

## Living Out the Virtues - A Look at Joseph

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Well, hi, everybody, I'm Scott Powell. And today we're going to be talking about the story of Joseph. Not the story of the Joseph of the New Testament, not Mary's husband, but the Joseph of the Old Testament, which is an incredible story, which can teach us a lot about particularly living out the virtues. So, before we dive into this great story, let's open in a prayer.

### Opening Prayer

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Jesus, we come to you today with praise and thanksgiving. We thank you so much for the gift of this retreat. We thank you for all of the people across the world who are entering into this time for their prayer and their reflection as we walk through Lent together. We pray that you would prepare us well to enter into your passion and then to enter of the Easter story.*

*Thank you for the gifts of this time together, these reflections, and all of the people who've put so much work into making this retreat possible. Please be in my words, let me not say anything that's outside of your will. And we pray for the intercession of all your saints, especially your mother as we pray together, Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

### Joseph from the Old Testament

So, I want to talk about the story of Joseph today. Joseph appears at the very end of the book of Genesis. And we can't know this for sure, but I wonder if Joseph in the New Testament, Joseph who raises Jesus, is actually named after this Joseph. I think there's a real possibility. And I think it's a real possibility partially because of what a wonderful, beautiful and inspiring story Joseph's actually is. And the ways in which it foreshadows, really profoundly, the story of Jesus himself.

So, we're introduced to Joseph formally in chapter 37 of Genesis, at the tail end. And Joseph is the second youngest of the 12 sons of a guy named Jacob. You might not have heard of Jacob before, but you've probably heard of his name change. Jacob had his name changed during his story to Israel. And Israel, or Jacob, has 12 sons. And those 12 sons will go on to become the 12 tribes of Israel. So, this is pretty significant, and this is a very important family story. And this is before these are tribes, they are just siblings and they're trying to live life together and not really along with each other.

Joseph like I mentioned, he is the second youngest. And when we meet him, he's about 17 years old. And when we meet him in chapter 37 of Genesis, it says he is... Well, there's a couple different translations, but what mine says is "Joseph was 17 years old and he was shepherding

the flock with his brothers." He was shepherding the flock with his brothers. Not super surprising, there's a lot of people in the Bible who shepherd flocks together. But that's actually not what the original Hebrew says. Remember the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, in Hebrew language. And what it says in Hebrew is closer to, "Joseph was shepherding his brothers." Which is a bit of a different twist. They're not all just kind of doing manual labor together. Joseph, the second youngest of all of these brothers, is shepherding over them. And you might ask yourself, wait a second, why would the second youngest be shepherding his big brothers? That's kind of weird and I wonder if that might lead to some bad things. Well, it does lead to some bad things.

## **The Significance of Joseph's Coat**

One of the things that people often remember about Joseph is of course the famous technicolor dreamcoat. But that's a significant part of the story. I don't know if it was actually technicolored, but there is an important garment that Joseph was wearing. And that garment speaks to the jealousy that his brothers actually have for him. Not because he got some colorful, pretty garment that was better than all of the rest of theirs. That's really not what's going on. Is that the garment that he was given was a symbol of authority.

His father gave him a garment. Actually, what it says in the original Hebrew is that this was a garment that had wrists and ankles. Which is kind of a weird thing to say. Why would it matter if a garment had wrists and ankles? Well, if it had wrists and ankles it meant it was very long and very formal, not the kind of thing you could do manual labor very well in. So in other words, Joseph is wearing kind of three piece suit. In other words, he is executive status. He's management, he's the boss over these guys which created a very tense situation with all of the older brothers, really angry that their father would give him the authority over them.

## **Cardinal Virtues**

Joseph, the other thing he's sort of known for is having dreams. And not just having them but being able to interpret dreams. And so early on in his story, Joseph is not demonstrating one of the virtues. So, in the New Testament, sometimes we talk about what are called the theological virtues, faith, hope, and love. In the Old Testament, there's sort of another grouping of virtues, they're called the Cardinal virtues. And Cardinal is actually in the Latin, it means the hinge virtues, the foundation virtues.

The Cardinal virtues are justice, fortitude, temperance, and prudence. Justice, fortitude, temperance, and prudence. And early on in his story, Joseph fails to show some prudence. What does prudence mean? It means knowing what the right thing to do in a given situation is. And early on Joseph has some dreams. And he has these dreams which seem to symbolize his whole family bowing down to kind of worship him. And being kind of an impetuous 17-year-old, he goes out to his family, and he says, "Hey guys, I had this dream that I think represents you guys all bowing down in front of me. Isn't that kind of cool?" And the brother's like you're stinking, you're stinking brother. He's not exactly showing prudence here. And even he tells his father and his father's like stop saying that, that's not okay. But then his father says he actually held these things in his heart. He reflected on this.

## **Joseph and His Brothers**

So, he grows up, the story moves along and eventually things come to a head and this tense relationship between Joseph and his brothers. And one day the brothers see Joseph coming and they say, "There's that dreamer. There's that fancy coated dreamer coming along." And they say, "You know what? We're sick of it. We're tired of this. We're tired of father's favoritism toward him. Let's kill him. Let's throw him in a pit. Let's murder him. Let's kill him. Let's take what's our, and we'll get the authority back." One of the brothers, call him Judah says, "You know what? Let's not kill him. I don't like him anymore than you guys do presumably, but maybe if we're going to get rid of him, let's make some money on him." And where they are is a place that frequents traders.

So, people coming to trade goods in between parts of the land. And they were standing on the road that was frequented by Midianites. So, people that would often be going to Egypt to sell goods and spices and other things. And they see this caravan of Midianites coming and they say, "Well, let's sell him off. And maybe we can actually make something off of the guy." So, they sell Joseph for 20 shackles, which according to Leviticus was the prices of a slave.

## **Joseph with Potiphar**

They sell him off into slavery and Joseph is then taken off into Egypt where he's sold into slavery, and he finds himself in the home of this guy named Potiphar. And Potiphar is a well to do man in the Egyptian government. He is an authoritative figure in the most powerful empire of the time. And Joseph begins to work for him and eventually gains some favor and is a respected member of the household in a certain sense. But at one point in the story, his wife, Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph. And Joseph showing temperance and showing some fortitude, some real courage, rejects the movements and these things that are going on from his wife and says, "No, that's not okay. I can't do this." And he essentially flees.

But before fleeing, Potiphar's wife who's very embarrassed by this, grabs his garment. And when her husband comes home, she says, "That slave of ours, that Joseph, he tried to seduce me. He tried to do terrible things to me. He has to pay." And so, Joseph then finds himself in prison where he dwells for many, many years.

## **Interpreting Dreams**

One of the things that Joseph does in prison is interpret a couple people's dream. There are some other servants of the Pharaoh, of the emperor, who find themselves in prison and they have some dreams and Joseph is able to interpret them. One of them is interpreted favorably that this guy is going to be vindicated for his crimes and go back and get his job back. Another one is going to be put to death for his crimes. But Joseph regardless, gains a little reputation for being someone who can understand these things, who can interpret these things. And eventually he finds himself in prison again. But one of the guys who he was imprisoned with, years later finds himself in the courts of Pharaoh. And Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the empire up in Egypt, is having bad dreams. And he's having these dreams that he can't interpret. He's bringing in all of his men and his magicians and his sorcerers, and he's trying to get somebody who can explain all these bad

dreams he's having. And at one point, the servant of his says, "Wait a second, there was a guy when I was in prison. I remember that guy, Joseph, he was really good at interpreting dreams." And so they send for Joseph and they bring him to Pharaoh and Pharaoh tells him his dreams.

## **Interpreting Pharaoh's Dreams**

And Joseph says, "Yeah, I get it. I can understand what that means. What your dreams mean Pharaoh, is that there's going to be a number of years of great abundance in Egypt. We're going to have crops and food in abundance. We will be blessed. But then after that, there's going to come a series of years of famine, where there will be nothing, and drought, and foodlessness and people will be in dire straits." So he says, "If I were you Pharaoh, I would get somebody to build me storehouses. Big storehouses where we could store grain, and food, and wheat for the coming famine, so that when the world gets hit with this, we are going to be just fine. And we're going to be sitting pretty."

And Pharaoh says, "That's a great idea. And I know just the man to lead this." And Joseph rather, now becomes essentially the prime minister, the number two person, in the land of Egypt, the most powerful empire in the world. So, Joseph has had quite a ride. He went from being a shepherd over his brothers to being sold off into slavery, to going and working in the house of Potiphar, to going to Porter's house to prison, and now from prison to being the prime minister of the most powerful empire in the world. And Joseph finds himself in a pretty interesting position.

## **Always Waits on God**

Now, throughout the story, one of the things that's most compelling about this story is that Joseph suffers tremendously. For years before being elevated to this position, he suffers hugely. And Joseph never once lets his faith in God fall, falter. Joseph never once says, "Oh, woe is me. Why are you doing this to me, Lord? Where are you? You've abandoned me." He never once seems to lose sight of who he is and who his God is. He shows courage. He shows prudence. He shows temperance in a great deal, but he also shows patience. He waits on God. Of all of the great figures in the Old Testament, specifically the book of Genesis, so many of them failed to wait on God, failed to trust in God when things get hard. Joseph always waits on God many times for years upon years. And how he finds himself as the prime minister of the nation of Egypt.

## **What God Can Do in Difficulties**

But the whole nation eventually slides into famine. And when the area or the region rather, slides into famine, and when the region slides into famine, Joseph's brothers and his father back in the holy land, they find themselves in want. And they say, and they hear rumors, they're like, well, we hear that there's a lot of food up in Egypt. Maybe if we go up to Egypt, we can beg for an audience with the prime minister and we can get him to care for us. And so, the brothers go up to Egypt. And when they go there, they are able to gain an audience with unbeknownst to them, their brother, Joseph. And he would've looked very different. We know from Egyptian culture they would shave all of their head and their facial hair. They would wear a lot of makeup and head dresses and a lot of different things that would make them unrecognizable to people who

might previously have known them. He wouldn't have looked like the Joseph who was sold off into slavery.

But the brothers would've looked the same to Joseph. And so, Joseph sees his brothers, the ones who sold him out, the ones who left him for as good as dead, the ones who rejected him, and he listens to them. And he sends them on a series of challenges. He wants to make sure his father's okay, and his little brother Benjamin is okay. And then eventually he says he welcomes them back and he reveals his identity. And he says, "Look, it's me. I'm the one that you tried to kill and now I've become your savior."

The story is incredible because what it shows, it shows a number of things, but it shows what God can do through even the worst circumstances. What God can do through what seem like the most hopeless things that might happen to us in the course of our life. And how God doesn't just bring good out of evil, but God brings salvation out of evil. God brings profound, overwhelming, overflowing good out of what seems to us as evil. Even our sin, even our darkness, the baggage that we carry with us, all of those things, if given to God through His grace can be transformed into something amazing.

## **Judah's Conversion**

It's fascinating to me that as the story goes on it's not Joseph who becomes prominent in the rest of the course of salvation history. The family line, the blessing, and the line of the King and then later Messiah doesn't pass through Joseph. He gets lost in a certain sense to history in some way. The family lineage, the blessing, the kingdom, and the Messiah passed through Judah. Remember Judah, he was the one who sold Joseph into slavery to begin with. It was his idea to sell him off. And yet it's through Judah that the King comes. It's through Judah that the Messiah comes. Because what happens in the meantime is that Judah has a profound conversion.

Judah, while Joseph is off in slavery, while Joseph is off in prison, while Joseph is slowly becoming prime minister, is having a profound conversion. Judah sees the things that he did to Joseph come back on himself. He recognizes what it means to be on the other side of this. And he has a deep and profound conversion back to the Lord so that when Joseph reveals himself, Judah says, "Please forgive me." He recognizes the depth of his sin. Is it any coincidence then, that it's through the one who recognizes the depth of his sin that Jesus chooses to come? Jesus, the faithful brother, the faithful only begotten son of God, who is sold out by his brothers, by his own people, by us every day when we choose to commit sin. The same Jesus who though sold out by us constantly for what we think is our greater good, comes back to save us every time. Saves all of humanity through his being turned over for 30 pieces of silver by Judas, over to the authorities who then saves all of humanity.

Joseph sets the stage for this. And yes, the lineage of the Messiah doesn't come out of Joseph, but I wonder if the one who raises the Messiah, the one who teaches Jesus to be a man, the one who teaches Jesus what it means to engage with the world, Joseph, his father, is actually named after this guy.

## **God Can Bring Good in any Evil**

What a beautiful way for God to bring this story. What do we learn from the story of Joseph? Is that God can bring anything, any good, profound good, tremendous good, unbelievable good, out of anything in our lives that we think is evil. They might be evil, our sin, our baggage, things that we've done in the past. If we give them over to God, if we have allow Him to transform those things, He can make them beautiful. He can make them glorious, and He can save us. He can save the world even through the darkest of circumstances. Thanks so much, everybody.