

Joseph the dreamer

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Gen 37¹⁻²⁴ / Eph 3¹⁴⁻²¹

We begin today a short series on the life of Joseph one of the twelve sons of Jacob from whom came the twelve tribes of Israel. There isn't, in fact, a tribe named Joseph because the tribes descended from him were actually named after his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. First some background.

Joseph is the son of Jacob and Rachel; Jacob the son of Isaac and Rebekah and Isaac the son of Abraham and Sarah – the great pioneers of God whom the whole of both the Hebrew and Christian world look to as icons of faith. Joseph is then the grandson of Isaac and the great grandson of Abraham. He lives not just in the shadow of this man of faith but actually in the land Abraham was promised. And in this land Jacob his father has flourished.

Jacob contracts to his uncle to work for him for 7 years in return for the hand of Rachel Laban's youngest daughter. At the end of that time Laban tricks Jacob into marrying the oldest daughter Leah and into working for a further 7 years for her. For the love of Rachel Jacob agrees but the two daughters become bitter rival for the love of Jacob and they express that rivalry through the offspring they have. Rachel proves to be barren for a time so she uses her servant to have children through Jacob. By the time she has her firstborn who is Joseph Leah her sister has had 6 sons and one daughter by Jacob and 2 sons each by the handmaids of both Rachel and Leah so he has 10 sons and a daughter already by the time Joseph arrives. But Joseph is immensely special to him because he is the son of the woman he fell in love with and, effectively, worked 14 years to marry.

Joseph is special in this way but it seems that he special in another way as well. Like his father before him and, indeed, his grandfather, Joseph is a dreamer. That

is, he dreams and he remembers and he interprets those dreams. He has a gift of interpretation, of being able to hear the truth through his dreams which is tantamount to saying that he hears God through his dreams. Three groups of dreams are featured in the biblical story of Joseph. The first two are the ones we hear in our reading today – dreams about his brothers serving him and treating him as a ruler. The second two are dreams not that he had but that he interpreted. The first of these belong to fellow inmates at the prison in which he is cast after being unjustly accused by the wife of his employer Potipher of trying to rape her. Two inmates have disturbing dreams which they cannot understand so they ask Joseph. Joseph interprets the first favourable and so the second also submits his dream for interpretation and this one turns out not nearly so well but the key is this... Joseph's interpretation turns out to be 100% accurate. What he says will happen does.

The third set of dreams which are central to Joseph's story belong to the King of Egypt – the Pharaoh. He dreams two dreams. One involves some fat cows and some very skinny cows which come out of the Nile. The skinny cows eat up the fat cows and stay alive. Again in another dream about grain seven skinny and dried up ears of grain eat up seven fat and well grown ears. Joseph is called to interpret and he rightly interprets the dream as a message of wisdom from God about what is to happen soon to the whole continent and how to avoid the worst of it. Pharaoh recognises wisdom when he see sit, promotes Joseph to the highest official in the country and puts him in charge of putting into practice what he has advised the King to do. In one foul stroke Joseph goes from rags to riches, from prisoner to King, from a 'nobody' to a VIP.

Let's just stop here a moment and reflect on this key moment in Joseph's life because it contains a major lesson for we who believe. If we review the life of Joseph up to this point few would disagree that it has largely sucked. Family life is dominated by a set of 9 half-brothers all of whom seem to hate him. He is quite clearly ostracised and left to his own devices. His father doesn't help this by clearly favouring him and by not helping him to be a little more sensitive to them. This eventually leads to them committing virtual murder by selling him to a band of wandering merchants who will sell him into a lifetime of slavery. But he ends

up in the household of a wealthy and powerful person and there his talent for organisation is recognised and Potiphar ends up leaving all his affairs in Joseph's hands. But the wife of Potiphar has designs on Joseph and when he resists these she falsely accuses him of rape for which he is promptly thrown in prison. Once again after a brief interlude his life sucks. Things begin to look up again when the chief prison officer recognises again his talent for organisation and puts him in charge of affairs inside. But nothing else changes and it is likely that he spends about 10 years of his life in prison.

Can any of us imagine spending that long in prison for something we did not do? How hard it must have been to hold on to hope. How chastened his spirit must have become. And then, perhaps when all hope had deserted him Joseph is brought before Pharaoh to interpret a dream. He does so accurately and so impresses Pharaoh that he is made governor of all Egypt and in charge of saving the nation from famine. He becomes, in effect, Pharaoh for as the scriptures say,

⁴⁴Moreover Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." ⁴⁵Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt.(Gen 41)

In the blink of an eye Joseph goes from being an insignificant and despised prisoner of the world's superpower to its virtual leader. In his own power and strength hardly a man in the world, no matter what army he commanded could have done this because Egypt was, at this time, near the height of her power. But God, does what no man or woman could ever do and just at the right time.

Perhaps you look at your circumstances at present and all you can see is failure or insignificance or a dead end street. Perhaps you've suffered at the hands of those who have betrayed you or belittled you or judged you in some way. Perhaps, like Joseph you've been wrongly accused of something, perhaps even punished for it in some very unjust way. Perhaps it's as simple as not being thanked for something or not being thanked in the way you think you should have been.

If this describes you in any way then please take another look at the life of Joseph because what we see in this life is an amazing comparison that is so glaring obvious because it is played out against the stark background of a world super-power facing destruction. And by the way don't tell me that God doesn't care for every individual regardless of colour or creed because the sub-story here is that God moves one of his own incredibly gifted people away from his family and his people and allows him to be locked up for 10 long years and suffer through all that indignity and privation just so... just so... he could bring salvation from starvation to perhaps millions of pagan Egyptians. That's the sub-story here. God is interested in people – full stop. God loves people – full stop.

But the main story is even more interesting I think because it, as it were, **unpacks** the lordship of God. It unpacks what lordship means and how it compares to our humanity and to our strength and our giftedness. And it does this by comparing Joseph – perhaps one of the most gifted leaders in all Israel with God. Think for a moment of the gifts that are clearly present in this man. In the first place we know that he was gifted physically. Potiphars wife was attracted immediately to him because, as the scriptures say, **'Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"** ' But he was much else besides.

The scripture speaks of him losing favour with the sons of Bilhar and Zilpah because he would bring a 'bad report' of them to Jacob. Now you can interpret this in a number of ways. You could say simply that he was a tell-tale and a nuisance or... you could say that he refused to be involved in their bad ways and he took the courageous road of reporting what they'd done. There is certainly nothing in the scriptures to suggest that what he was reporting to his father was false and the scripture is very sensitive to false witness. Indeed this is one of the 10 commandments – that one should not bear false witness against one's neighbour – so one would expect this to be commented on if Joseph had been speaking falsely of his brothers. So he is, I think, a man of high moral standards.

He is also spiritually gifted. He hears from God and he is able to understand the things of God. This much is evident in his dreams and his interpretation of his dreams.

Finally Joseph is a gifted leader and organiser. Without any training he single-handedly organises a national system of saving grain over 7 full and productive years so that the nation will be able to survive for 7 lean and shocking years of famine. And he is so effective in doing so that he enables the royal household to purchase all land and even the people.

What incredible talent! What amazing giftedness! What an incredibly resourceful person! And yet, despite all these gifts, despite a father who loved him deeply, despite a wonderful start in life and a really hopeful looking future – Joseph becomes a slave then a prisoner in a foreign country – estranged from his family and cut off completely from his people. All these gifts, all these advantages come to nothing for this amazing man.

If it had been up to this incredibly young man, talented and strong as he was, we would have assigned him to the dark pages of history to die an outcast's early death in a foreign country, despised and rejected by all whom he held dear. We would never hear his name, know his life, think of him again or, indeed, at all! But it wasn't up to him.

Throughout the story of Joseph the person and lordship of God lurks, unseen, mysterious and yet so present. God is in this man's life – apart from all the talents and beauty and strength; somehow God is there and in the veritable twinkling of an eye God doesn't just move a piece on the chessboard – He changes the whole game. Bang! Joseph is no longer a prisoner. Bang! Joseph is no longer an unknown nobody. Bang! Joseph is no longer living without justice. Bang! Joseph is no longer powerless. In the twinkling of an eye he literally becomes ruler of the world.

Something all his talent couldn't possibly have managed comes to pass. He doesn't have to fight for it; he doesn't have to claim it; he doesn't have to buy it; he does really even have to work for it. It's just laid out there for him – because God is in the picture.

Now let's just turn this around a minute and ask some questions about us. I wonder if you're feeling insignificant today. I wonder if you're feeling your life is

being wasted; you're up to your neck in nappies; you're in some dead end job; you're in a loveless and lifeless marriage; you've been treated unjustly and unfairly; you're just miles away from where you'd hoped you would be by now. What can we learn from Joseph? Well we can learn these things...

Talent is not necessarily going to get us to where we want or need to be. God loves talent and He gives talent but talent is a two edged sword – it can get us into as much trouble as it can get us out of. If Joseph had had the maturity to use his talents more wisely he may never have become estranged from his brothers.

Beauty is another two edged sword. Joseph was a handsome dude! He had women swooning over him. Sounds good does it guys? Look where it got him – in jail on trumped up charges for 10 years. Give me ugly any day!

Strength is also never an answer on its own. Joseph was 'well built' apparently but let's be clear – his strength wasn't the sort of strength that God could use. God had to literally weaken him before He could use him. I see that so often in Christian journeys. God has to let us become weak so that we will finally rely in God's strength! Our strengths are so often, spiritually speaking at least, our greatest weakness. God has to let us use it all up before we can be of use.

You see God had plans and visions which are far an above the little plans we have – if only we will believe. The God of Joseph laughed at his delight in the dream of ruling over his brothers. That was just small change compared to the plan He had for Joseph's life. Rule over one family? Don't be silly. I want him to rule over the major world power of the day! I want him to have the fate of millions of families in his hands. That's my dream says God. And it's God's dream that counts!

And this I think is our ultimate lesson for today. Whose dreams are you focused on at present? Whose life are you living at present? Perhaps, just perhaps, you're living in disappointment because you insist that this life is your life and so God isn't in the picture. Perhaps your dream is just too small! Perhaps you've even given up on dreaming.

Friends, we need to get back to God's dream for us because it is His dream which will release in us the power to live as we are called to – to wait patiently for God's

dream to come upon us – to resist the temptation to give up because the picture is not just about us – but about God as well. For it is not in our imagining that we will find life but in God’s dreaming. As Paul says...

²⁰**Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,**
²¹**to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3)**