

## **JOSEPH: GOD'S IMAGE TO THE WORLD**

**Genesis 37-50**

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Spoiled, adolescent braggart is betrayed by his jealous brothers, imprisoned by the lie of a sexually-frustrated seductress, but overcomes adversity and ascends to the throne. Sounds like a great story, doesn't it? No, this plot does not come from Hollywood; it comes from the Hebrews. And the setting is by no stretch modern, as the events take place between 1720 and 1550 BC.<sup>1</sup> It is the story of Joseph. Joseph: from the pit, through prison, to power. Perhaps some of you, like myself, have seen Andrew Lloyd Webber's popular *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. It was delightful. Whether or not Joseph could sing like Donny Osmond, I do not know. But this I do know: the tale as told in Genesis cannot be bettered.

Joseph, the eleventh of twelve sons, is favored by his father Jacob. The sign of Jacob's partiality is his gift to Joseph of "a richly ornamented robe" (NIV)—"a coat of many colours" (KJV) or "a long robe with sleeves" (RSV). Whatever the precise nature of this coat, it was probably the type of robe reserved for royalty. It was "the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore" (2 Sam 13:18). Add to this extravagant garment Joseph's exaggerated dreams of greatness, and it is not difficult to see why his brothers hated him. Joseph is sent by his father to check on his brothers who are grazing the flocks some sixty-five miles away. As he finally catches up to them, they see him in the distance and begin to plot to kill him. Please excuse my sense of humor, but as serious as the situation is, there is also some silliness. We are witnessing a scene that

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<sup>1</sup>"The most likely date for Joseph is the period of the Hyksos pharaohs, c. 1720–1550 BC. These were Semitic rulers who had infiltrated from Canaan, but scrupulously observed Egyptian conventions. At first they took over the existing Egyptian bureaucratic administration, but later appointed naturalized Semites to high office" (K. A. Kitchen, "Joseph," in D. R. W. Wood, rev. ed., *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (InterVarsity Press, 1996), 608).

could have been taken from a Monty Python movie! Joseph, the teenage dreamer dressed up like a king's virgin daughter, is trudging over the rugged terrain in a royal robe that could have been spotted—as we would say—“a mile away.” Jacob's spoiled spy is certainly *not* going to sneak up on his brothers! And soon, the brother who blabs to his brothers about their bowing down to him is begging for his life before these same brothers. I wonder, did Joseph bow down to them in his begging? Joseph is sold as a slave and taken to Egypt. The brothers slaughter a goat and dip Joseph's robe in the blood. They take the robe back to their father and say, “We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe.” Jacob, of course, recognizes the robe and concludes that Joseph has been devoured by some ferocious animal. Jacob who duped his dad is duped by his sons.

In Egypt, Joseph is the property of Potiphar. Mrs. Potiphar desires to lay claim to this “piece of property.” She repeatedly propositions Joseph—we would call this “sexual harassment”—and he repeatedly refuses. One day, she caught him by his cloak and said, “Come to bed with me!” But he ran out of the house, leaving his cloak in her hand. Mrs. Potiphar presents the cloak to her husband as proof that Joseph attempted to rape her. Joseph is sent to prison. It seems Joseph has a hard time hanging on to his garments. First a robe and now a cloak, and both times the garments were used as evidence which led to a wrong conclusion. Before Joseph's father Jacob was able to offer anything worthwhile, he had to be “put away” for twenty years in an imprisonment of sorts with Uncle Laban. Before Joseph can give anything worthwhile to his brothers and family, he must also be “put away,” for twenty-plus years—put down into a pit, put down into a foreign country, and put down into a prison in a foreign land.

In prison, Joseph comes into contact with Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker. Each of these officials has disturbing dreams. Joseph interprets the dreams, and the interpretations come to pass just as Joseph had predicted. The baker is hanged, the cupbearer is reinstated, and the cupbearer forgets about Joseph. Two full years later, when Pharaoh is distraught over his disturbing dreams, the cupbearer remembers Joseph and recommends him to Pharaoh. Joseph is brought before Pharaoh and he interprets Pharaoh's dreams. According to the dreams given by God to Pharaoh, seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, but seven years of severe

famine will follow. Furthermore, since the matter has been determined by God and soon to be done by God, Pharaoh must prepare himself and his people, and must do so without delay. Impressed with Joseph's interpretation and suggested solution, Pharaoh elevates Joseph to a position of power second only to Pharaoh himself. Fittingly, Pharaoh dresses Joseph in royal robes. It has been thirteen years and, finally, Joseph is wearing garments he will get to keep.

The years of prosperity pass; famine ravages the land; Joseph's brothers travel twice to Egypt to find food. During these twin visits to Egypt, Joseph plays tricks on his brothers. Is he teasing them or testing them? I think he is testing them. After all, his last remembrance of his siblings is that they chose to sale him rather than kill him. In the end, there are hugs all around, and eventually Jacob's entire household joins Joseph in Egypt.

Throughout the Joseph story, there is a refrain that we encounter again and again: "the LORD was with Joseph" (Gen 39:2, 3, 21, 23; 50:19-21). When, in Egypt, Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, listen to his "interpretation" of what has happened to him.

<sup>4</sup>Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! <sup>5</sup>And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. <sup>6</sup>For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. <sup>7</sup>But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

<sup>8</sup>"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. <sup>9</sup>Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. . . .' (Gen 45:4-9, NIV).

Joseph bids his brothers to view the past from the perspective of the present: "Look! Everybody is alive!" But there is more, much more.

I want to suggest that *Joseph functions as God to the world.*<sup>2</sup> Abraham was called from among many; Jacob was picked over Esau; and it seems likely that Joseph's dreams

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<sup>2</sup>For this perspective, I am indebted to Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 176-232. One of my favorite sermons about Joseph is quite old, preached on 20 August 1893: J. W. McGarvey, *Sermons* (Gospel Advocate, 1974), 215-231.

reflect God's choosing. In Potiphar's house and in prison, the LORD was not merely "with Joseph," He also "gave him [Joseph] success in everything he did" (Gen 39:3, 23). Joseph found favor in Potiphar's eyes, and Joseph ministered to him—with the result that Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his house (Gen 39:3-4). Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker were assigned to Joseph in prison, and Joseph ministered to them (Gen 40:4). *What Joseph does is to manage well and to minister well.* And when the cupbearer and baker are visibly depressed because no one can interpret their dreams, Joseph responds, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams" (Gen 40:8b). Solutions are from God—so tell *me!* Joseph is like God, God's stand-in. Impressed with Joseph's abilities, Pharaoh remarks, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" (Gen 41:38). On their second visit to Egypt, when Joseph's brothers express their concern about the silver that had been placed in their sacks on their previous visit (and the reader knows that Joseph is responsible), the steward replies, "It's all right. Don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your fathers, has given you treasure in your sacks" (Gen 43:23a). Even in the testing of his brothers, Joseph is Godlike. Jacob is challenged to let go of his beloved son Benjamin, just as Abraham was challenged to let go of his beloved son Isaac. Both fathers must relinquish their sons for the sake of others. When all hope is lost and Judah passionately pleads to Joseph on behalf of Benjamin, Joseph erupts in weeping—showing himself and showering forgiveness on his brothers (Gen 45:1-15). Surely, we are being given a picture of the very heart of God. And when Joseph is reunited with his father Jacob, it is Joseph who does the bowing, falling on his father's neck (Gen 46:29). He who had set himself up over his brothers and father and mother falls weeping on the neck of an aged parent. He has done the same with his brothers. Surely, we are being given a picture of the very heart of God. At the death of Jacob, the brothers fear that now, with dad out of the way, Joseph will seek revenge. But Joseph reassures them,

<sup>19b</sup>"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. <sup>21</sup>So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children" (Gen 50:19-21, NIV).

“Am I in the place of God?” asks Joseph. . . . It sure looks like it Joseph. . . . It sure looks like it. . . . In fact, it is such a natural assumption that Joseph must emphasize that he is *not* God.

The initial and most fundamental promise in the beginning of Abraham’s story is fulfilled toward the end of Joseph’s story: “All the nations of the earth will be blessed through you seed” (Gen 12:3b). *Joseph, Abraham’s descendant, accomplishes on earth the blessing for all peoples desired by the LORD God.* I realize that there is more blessing to come, not the least of which is God’s gift of His Son. But what I want all of us to see is that from the perspective of Genesis alone, this is a movie with a very happy ending.

*Joseph and his relationship with God, this is the grand possibility held out by the Book of Genesis.* Adam and Eve aspired to be like God; Joseph, on the other hand, acts like God. Joseph is the grand reversal of his primeval parents, Adam and Eve—and their offspring. Joseph exercises dominion over the earth, managing its resources and ministering to its inhabitants. *Joseph, he is the “image of God” that God intended every human to be.* God has created each of us in His image and He calls us to live as His images in this world. We can be what God created us to be. That is the gospel according to Genesis.

Joseph’s character gives the richest meaning to phrases like “get over it,” “get a life,” “just do it,” and even, “just say no.” But he has to “get down” before he can “fly high.” From the pit, through prison, to power—Joseph learns what we all need to learn: *to be favored is to grant favor.*

We who are assembled here this morning are, for the most part, a favored people. The question that confronts us is, How do we wear our garments of favor? Do we, like the teenage Joseph, strut about proclaiming our superiority? Or, do we, like the adult Joseph, seek to serve? Maybe we need to be stripped of our garments of favor until, like Joseph, we learn how to wear them.

Some sixteen-and-a-half centuries after Joseph, when BC had become AD, the Apostle Paul wrote these words to the Galatian Christians:

<sup>3:26</sup>You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, <sup>27</sup>for all of you who were baptized into Christ *have clothed yourselves with Christ* (Gal 3:26-27, emphasis mine).

“Clothed with Christ”—the garment of God’s favor. But before you don this royal robe, there is something you need to know: *God does not alter the coat to fit you, He alters you to fit the coat.* That is what He did with Joseph, and that is what He wants to do with me and with you.