



The Essentials Series

Week 7 – The Adventures of Joseph Gen 37 & 41:46-57

St. George's Episcopal Church

Spring 2015

Introducing Joseph

- Book/Toledot 10 – the Account of Jacob.
 - Although Joseph features heavily in this account, the whole narrative is really about God's sovereign grace transforming the entire patriarchal family of Jacob.
 - The underlying themes of God's promises to Abraham (land, descendants who possess the land, and blessing to the nations) are shown as both having partial fulfillment (the holy family is in fact growing, and for a time they do live in Canaan) and in danger due to the family's severe dysfunction and external stressors (e.g., famine).
 - God does not explicitly appear or speak at all, yet his providence and guidance saturate the story through very well timed coincidences, fortuitous meetings, and supernatural dreams.
 - Thus we see in Genesis three different forms of divine revelation: theophany (a physical appearing), visions, and providence. The dominant form in 1-11 is theophany, in 12-35 it is visions, and in 36-50 providence.
- Jacob, who was renamed Israel (Gen 32:28; 35:10) by God, has four wives: Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah – the latter two being Leah and Rachel's handmaidens, respectively.
 - To Leah were born six sons: Rueben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; then Issachar, and Zebulun
 - To Bilhah were born two sons: Dan and Naphtali
 - To Zilpah were born two sons: Gad and Asher
 - To Rachel were born two sons: Joseph and Benjamin
- Jacob/Israel, knew what it meant to live with parental favorites, but himself makes the same mistake
 - His favorite wife is Rachel, who, in truth, was the only one he originally wanted to marry, but was tricked into marrying Leah, because she was older than Rachel.
 - Rachel was barren, and like Sarah her grandmother-in-law, she offers Jacob her maiden, Bilhah to have a surrogate child on her behalf. Leah retaliates by throwing her maiden Zilpah at Israel!
 - Finally Rachel has two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, and Joseph is Israel's clear favorite.
 - However, the rights of inheritance and succession are based on chronological birth order, not paternal favoritism. Thus Rueben initially carries the place of succession, not Joseph. However Rueben and his next two brothers are removed from leadership because of sin:
 - Rueben commits incest with Bilhah (35:22). His sin disqualifies him from being Israel's heir and the successor to the covenant promises, and likely was done out of a power grab.
 - Likewise Simeon and Levi commit a massacre (without divine sanction) to avenge the rape of their sister Dinah (ch 34) and are disqualified.
 - Thus Israel's fourth son (by Leah), Judah, will eventually have the blessing of leadership (49:8-12). At first he too shows signs of unworthiness, but ch. 38 is key to his conversion.
 - However, preservation and leadership of the family will initially seem to fall into Joseph's hands when he becomes regent of Egypt.
 - By the end of the story Joseph sees that his brothers have changed (as has he), esp. Judah

Joseph the dreamer

- Joseph at 17 years of age was his father's favorite, and to show this Israel makes him a robe of many colors – much to the anger/resentment/jealousy of his 11 other brothers.
- Joseph is a tattle-tale (37:2), and a bit of a sociopath. After his tattling and Israel's favoritism, he then has two dreams. These dreams are prophetic, much like the word of the Lord which was given to Rebekah concerning the twins in her womb (25:23), and sets the trajectory for the account.
 - While these dreams are genuine and from the Lord, Joseph incurs further hatred when he shares them with his family.
 - However, on the other hand, his family does not respond to God's prophetic vision in faith, but rather in anger and jealousy.
- Joseph, when he is sent by Israel to check on his brother's and the family flocks, an unwise decision indicating Israel's obliviousness to his family's dysfunction, is sold into slavery (37:25f) to a caravan of Ishmaelite's, who in turn sell him to an Egyptian named Potiphar.

- Rueben's unworthiness is further illustrated by his impotence in preventing both the harm to Joseph and the deceit to his father, Israel.
- It is Judah who actually suggests the sale as an alternative to killing him, setting up ch. 38.
- Overall, this opening story arc portrays a sad and dysfunctional family, and the opening scene ends with Joseph in slavery in Egypt and the brothers deceiving Israel regarding his "death".

Joseph in Egypt

- In Egypt Joseph is wrongfully accused of making a pass at his master's wife (39:6-18), and despite his able service and management of Potiphar's household is thrown in prison.
 - There in prison he providentially meets Pharaoh's cupbearer and is able to successfully interpret the cupbearer's dream. Later, when Pharaoh has a dream he can't understand, he hears about Joseph.
 - Pharaoh is so impressed by Joseph that he makes him second only to Pharaoh himself and ruler/administrator over all Egypt.
- Pharaoh's famous dream is of seven fat cattle which are then eaten by seven thin cows, followed by a second vision of seven healthy ears of corn which are replaced by shrivels sprouts of corn: an omen of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Joseph recommends an administrator be put in charge of preserving 1/5 of each of the good years produce to use in famine.
 - We are told that Joseph was 30 years old when he entered Pharaoh's service, thirteen years after he was sold into slavery.
 - Pharaoh renames Joseph Zaphenath-paneah and gives him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara a priest of On.
 - Joseph has two sons with Asenath, Manasseh and Ephraim (41:50). From these two sons are descended what become known as the two half tribes of Israel. Centuries later when the Israelites flee Egypt and conquer Canaan, the land is divided into twelve regions by tribe, except that the Levites, the priestly tribe, receive no land (Num 18:20-24) so the two half tribes still keep the number of allocations of the promised land at 12.
- Joseph's plan is blessed by the Lord and successful. The grain collected was so plentiful that Joseph stopped measuring it (41:49).
 - When the famine years arrive, they are brutal and widespread, the narrator goes so far as to couch the famine in global terms (41:57)
 - But Joseph is overseer of all of Egypt's reserves of grain and food, and is charged by Pharaoh to see to its administration and sale to those who come in need to buy it.
- The famine's widespread effects are felt all the way back in Canaan by the patriarchal family.
 - But by God's grace and sovereign hand, despite the sin and dysfunction of his chosen family, He has positioned Joseph to be the means to provide for and ultimately spare and save the family from starvation.
 - But even more so, in God's tender mercy and loving-kindness, he will also be at work to reunite, reconcile, and bless this family.

Next Week: Joseph's Family in Egypt – Genesis 42-44

A postscript on Judah, chapter 38

- *After Joseph is sold into slavery the narrative pauses on Joseph and changes gears to focus on a lengthy and sordid account of Judah.*
- *The story of Judah and Tamar seems rather out of place, mashed right into the middle of the Joseph story, but its function and purpose is to feature God's work in transforming Judah to be the progenitor of Israel's kings (and not Joseph, cf. Gen 49:10).*
- *We see the first fruits of Judah's reform when he says of Tamar, "She is righteous, not I..." (38:36). His confession of wrongdoing is the first step in his transformation which will bear its ultimate fruit at the end of the Joseph story when he is willing to take responsibility for Benjamin's safety (for Israel's sake) and offers to take the place of accused Benjamin (44:18-34) – the sacrificial king!*
- *Thus Judah demonstrates the outworking of God's election to carry the lineage of the Promised Seed, and Tamar, likely a Canaanite, is mentioned in the genealogy of the Messiah, in Matthew 1:3.*