June 25, 2017

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Children’s Bible Stories All Grown Up: Joseph

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 New Revised Standard Version

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “Here I am.” So he said to him, “Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, “What are you seeking?” “I am seeking my brothers,” he said; “tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.” The man said, “They have gone away, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Did your parents have a favorite? Jacob knew about favorites. Jacob and Esau were twins, Jacob was his mom’s favorite and Esau was his dad’s. Esau was born first so he would receive a double portion of his dad’s inheritance. Jacob offered to give his brother some stew in exchange for that birthright. Then Jacob tricked his dad and received the blessing that was meant for Esau. Jacob knew about parents playing favorites. The story that we hear today is about Jacob’s twelve sons and Jacob’s favorite son, Joseph. READ SCRIPTURE. Joseph was the firstborn of Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel, whom he dearly loved. Joseph was the child born in Jacob’s later years, and when Joseph was born Jacob got a new lease on life. Jacob didn’t hide his favoritism. In fact, he put his favoritism on display by giving Joseph a long robe with sleeves or as the King James Version translates it, a coat of many colors.

You can’t work very well in a garment that has sleeves and extends all the way down to your ankles, especially if it is a costly, ornamented robe.[[1]](#footnote-2) In Joseph’s day, when you went to work, you went in a short, sleeveless tunic so your arms and legs were free to work. It is like a welder coming to the construction site wearing a full-length mink coat.[[2]](#footnote-3) It is like his father was telling everyone, this is my son and he doesn’t have to work like the rest of you. It was a household of anger and jealousy. Joseph’s brothers endured 17 years of favoritism, 17 years of being told that you aren’t good enough, 17 years of resentment and hatred. Joseph’s brothers had come to dislike their younger brother so much that they could not even speak a kind word to him.[[3]](#footnote-4)

And then there were the dreams. The dreams were the last straw. Joseph told his brothers that he was going to be their master and they would serve him. Then, he told his brothers about another dream. The sun, the moon, the stars, symbolizing his dad, his mom and his brothers, were all bowing down to him.

So, the brothers go to Shechem to take care of the animals. Shechem was not a good place in this family’s history. One of their sisters, Dinah, was raped in Shechem. In retaliation, Dinah’s brothers trapped the Hivites, killed all the men in the city, took all of the wealth and women and children (Genesis 34:29). Jacob makes the connection where his sons are, and he orders Joseph to go check on them because of what the brothers had done to the people of Shechem. As Joseph’s brothers see him coming, we see an explosion of years and years of pent-up emotions. “It’s the dreamer! Let’s kill him!” Reuben steps in. Reuben is the firstborn and Reuben just a few chapters before had sexual relations with Bilhah, one of his dad’s concubines who was the mother of two of his half-brothers. Sounds like incest to me. Reuben suggests to his brothers that they not kill Joseph, but just throw him into a pit and leave him. We don’t know if Reuben feels responsible as the older brother or if he was trying to make better choices. Maybe he meant to come back and rescue his brother?

Did you notice the first thing that they did to Joseph? They took off the long robe. The took off the hated robe of favoritism.[[4]](#footnote-5) They equalized the relationship. They symbolically told Joseph that he was no better than they were. They threw him in the pit and then they ate, no guilt here! Then we see what happens with greed or the love of money. They sold their brother into slavery. Twenty pieces of silver was the price of a handicapped slave in those days.[[5]](#footnote-6) As the caravan wound its way to Egypt, Joseph’s brothers dipped his robe in the blood of a freshly killed goat. Then they took the bloodstained garment back to their father, tossed it on the floor and said, “We found this. We think it may be your son’s robe.”[[6]](#footnote-7) Jacob knows his son is dead.

But Joseph wasn’t dead. Joseph was in Egypt in a country and a culture he didn’t know, surrounded by a language he didn’t understand.[[7]](#footnote-8) We don’t know how long Joseph had been in Egypt when we hear the next part of the story. Joseph has been sold to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, he is the captain of the guard. Potiphar increased Joseph’s responsibilities and eventually Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his entire household.

Then the Bible says Joseph was handsome in form and appearance and Potiphar’s wife looks with desire at Joseph and says to Joseph, “Lie with me.” Joseph refuses. He says that the master trusts him and he can’t betray him. Joseph says that he can not do this great evil and sin against God. Potiphar’s wife did not take no for an answer. Every day Potiphar’s wife propositioned Joseph and every day he said no. Potiphar’s wife did not like that, so one day Joseph goes into the house to do his work and none of the men of the household are there. Potiphar’s wife catches Joseph’s garment and propositions him. He leaves his robe in her hands and runs outside. Potiphar’s wife is not happy and calls to the men of her household and says that Joseph tried to rape her but she screamed. Potiphar’s wife tells Potiphar and Joseph is put in jail.

This part of the story always makes me angry because I think about all of the women who have had their stories of rape dismissed. I think of all the women who have been told that they were asking for it or that the way that they dressed or acted was the reason for the violence that was inflicted on them. I get angry when I think about the people who have used this Bible story to justify rape. Our third President, Thomas Jefferson, made his own Bible. He used a razor to cut out all of the miracles of Jesus and mentions of the supernatural. He cut out the resurrection and any passages that portray Jesus as divine. He called it The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth and created it for his own devotion. It is commonly referred to as the Jefferson Bible and I want to create the Smith Bible where there is no mention of Potiphar’s wife.

Now scholars do think that Potiphar didn’t believe his wife’s accusations about Joseph because Potiphar didn’t kill Joseph on the spot. Joseph was put in prison, and he is starting all over again. Days turned into weeks, turned into months and like many people in prison, Joseph was forgotten. In prison Joseph is again given a position of trust and the chief jailer puts all of the prisoners under Joseph’s responsibility.

Then the cupbearer and the baker of the Pharaoh do something offensive, the Bible doesn’t say what, and they go to jail where they are placed under Joseph’s responsibility. The cupbearer was the person who tasted everything before the Pharaoh did and the baker is the one who made it. One night the cupbearer and the baker have a dream, and they are sad because there is no one there who can interpret it, but Joseph says God can. Joseph interprets the cupbearer’s dream that he will be released and have his job restored. Joseph also asks the cupbearer to mention his name to the Pharaoh so he can be released. Joseph interprets the baker’s dream that he will be killed, and he was. The cupbearer was released but he didn’t mention Joseph’s name to the Pharaoh. Two years later, yes, two years later, the Pharaoh has a dream. Two years of waiting and feeling like nothing is happening. The cupbearer remembers Joseph and Joseph says that God will interpret the dream through him. Joseph says that after seven years of abundance there will be seven years of famine and the Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of all the land of Egypt to prepare for the famine.

Thirteen years passed from when Joseph was sold into slavery and his promotion over all of the land in Egypt. Thirteen years of nightmare, hardship, setback and frustration. The Pharaoh changes Joseph’s name and gives him a wife and they have two sons. Joseph names his sons Manasseh and Ephraim, Manasseh means to forget because Joseph says God has made him forget all his trouble and all his father’s household and Ephraim means fruitfulness because God made him fruitful in the land of his affliction.

Do you remember that part in Romans 5:20 that says “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”? In the Message translation Eugene Peterson translates that verse to say “sin doesn’t have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it’s sin versus grace, grace wins hands down.” It means that our bad memories do not defeat us. Aggressive forgiveness means we have to let our pain and our grudges go so they are replaced with thankfulness and gratitude.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Joseph’s dad Jacob and Joseph’s brothers are suffering the effects of the famine. So Jacob sends all of his sons, but his youngest Benjamin, to Egypt where they bow down with their faces to the ground to the prime minister of Egypt, who is their brother Joseph. They don’t recognize that it is their brother and he speaks harshly to them. Joseph accuses them of being spies and tells them they have to bring to Egypt their youngest brother Benjamin who had stayed home with their father Jacob. Then Joseph puts his brothers in prison for three days, keeps his brother Simeon, and then sends the rest on their way with grain and with their bags of money refilled. Jacob considers his son Simeon lost and doesn’t want to send a third son, his youngest Benjamin, to die. Jacob waits until they are all out of food and then he is willing to send Benjamin because it is the only option.

The brothers arrive in Egypt and Joseph has a feast at his house to celebrate. You can imagine what everyone else thought, why is the prime minister of Egypt having a feast with dusty Hebrew nomads? So, naturally the brothers are afraid at this unexpected grace and they think they will be taken as slaves. They tell Joseph’s house steward that they have money to pay back because their money bags were refilled and they don’t know how and the house steward says to them, shalom. Peace, don’t be afraid. The steward says that the money was a gift from the God of their father.

For the second time, Joseph sends his brothers on their way with food and has their money bags refilled but this time he has one of his own silver cups hidden in his brother Benjamin’s sack. The brothers were not too far from the city when they see Joseph’s house steward running after them accusing them of stealing. The steward finds the silver cup in Benjamin’s bag and the brothers go back to Joseph where they say that they are guilty, even though they didn’t take the silver cup.

Joseph says he will keep Benjamin as his slave and send the rest of the brothers home. Judah, the brother who twenty years earlier had said, “Here comes that dreamer Joseph. Let’s kill him and say that a ferocious animal devoured him,” Judah pleads for his brother Benjamin. Judah offers to be taken as a slave instead, anything to save his brother. Joseph sees that Judah has changed. Joseph can’t keep up the deception any longer, he weeps, the Bible says he wept so loudly that the Egyptians and the household of the Pharaoh heard it, and he tells his brothers who he is, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into slavery” (Genesis 45:4).

Then Joseph tells his brothers to not be upset or angry with themselves because God used him in Egypt to preserve life. Joseph had fully forgiven his brothers. His brothers had meant their actions for evil, but God was able to use what happened to Joseph for good to save people’s lives. Joseph offers his brothers a place to stay so that they can be near him because there are still five years of famine left. Joseph reconciles with his dad and his entire family of the house of Israel moves to Egypt. But in those five years of famine everyone in Egypt sells first their cattle and then their farmland to the Pharaoh in order to have food to eat. A few hundred years later, a new king came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph and that king is the one who enslaves all of the Israelites, and then we have the story of Moses and the parting of the Red Sea and the 40 years of wandering in the desert to get to the Promised Land.

Throughout the story of Joseph, the Bible tells us that the Lord was with Joseph. Here’s the thing. God never leaves. God is always with us. When we are in the pit, God is with us. This is a story that ends in amazing redemption. Joseph continued being faithful to God, living a life of integrity, and was placed in the highest command just under Pharaoh. When a drought devastated Egypt, it was Joseph’s organization and forethought that saved the nation, including the brothers who bullied him.

The story of Joseph’s mistreatment, disappointment and abandonment is one that resonates with all of us.[[9]](#footnote-10) The amazing thing to me is that Joseph lived a life free of bitterness despite everything that happened to him.[[10]](#footnote-11) When we live a life of faith and trust it affects our attitude. When we put one foot in front of the other and share joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control and generosity, then God renews our attitude. So, I leave us this day with these questions: Is your heart right? Are you moving away from people or toward them? Are you about the business of healing or hurting? We are all going to be wounded by the people we love. May we remember the words of Romans 5:20, “sin doesn’t have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it’s sin versus grace, grace wins hands down.” Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Swindoll, Charles. Joseph. W Publishing Group, 1998. Page 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)