

April 26-30, 2021 Edition

The "BIG Story" Of The Bible #47

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament

Joseph: Dreamer To Schemer

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: Genesis is a book with as much information about Who God is and what He can do in the human life as any other in the entire Bible. But have you noticed that these are not perfect people? Far from it. Sometimes you'll hear people who are bashing the Bible say that its a book of pious, well-meaning advice that is not relevant to or reflective of the real world today. When I hear people say that I know they've never read it because the people in the Bible (with one notable exception) are flawed and messed up. In fact, they're sort of a representation of the nursery rhyme Humpty Dumpty. Genesis is a story about how over and over again the people of God "had a great fall".

Their marriages are filled with disasters. Their families are dysfunctional... These are not the Waltons, friends. These people are badly messed up, aren't they? They need Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, Dr. Ruth, Dr. Spock, Dr. Seuss--they need somebody.

Some of you are starting to feel a lot better about your families right about now...

But what God does over and over in Genesis is something that all the king's horses and all the king's men could not do- He puts these broken humans lives back together again. The book of Genesis is a story about the relentless nature of God's grace. These people don't go looking for God- He comes to them. And even as they fail (sometimes over and over again) God's grace never leaves them. It reminds me of something the apostle Paul said:

And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

Philippians 1:6 (NLT)

God is relentless in His love and grace. And if you've ever found yourself wondering if your life was too messed up or if you were too far gone for God to work with just look at the story of Joseph.

Joseph is born to Jacob's favorite wife (that's a strange statement in and of itself, right?), Rachel. She had a tough time conceiving and carrying a baby to birth so this one was special to Jacob. You would think that a man who had grown up in a dysfunctional family where parents had obvious favorites would know better than to do the same thing with his family but apparently not.

He gave Joseph a beautiful coat which made his brothers VERY jealous. To make things worse, Joseph had incredibly detailed dreams that he loved to share with his brothers. All of his dreams involved his brothers bowing down to him. Now, I know that a person can't control what they dream- especially in this case where the dreams were sent to Joseph by God- but you can choose what you decide to tell your brothers about your dreams. The picture that is being painted here is that Joseph is becoming a selfish, spoiled, arrogant brat and there's nothing to stop him from becoming a selfish, spoiled, arrogant man if something doesn't change.

So one day Jacob sends Joseph to go check up on his brothers who are out watching Jacob's flocks. He has already come back from one such outing with a "bad" report about his brothers. That word that the writer uses for "bad" almost always means a false report. In other words, Joseph made up a story to get his brothers in trouble. Now his father has sent him out again and this time his brothers decide to kill him.

Lucky for Joseph that his brother, Reuben talks them out of it. They do grab Joseph and strip the coat off of him and throw him into a cistern (lucky for Joseph and the rest of the world that cistern was empty). It was Reuben's intent to go back later and get Joseph out of the cistern and return him to his father. But while Reuben was gone, Judah (another one of Joseph's brothers) talks his brothers into selling Joseph into slavery rather than killing him. When Reuben returns and finds Joseph gone he's beside himself but there is nothing to be done at this point other than go along with the ruse.

They tear Joseph's fancy coat up and kill a goat to soak the jacket in the blood. They take the coat back to Jacob and tell him they found it out in the wilderness. Jacob is devastated. Now, if you know the story of Jacob & Esau and how Jacob tricked his poor old dying dad with his mother's help using his brother's coat and a killed goat then maybe you're starting to see the irony here. Because now all these years later Jacob is being tricked by his own sons with their brother's coat and killed goat.

Meanwhile, Joseph is taken to Egypt where he is sold to a wealthy Egyptian. Joseph has the favor of God upon him (weird to say that with all of the bad things that have happened to him but that's what the Bible says) and so everything he touched turned to gold. Potiphar (Joseph's new master) noticed and put him in charge of his entire household. Joseph might have thought things were looking up until Mrs. Potiphar started making googly eyes at Joseph. She wanted Joseph to sleep with her but Joseph wouldn't do it. He considered it to be a great sin against God.

Now I want to stop here for a moment- does it blow anyone else away that at this point the spoiled, arrogant kid who only thought about himself is concerned not with getting caught by his master but is concerned with letting God down? Because it does me. Consider me blown away. I mean, what has God done for Joseph at this point? Joseph had everything going for him until his brothers tossed him in that pit. Joseph was crying out and asking for help but none came. Then he's sold into slavery and ends up in Egypt. Maybe you could say things are looking up for him at this point except... you know... that he's a slave. And now we learn that Joseph is concerned about his relationship with the Creator. Seems strange to me. We'll continue Joseph's story tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what it takes to turn a spoiled brat into someone who cares about how people are treated.

Tuesday Reflection: So we pick up where we left off yesterday- with Joseph's boss' wife trying to seduce him. He keeps telling her no but eventually Mrs. Potiphar wouldn't be put off and she arranged to be alone with Joseph and she grabbed him and said, "sleep with me!" Joseph didn't hang around to argue- he bolted. He ran from the temptation but in so doing he lost his coat.

He. Lost. His. Coat.

Anyone remember what happened the last time he lost his coat. I'll give you a hint- it wasn't good. And it's not going to be good this time either. Mrs. Potiphar doesn't like being rejected so she tells her husband that Joseph tried to seduce her and when she screamed he left his coat when he ran. Potiphar was so mad he put Joseph in prison. Now the Bible does say that God was with Joseph in prison but how long do you think it would take the average Joe (do you see what I did there? Average "Joe"???) Sometimes I crack myself up although my wife says I'm the only

one I crack up but I'm digressing so...) to turn away from God when their life was going the way Joseph's is going? For most of us I'm thinking not this long. But Joseph seems to still be on board. He seems to be creating a closer and more engaged relationship with God than he's ever experienced the worse things get.

So Joseph is in prison with a couple of guys. They both have dreams but neither one knows what their dreams mean. Joseph interprets their dreams (one is a really good dream and the other is not so good) and asks the guy whose dream was good to remember him when he is back in the palace working for the Pharaoh again. But it was two years before Joseph would be remembered. Finally the Pharaoh has a dream that nobody can interpret- the guy who had been in prison with Joseph remembers and tells Pharaoh about him and Joseph is brought into the palace to interpret the dream. He does and impresses Pharaoh so much that Joseph is put in a position of great power in Egypt- basically Joseph becomes the second most powerful person in Egypt overnight.

At this point Joseph's faithfulness starts to make sense to the reader but this is not just a story- it was somebody's life. A life where the person living it didn't know how it ended while he was going through what he was going through. How would you handle everything that Joseph went through if it happened to you? I have to be honest and say I'm not sure how I'd have done. I would like to say I'd have stuck it out like Joseph but...

But that's not the end of the story. Joseph (because of Pharaoh's dream) knows a famine is coming. He starts stockpiling grain so that when the famine comes the Egyptians won't starve to death. That's a great thing but the reason this story is in the Bible is because of the promise God made to the serpent way back in the Garden of Eden when He told the snake that a descendant of the woman would come and while the snake would hurt this man when he struck His heel in the process the man would crush the serpent's head. Joseph is part of the family that God is going to work through to send that man in the future. But that means that Joseph's family (the ones who sold him into slavery) must survive the famine as well.

So one day Joseph is at work and a group of people from the north of Egypt come to buy food. Joseph recognizes his brothers but they don't recognize him because of all the crazy makeup and bling the Egyptians wore in those days. We don't have time to talk about all the shenanigans and hijinks that Joseph uses to eventually get his younger brother and then his father down to Egypt but suffice it to say, eventually it happened.

But what about all the bad blood? What about what his brothers had done to him? He forgave them. He made this amazing statement at the end of the book of Genesis that kind of sums up the whole book:

You meant to hurt me, but God turned your evil into good. Genesis 50:20 (NLT)

And the story of God continues. Abraham's family will survive the great famine that killed an awful lot of people in the world and they settle down in Egypt which is why when we talk about Moses next week the children of Israel will be living as slaves in Egypt rather than wandering around the promised land like you'd expect. We'll get to that story next week but for today maybe spend some time thinking about how God worked in Joseph's life and how He works in ours. Am I as patiently faithful as Joseph even when things seem to be out of control? Are you?

Wednesday Reflection: There are many lessons we can learn from the story of Joseph's life- one of them is that even if things look dark and we can't see how anything good could ever happen to us again- God's not finished with us yet. What may look to us like the end may be only an inconvenient set back in the grand scheme of our lives when all is said and done. God uses everything to work His plan for our lives and it's pretty obvious that He's not generally in a hurry- He is the very definition of patience:

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. 2 Peter 3:9 (NLT)

What do you think was on Joseph's mind as he sat at the bottom of that pit and cried out to God, to his brothers, to anyone who would listen to please save him? What do you think was on his mind as no rescue arrived? Sure, his brothers Reuben and Judah ensured that he didn't get killed but still, he was sold into slavery and taken to Egypt. What do you think Joseph was thinking as all that transpired? He was in a remote place called Dothan and there was nobody to hear his cries (at least nobody that cared to save him). A few centuries later there was another cry for help from the same general spot. By then Dothan had become a town in Israel and the prophet of God, Elisha, and his servant were in the town when an entire army came to kill Elisha. Elisha prayed and God sent angels to rescue Elisha and his servant. And when Elisha prayed that God would strike the enemy soldiers blind, God did it just the way Elisha prayed He would. I don't know about you but when it comes to prayer... **THAT'S WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT!** That's what I like to have happen when I pray. God very obviously does exactly what I ask for exactly when I ask for it. In fact, just about every story I've heard about answered prayers in churches revolve around this kind of answered prayer.

So back to Joseph. Joseph cried out in the same place that Elisha did (a few centuries before Elisha was born but still...) and God did not come to his rescue in the same obvious way He did for Elisha. Why not? What was the difference?

Well, I don't know for certain but I can tell you this- I believe with all my heart that God was being as kind to Joseph by not giving him exactly what he cried out for as He would later be to Elisha in giving him what he asked for exactly in the way and timing he asked for it. Why? Think about it. What kind of person was Joseph at this point? Rude, arrogant, stuck up, selfish... did I say arrogant? Does that sound like the kind of person God uses? Not if He can help it. Joseph may have thought his life was over as he sat in that pit but for you and I who have read the story we know, God wasn't finished with Joseph yet. Through some of the toughest times that Joseph would ever know God would soften and humble Joseph's heart. He would turn him from a spoiled brat into a man about whom would be written one of the greatest stories of redemption and forgiveness the world has ever heard. But none of that would have happened if God rescued Joseph from that pit in the way Joseph wanted Him to. The prophet Isaiah puts it this way:

But God's not finished. He's waiting around to be gracious to you. He's gathering strength to show mercy to you. God takes the time to do everything right-everything. Those who wait around for him are the lucky ones. Isaiah 30:18 (MES)

And that's what Joseph did. He waited on God's timing. I know, he really didn't have a choice on whether to wait or not but he did have a choice on what he would focus on and who he would become during the waiting. Because while there is no substitute for time passing when it comes to God's plan at work in our lives, time alone doesn't turn us into great men/women of God. Time plus focusing on God's character and working to incorporate that character into our own hearts though will work miracles in our lives and the world we live in.

So how are you doing with this whole patience thing? Do you struggle with believing that God's not finished with you yet and believing that He could ever do anything miraculous with your life after what's happened/where you've been/what you've done/what's been done to you? Are you struggling with questions about why God didn't do what you asked Him to do? Yeah, me too. There's a lot I don't know but one thing that I do believe with all my heart- no matter what's happened in your (and my) past, God's not finished with you (and me) yet.

Thursday Reflection: Another lesson from the life of Joseph is this one- God uses every experience we have (our own choices, the impact of other people's choices on our lives and traumatic/good events that just sort of happen to us) to bring about the good He has planned for us and the world. That's exactly what Joseph comes to believe. I can't imagine what ran through his mind when he sees his brothers standing before him in Egypt. He could have had them killed. Did the thought run through his mind? Maybe, but I know it ran through their minds. Why didn't he kill them? Well, partly because that wasn't God's plan for the promise that He made to the serpent to come true so there's that. But Joseph had also grown from the time he had been betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. He had become more like this God who loves and forgives and pursues. Joseph did put his brothers through some pretty crazy tests. Why? Maybe to see if they had changed like he had.

We'll never know for sure but he gave them every chance to prove themselves unchanged but every time they showed him they had changed. In fact, when he gave them the opportunity to betray his little brother Benjamin (the one who had taken Joseph's place as the new favorite of Jacob) the brother's showed that they didn't care to put their father through the loss of his favored son again. One of the brothers even volunteered to die instead of Benjamin if that would appease the second most powerful man in Egypt. And interestingly enough... the brother that offers to take Bens place is Judah. Do you know there's a pretty famous descendant of Judah that will be born a few thousand years after this that will teach the world a little something about taking someone else's place (yours and mine) to pay for their sins. His name is Jesus. Just an interesting side note there.

And when finally his brothers- knowing who he was at this point- thought Joseph was going to kill them for their treachery against him he said:

You meant to hurt me, but God turned your evil into good to save the lives of many people, which is being done. Genesis 50:20 (NCV)

Does that blow you away? Not just the forgiveness but the certainty that God's hand was in all of it? Even the horrific things that had happened to Joseph, he considered them all to be part of the final arrangement. How does that work? Does that mean God caused his brothers to be so filled with hate and jealousy that they would want to kill him but settle for selling him into

slavery? No. God doesn't cause anyone to do evil but there is a sense in which He is able to work through the evil that we (and the devil) do to bring about His purposes:

*The LORD works out everything for his own ends- even the wicked.
Proverbs 16:4 (NIV)*

Can you imagine how mad that must make the devil? He convinces Joseph's brothers to do something horribly evil and God uses it to do something great. You see it over and over again in the Bible. It's what's at the heart of the crucifixion- the devil must have thought that was his greatest victory and God uses it to do the greatest good that this universe has ever seen.

And that's a great example of what today's thought is all about- even when things look the darkest God isn't finished yet. Not with Jesus' life, not with Joseph's and not with yours. I know things can look awfully bleak sometimes but the message of the story of Joseph is this- just look at what God can do in the life of someone who is cooperating with developing His character as they stumble through the darkest days of their lives. He does it over and over again. I've seen it at work in my own life. I've seen it at work in many of your lives. And not matter how dark things may seem for you right now- He's not finished with you yet. He will take the evil that has occurred in your life (from your own decisions, the choices of others and even the evil that the devil has unleashed into your life) and make something good come out of it. It's His specialty:

We know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God and are fitting into his plans. Romans 8:28 (TLB)

Friday Reflection: The last concept we are going to examine in the life of Joseph is the concept of trust. What I see as I look at Joseph's life is that over time he leaves behind his arrogance and selfishness and starts looking to God for how he should behave. He learns to trust God, even as a slave and prisoner. He begins to trust God in whatever circumstance he finds himself in. In other words, his trust was not dependent on things going the way he thought they should go. And while he was going through the very darkest days of his life he worked on not only trusting God but also on becoming like Him which it turns out is a pretty powerful combination:

Dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense... And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. Colossians 3:12-14 (MES)

Every day when Jacob woke up he didn't just put on his literal clothing- he dressed himself emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. Rather than hatred he chose compassion. Rather than being mean he chose to be kind. Rather than arrogance he chose humility. He learned to forgive and he learned what love was really all about.

But how did he do that? I don't mean what was the actual process of dressing himself spiritually every day. I mean, how did he manage to put himself in a position where God could transform him into someone useful and beautiful while going through the darkest days of his life? I don't know about you but when things are at their worst, I have a hard time wanting to be loving and forgiving and compassionate. So how did Joseph do it?

He had his Father's coat. No... I know he lost his fancy shmancy coat that Jacob had given to him when his brothers attacked him. I'm not talking about that coat- I'm talking about the coat given to him by his Father in heaven. Let's talk about that for a minute, shall we? What did the coat Jacob gave to Joseph represent to Joseph? It represented Joseph's knowledge that he was unconditionally loved, adored, cherished and provided for. That original fancy coat could be taken from Joseph but the metaphorical coat that his Father in heaven gave to him could not. And because he knew where he stood with the Father, Joseph could endure anything that this world and the people who lived in it with him could throw at him. It allowed him to not only endure the hardships he went through but to be transformed even as he was going through them. Joseph had the unshakeable belief that even when his prayers weren't answered in the way he thought they should that God was still acting in kindness and mercy to Joseph. And really, he was right. If God hadn't allowed Joseph to go through the things he went through then the famine would have killed Joseph more than likely. And not only Joseph- it would have killed all of Jacob's family effectively short circuiting God's plan to send a man who would crush the head of the serpent. In the end Joseph realized that God's kindness doesn't always feel good but it didn't diminish his belief that God was being kind to him.

So now let me ask you a question- how do you endure the darkest and toughest times of your life? How do you not just endure them but thrive in the midst of them and find yourself being transformed even as you suffer? Do you, like Joseph, believe that even when things are at their worst that God is still working to do the kindest, most loving thing for you those you love? It's a tough thing to accomplish but it's one of the most powerful things you will ever work on in your life. And it doesn't just happen because you work really hard to convince yourself that God's kindness is always at work even when you can't see it. This isn't just about clothing yourself with all the virtues that we saw in Colossians chapter 3. This is primarily about what God clothes you with- it's about Him putting Joseph's coat on your back giving you the assurance of His unconditional love and mercy and kindness. Paul puts it like this in Galatians:

*For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.
Galatians 3:27 (NIV)*

What does it mean to you that you've been "clothed with Christ"? I think Joseph could tell you what it meant to him even thousands of years before Jesus would come to this earth and go through an eerily similar story to what Joseph experienced: Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and sold for a few pieces of silver- Jesus was betrayed by His disciple and sold for a few pieces of silver. Joseph had his father's coat ripped from Him- Jesus had his coat ripped off of His back. Joseph cried out from the bottom of the pit and nobody answered his cries. Jesus cried out from the cross and not only did nobody answer- Heaven turned away. Because of what he went through and how he went through it Joseph rose to a place where he could save the very ones who had betrayed him- Because of what He went through and how He endured it Jesus rose to a place where He could save the very ones who had betrayed and abandoned Him.

But there are a couple of very important differences between Joseph & Jesus. Joseph had no choice in his slavery/imprisonment. Jesus chose to go through what He went through. And while Joseph's coat was ripped from his back and Jesus' coat was also taken from Him just before He was crucified there's another aspect of this story that we need to understand if we're going to realize just how far Jesus went for us. Because Jesus' literal coat that was taken from Him and

gambled over by the Roman soldiers was the least of Jesus' concerns. What really undid Jesus was when He allowed His spiritual coat to be taken from Him. The one that reminded Him that He was beloved by His Father. The coat that we get glimpses of in the story of His baptism when the heavens parted and God said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."

We also get a glimpse of it not long before His crucifixion on the mount of transfiguration when God said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him." But on that cross Jesus voluntarily took that "coat" off and spent what must have felt like an eternity without that assurance and confidence that His Father loved Him more than anything. He lost that assurance that everything was going to be ok even if He knew it intellectually. He did that for you. He did that for me. So that we would never have to spend a day without access to our Father's coat. We may not always feel it but when we are struggling with our feelings the Bible urges us over and over to look to that moment when Jesus gave up his assurance so we would never have to:

Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed... When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls! Hebrews 12:2-3 (MES)

How do I endure the toughest and darkest days of my life? By putting on Joseph's coat.