

Joseph Sold into Slavery

Genesis 37:2-28

(Nominated by Kelly Freeman)

July 12, 2009

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I feel certain that as I was reading the lengthy passage from the book of Genesis you were all thinking, “Wow! This story about Joseph sure does remind me of Michael Jackson!” Right? You mean you *weren't* thinking that? Well, if you didn't make that connection, let me remind you that the *Jackson 5* didn't start out with five. They were originally *The Jackson Brothers* and included only brothers Jackie, Tito, and Jermaine. Later they were joined by younger brothers Marion and little Michael. While all of them were talented, the one who stole the hearts of audiences was seven-year-old Michael. He could dance. He could sing. And the youth of the country, black and white, fell in love with Michael Jackson.

I wonder what that was like for the older brothers, being eclipsed by the younger brother. I wonder if there was ever jealousy. I wonder if any of them secretly hated Michael. I wonder if they ever conspired to kill him and try to convince their dad that it was an accident.

That's what happened to young Joseph in that lengthy passage from Genesis. He was seventeen years old, just a lad watching the family sheep. His name means, “to add.” He was the one *added* late in life to his father. Right away we see the sibling rivalry begin. Young Joseph tattled on his older brothers. The text says that he gave “a bad report” about them to their father. We don't know what they did, but Joseph made sure their father knew all about it. Then we're told something else that kicks it up a notch, as Emril says. The text says that their father “loved Joseph more than any other of his children.” Ouch! That is a formula for family disaster. As a constant reminder of his favored status, Joseph wore a special jacket their father made and gave just to him. It was a long robe-like jacket with sleeves, perhaps with connotations of royalty. To his brothers, this one the Lord “added” was a royal pain. The animosity between Joseph and his brothers reached a point where they could not even speak to each other without fighting.

Young Joseph then made a foolish mistake. Actually he made two foolish mistakes. He had two dreams. He didn't have to tell his brothers about these dreams, but he did. That was the foolish mistake. In each dream, his older brothers bowed before him and served him. In the second dream, his brothers and his parents bowed and served him. This time the text says, "So his brothers were jealous of him...."

My wife nominated this text. I've often thought that she may have missed her calling. She should have been an Old Testament scholar. She certainly has the mental aptitude, and she's always loved the Old Testament stories, especially this one. I agree with her that this is a fascinating and complex story. I really wrestled this week to get my arms around what this story means for people of faith. Some Old Testament theologians say that this family story is also an ancient history lesson about the people of Israel. Young Joseph's father was named Jacob, remember? He is the same one who wrestled with God and sustained the hip injury. You'll also remember that God changed his name from Jacob to Israel. He had twelve sons who represent the twelve tribes of Israel. This family represents the people of Israel. All of them eventually would be forced into Egypt, which was a place of slavery for the people of Israel and where they bowed down to foreign powers.

That big picture is unfolding behind this family story. The big picture is about the rebellious people of Israel, their slavery in Egypt, and ultimately God's deliverance. The more accessible story, though, is this dysfunctional family—twelve brothers and an aging father, jealousy, deception, and talk of murder. It would make a great Grisham novel!

Do you remember what Joseph's brothers did after they heard Joseph's dreams? They began to conspire with one another about how to do away with the young dreamer and his dreams. At first they planned to kill him. They decided to kill him and then drop his body into a pit. They would tell their father that a wild animal attacked and killed him. "There!" they would say, wiping their hands. "We'll see what become of his silly dreams now!"

The text says that they took hold of Joseph and stripped off the robe first, that special robe their father had made just for him. But instead of killing him, they decided to sell him to some traveling traders. They then took his special robe, dipped it in the blood of a goat, and told their father

than a wild animal killed his special young son. “We’re *so* sorry,” they told their grief stricken father.

This section of Joseph’s story ends with the traveling traders selling Joseph to a royal officer in Egypt. Do you remember what happened with Joseph in Egypt? Eventually he became a leading officer in Pharaoh’s court. His gift with dreams served him well. He interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams, warning him of a seven-year famine that was coming. Joseph was put in charge of stockpiling grain in preparation for the famine. So when the famine finally hit, guess who was a hero? Joseph. And guess who came to Egypt in search of grain? Joseph’s brothers. Joseph was governor over all the land by this time. His brothers came seeking food and bowed before him, just as the dream had predicted. They didn’t even recognize that the powerful governor of the land was their long lost brother.

It is a fascinating story, isn’t it? Now the difficult issue is this: what does this story mean for the people of God? What does it mean for us? This story has many meanings, more than I have time to cover. Let me mention only two.

First, notice that God is strangely absent in this story. God is not mentioned in Genesis 37. That is not true of other stories in the book of Genesis. God met Adam and Eve in the garden, remember? God instructed Noah to build an ark. In Joseph’s story, though, we see only hints of God until the last few verses in chapter fifty. Walter Brueggemann says that this story reveals “the hiddenness of God” (*Interpretation*, p. 293). While God is not front and center in this story, we nevertheless feel God’s presence—present but hidden—through the dreams and the turns of good fortune. Only as we stand at the end of the story and look back do we see the hand of God active in the life of Joseph and his family.

And isn’t that often the way it is for us too? God has never appeared to me in the night and challenged me to a wrestling match. God hasn’t appeared to me as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead me through any of my wildernesses. No, my experience with God has been more like that of young Joseph, where God’s overt presence has been hidden.

There is a lesson in this story about the hiddenness of God. We must be careful not to decide too quickly that God is not present. It would have

been easy for Joseph in the bottom of that pit to cry out, “Why aren’t you helping me, God?” That would have been easy when Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce him, and he was thrown into jail. At those moments it may have seemed that God was absent. But the story wasn’t over then. Standing at the end of his story and looking back, we do see the presence of the Hidden One giving Joseph just what he needed when he needed it. So be careful that you don’t decide too quickly that God has abandoned you.

Another lesson in this story is about reconciliation over revenge. Joseph’s dreams came true. He became a powerful figure in Egypt, and his brothers did bow before him. It’s a moving scene. Joseph had risen to governor over all the land of Egypt. Famine seized the land. His brothers traveled to Egypt in search of food. The brothers did not recognize that the powerful man who held their lives in his hands was their brother. At first Joseph accused them of being spies. He sent them back home to get his youngest brother, Benjamin. As he sent them away, Joseph became so overcome by affection for his brothers that he ran out of the room and broke down weeping.

It’s even more moving when Joseph finally reveals his identity to his brothers. He commanded everyone but his brothers to leave the room. Again he was overwhelmed by emotion, and this time he wept so loudly that even the Egyptians could hear him. This is what he said to the brothers who sold him into slavery:

Come closer.... I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.... Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.... It was not you who sent me here, but God.

In a very tender scene, he then fell upon Benjamin’s neck and wept. Then he kissed and wept with each of his brothers.

He chose reconciliation over revenge. He chose love over hate. The one who had every right to seek revenge didn’t. He chose instead to be reconciled, which was much harder and far more rewarding.

This can be a model for you too, if you are estranged from a son or daughter, a friend, or someone else. In the end being right is greatly overrated. If being right means that you lose a loved one, that is a hollow

victory. Yes, reconciliation is much harder, but it is also far more rewarding.

Joseph is still adding to us, isn't he? The wisdom of these ancient Hebrew Scriptures instructs us still. Kelly, thank you for calling it to our attention.

Closing Prayer

God, you are in the very air we breathe, present but hidden, filling our lungs with life and yet unseen. We thank you for your sustaining presence. Amen.