 1 Peter 3:14 says that if we suffer for the sake of righteousness we are blessed and need not fear intimidation.

Christ who only did right— who went about healing and helping and showing love and was absolutely holy was hated, and promises in John 15 that if the world hated him it will hate those who belong to him. Christ clearly teaches what is shown in the story of Joseph— The world, under the influence of satan will often react in hostility to us and we may suffer for reflecting God's kingdom.

## *God will not waste our suffering*

Another mindset we slip into is that suffering is a set-back or an obstacle.

In the midst of suffering illness or job loss or relational conflict it is hard not to see that suffering as interrupting or even preventing our real purpose in life. I have felt that— felt that certain sufferings and trials had in a sense put me on the shelf and that only when they were finally past would I be able to be and do what I was created for.

But consider Joseph. At the beginning of his story he recounts two dreams to his brothers— dreams that show his brothers bowing down to him. What did he imagine as his future? Perhaps wearing his fine coat from his father, he expected to one day take headship of the family. I wonder if he thought about his dreams as he lay at the bottom of that pit, or as he worked in Potiphar's house, or as he laboured in the prison for all those years?

Joseph spent years in Potiphar's house— learning to manage the estate, learning the Egyptian culture and language, and then years managing the prison— caring for and responding to people in distress, to criminals, to others who were suffering. All those years— nearly 20 years— far from his home and family: Were they a set back? Were they lost years? Were they keeping him from being and doing what he was made for? No, in fact they were preparing him for his great purpose.

The commentator Maclaren writes:

“To be content to look after a jail  
even though we have dreamed  
of the sun and moon bowing down to us  
is the best apprenticeship  
for whatever God intends for us.”

I love that quote.

The character Joseph developed in his suffering— the strength and perspective, the administrative and leadership skills, the faith and courage— these were vital. I do not think he would have developed those qualities if he had stayed in the home of his father where he would have been rather spoiled and pampered.

Maclaren continues: “Outward success is not God's best gift— It was better to be the Joseph who deserved his high place than to have the place.”

The suffering caused by Joseph's brothers in their hatred for his dreams was not a set-back. It was actually the means of making the dreams come true. Of course, Joseph did not know that, but we can learn from his example as we see him taking up whatever work is before him— doing each task with excellence and in the power of God's spirit. And so can we— no matter how menial or seemingly unrelated to our own dreams the work may seem.

This is hard. I have felt the crippling and paralyzing effects of suffering. Both from the trauma of grief when we lost our little girl, and from years of chronic depression. Trauma and grief can legitimately place us in a time of being incapacitated. It's hard to make plans. It seems impossible to do the daily tasks. People don't understand why you cannot commit to events or leave early. But then at some point the Lord will put before us opportunities, commitments, relationships and tasks— small daily ones, and then bigger ones. These are a means of healing and forward-purpose for us, because God will use what is before us to make us what we need to be. Suffering is not a set-back. God will not waste our suffering. This is a foundational truth— a truth that can be a rock under us: **OUR SUFFERING IS NEVER WASTED.**

## God's plan is greater

It is also true that our suffering is never meaningless. We see Joseph recognize this truth in the climax of the story. Listen to Genesis 45:

<sup>1</sup>Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me..." <sup>2</sup>Then he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it. <sup>3</sup>Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

<sup>4</sup>Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup>Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup>For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. <sup>7</sup>God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. <sup>8</sup>Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. <sup>9</sup>Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, "God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. <sup>10</sup>You shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me..." (NASB)

After a storm of loud and violent weeping— so loud and distressing it is reported to Pharaoh— Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. Miraculously he forgives them. He loves them. His words are tender, he calls them to come close, he tells them not to be sad. He comforts them. And then Joseph reveals the truth that holds this whole story together; The truth that assures us our suffering is not wasted. That truth is the sovereign power and plan of God.

Joseph says an *awe-full* thing— I mean a thing full of awe— full of mystery and fear and hope. He says, "Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; **FOR GOD SENT ME BEFORE YOU TO PRESERVE LIFE.**" God sent me. He does not say, "God allowed you to send me," or "God implemented Plan B and fixed the mess you made by sending me here." He says God sent him. He says it three times. It was God who determined that Joseph would go to Egypt.

In case we don't quite get it, at the end of the story, after Joseph's family have lived in Egypt for some years and Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers get nervous. They wonder if Joseph's kindness to them was only for the sake of their father. They beg for their lives. And Joseph, weeping because the wound still hurts, says, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you **YOU MEANT EVIL AGAINST ME BUT GOD MEANT IT FOR GOOD.**"

We must be clear: the sin the brothers committed against Joseph did not *become* good. It was sin and they were accountable for it. People do evil terrible things, and in this fallen world ugly and horrible suffering happens and it is not ever good. The death of our little girl— the two weeks of traumatic suffering in the hospital beforehand— it was not good. Christ himself wept with anguish and anger at the tomb of his friend Lazarus even though He knew He would raise him. The death of Lazarus was not good. But in God's mercy and might, He can purpose those things— design from them a good we cannot imagine.

The promise in Romans 8 is ours to claim and to cling to: "We **KNOW** that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

Joseph recognized that higher and stronger and more sure than his brothers' wicked intent was God's sovereign hand sending him to Egypt. Why did God do this? Joseph recognizes that it was for a great purpose— to preserve life. The lives of the Egyptians, the lives of the surrounding nations, precious human life preserved in famine.

Joseph sees another purpose beyond that. He says in verse 7, God sent me before you to preserve **FOR YOU A REMNANT** in the earth and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. God sent Joseph to Egypt so that Jacob— the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, with whom God had made a covenant— Jacob and his children would not starve, because God had promised Abraham descendants that outnumber the stars.

But the plan is even larger. We read this story in the context of God's whole revealed scripture. And so we know that ultimately God sent Joseph to Egypt so that a greater deliverance would happen: *our deliverance*. Judah is the brother who comes up with the idea to sell Joseph instead of kill him. This horrible act would end up saving Judah's life— And it is Judah who receives his dying father's most important blessing. Jacob declares that Judah's brothers will praise him and that he is a lion and that the ruling sceptre shall not depart from Judah until One comes whom all the peoples will obey. God sent Joseph into Egypt to preserve Judah so that from the line of Judah would come one called the Lion of Judah: the Messiah— our Saviour— Christ Jesus.

God's eternal plan before the world was made was that through Christ— the Lion of Judah— we would be reconciled to God. Although Joseph could not see it, his suffering was part of God's plan to preserve the line of Judah. **OUR SUFFERING IS NOT MEANINGLESS.**

### *The Lord is with us in our suffering*

There is another truth I want to draw out of this story. I have struggled to know how to put it in words. It has felt like an enormous burning just behind me— just beyond my words. And I feel if we can only somehow adjust our gaze— somehow draw near to this burning truth it will illuminate all these other things I have said. One line changes this whole story— one line makes all the difference. It is the difference between the True and Living God and all other religions in the world. It is the difference between duty and delight— the difference between existing through suffering and living through suffering. The line is repeated several times in the account of Joseph: **THE LORD WAS WITH JOSEPH.**

How did he endure the traumatic and unjust afflictions? The betrayal and violence of his brothers as they throw him in a deep pit, their disregard for his pleading as they sell him for silver, slavery in a foreign land, harassment and temptation, malicious slander and unjust imprisonment? The Lord was with Joseph. He was with him in his affliction.

In all this story, I believe the darkest time was after he had interpreted the cup-bearer's dream and seen him released from prison. He asks the cup-bearer to remember him. There is a glimpse of hope But then he is forgotten. That is a dark place. When you have barely survived some terrible trial only to be plunged into a deeper one. And just when you feel you are recovering your footing in that suffering, just as you begin to catch your breath, you are overtaken again— another trauma, another sorrow, a new pain.

Christ knew this darkness too.

The British poet, Malcolm Guite recently wrote a series of poems on the different moments in Christ's painful steps toward the crucifixion. As I read these poems the past couple of weeks, my mind was (of course) absorbed with the story of Joseph as I was preparing for today. I saw that Joseph's sufferings are echoes or I suppose *pre-echoes* of what Christ suffered. Christ was betrayed by one he had called brother— sold for silver like Joseph. Christ was slandered and falsely condemned. Malcolm writes a sonnet on the stripping of Christ's robe and garments, reminiscent of the brothers tearing off Joseph's coat. And then reflecting on Christ's agonizing walk carrying the cross, Guite writes a sonnet entitled, "Jesus falls the third time," and it brought about a moment of clarity and wonder for me.

Listen. Imagine Joseph, imagine Christ, on that road to the hill of crucifixion.

#### JESUS FALLS A THIRD TIME

He weeps with you and with you he will stay  
 When all your staying power has run out  
 You can't go on, you go on anyway.  
 He stumbles just beside you when the doubt  
 That always haunts you, cuts you down at last  
 And takes away the hope that drove you on.  
 This is the third fall and it hurts the worst  
 This long descent through darkness to depression  
 From which there seems no rising and no will  
 To rise, or breathe or bear your own heart beat.  
 Twice you survived; this third will surely kill,  
 And you could almost wish for that defeat  
 Except that in the cold hell where you freeze  
 You find your God beside you on his knees.

Joseph endured in the pit, in slavery, in prison because the Lord was with him. And my dear believing sisters— those of you who have come to Jesus and received in yourself his saving grace and forgiveness and love— you have died with Him and you have been given His new life. You are united with Christ. Christ is with you.

Christ is present in your suffering. That is the miraculous gift of the Incarnation— Immanuel— God with us. He does not stand on the other side of our suffering saying, “You can do it— try, pray, work harder, have more faith.” No, He walks or crawls, or kneels or lays beside you. He weeps and groans under the weight of your suffering— bearing it for you and with you. I know this is true. Perhaps He seems silent. Perhaps He *is* silent, unseen, hidden. But He is there.

Do you know the pieces in a game of chess— the small ones people move around the board called pawns? Listen— **WE ARE NOT PAWNS IN GOD'S PLAN.** He is not way up there somewhere saying, “I will move her there and mess up his life here and I will put that one over here— then my plan will be complete.” Our suffering, our prospering, our gifts and relationships— they are not pawns in His plan. We know this because he has not remained far off and aloof. He has come near. He has entered with us and become flesh. And in entering our suffering Christ has filled it with the infinite glory and value of God's divine purpose.

In John 15:9 Jesus says, “*Just as* the Father has loved me, I also have loved you— abide in My love.” In John 17 he prays to the Father, “that those who believe may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us.” The mystery of the Trinity is that God is in Himself a togetherness— a community. He is three in one— always together in this exchange of mutual love and fellowship. And in the most intimate and mysterious of unions— of which marriage is only a shadow, He has made us to become part of that life— part of the Body of Christ itself. It is entirely scandalous but He calls us to this intimacy and says that all our temporary pain and suffering here, all our fleeting prosperity and health— is the means by which a cosmic and divine plan is unfolding

Joseph, in the reality of the Lord's presence with Him was participating in God's eternal plan. And like Joseph we are part and our suffering is part— a precious part of God's glorious cosmic plan. A plan by which the Kingdom of Heaven spreads like a great tree reaching and enclosing and sheltering and saving all those God has called to be His own.

The Lord was with Joseph. It may be that you have only ever seen yourself as an insignificant pawn in the Divine plan. Perhaps you have only believed in God as aloof and perhaps even cruel. Perhaps you have not opened your heart to the Gospel— the news of God’s coming. Malcolm Guite has another sonnet where we find the truth from the story of Joseph realized in the crucifixion of Christ. I will end with this:

#### JESUS IS NAILED TO THE CROSS

See, as they strip the robe from off his back  
And spread his arms and nail them to the cross,  
The dark nails pierce him and the sky turns black,  
And love is firmly fastened onto loss.  
But here a pure change happens. On this tree  
Loss becomes gain, death opens into birth.  
Here wounding heals and fastening makes free  
Earth breathes in heaven, heaven roots in earth.  
And here we see the length, the breadth, the height  
Where love and hatred meet and love stays true  
Where sin meets grace and darkness turns to light  
We see what love can bear and be and do,  
And here our Saviour calls us to his side  
His love is free, his arms are open wide

Amen.