

REAL PEOPLE, REAL GOD:

Joseph

The story of Jacob's son, Joseph, is familiar to most of us and can be found in Genesis 37-50. It's also been told to children and adults through fiction in a myriad of ways. The Dreamworks movie, *Joseph: King of Dreams*, is one I just recently watched with my grandkids, and I'll bet some of you have seen the play, *Joseph and the Technicolor Dream Coat*.

Same Story, Second Verse

The story begins with Jacob making the same mistake his father Isaac did:

“Joseph, a young man of *seventeen*, was tending the flocks with his brothers...and he *brought their father a bad report about them*. Now [*Jacob*] *loved Joseph more than any of his other sons*...and he made an ornate robe for him. When *his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him*.” Gen. 37:2-4 (*emphasis added*)

- Choosing a favorite son causes division in the family
- Joseph appears to be a spoiled brat, tattling on his brothers.

REAL PEOPLE Cause Trouble

This family continues to spiral with more situations similar to Jacob's own growing-up years...

- Hatred between brothers grows.
- Joseph experiences God in dreams that his brothers and father interpret (and they get very angry at the dreams' implications).
- Jacob sends Joseph to “check on” his older ten sons while they're tending flocks (more like “check UP on”).
- Joseph's brothers plot to kill him, but relent and instead sell Joseph into slavery; they kill a goat and deceive Jacob into thinking Joseph is dead (just as Jacob killed a goat and deceived his father Isaac years ago).

Did Jacob and Joseph deserve to be duped? Was it okay for the ten brothers to sell Joseph or lie to their father? No, but at least we understand their motivation—the *why* behind it.

Consider the kind of man Joseph might have become if he would have continued living as the ever-favored son, tattling to daddy, expounding on his grand dreams, never experiencing any

hardship or trials or testing. I think he was on his way to becoming a self-righteous, holier-than-thou old fart! Some of the hardships we're about to see in Joseph's life may have just beat the meanness out of him.

The REAL Main Character

Before we go any farther in the story, let's establish the main theme—and the main character. While Joseph seems like the main character for these 12 chapters of Genesis, he is really *secondary*.

This story is more about what **God** is doing to bring good out of bad in Joseph's life. The story's sole purpose is stated in **Genesis 50:20** —

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

What's Our REAL GOD Doing?

Beginning in chapter 39 of Genesis, we need not look far to see what God is doing when Joseph arrives in Egypt. When Joseph is sold into the household of Potiphar, Pharaoh's captain of the guard, we see some key phrases that appear repeatedly throughout Joseph's life.

- “The LORD was with Joseph” v.2
- “the LORD gave him success in everything he did...” v.3
- “Joseph found favor in his (Potiphar's) eyes...” v.4
- “Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.” v.4
- “the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph... both in the house and in the field” v.5.

These phrases point to the main agent in this story—our REAL GOD Himself.

Real People Make Things Exciting

Because REAL PEOPLE are involved, things get dicey for Joseph again.

- Potiphar is *trusting*
- Potiphar's wife starts *lusting*
- And Joseph is *busting* out of his loin cloth to get away from the boss's wife!
- Joseph is falsely accused, and Potiphar believes his wife instead of righteous Joseph.
- Joseph is then imprisoned for something he didn't do.

If Joseph was the main character, my editor would complain that he spends too much time in trouble! But the main character again works behind the scenes as the Hero of this story...

Our Real Hero Blesses Joseph Again

Even during Joseph's false imprisonment, we see those key phrases about our REAL GOD ever near Joseph in his time of need:

“But while Joseph was there in the prison, the *Lord was with him*; he showed him kindness and *granted him favor* in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden *put Joseph in charge* of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because *the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success* in whatever he did.” **Genesis 39:20b-23** (*emphasis added*)

In addition to all the success and favor, our REAL GOD grants Joseph an opportunity to interpret two dreams while in prison, foreshadowing an even greater opportunity for Joseph down the road. When the royal baker and royal cupbearer come to Joseph with their dreams, Joseph assures them only God can interpret their dreams (a far cry from the Joseph who flaunted his dreams as a spoiled 17-year-old). He interprets the dreams, but Joseph remains in prison—thinking he's been forgotten.

Joseph Recognizes the Main Character

Two years later (Sheesh! 2 more years of waiting—yep.), Pharaoh has two dreams that none of his wise men or magicians can interpret, and that ol' cupbearer finally remembers Joseph and his ability to interpret. When Pharaoh asks Joseph to interpret his dreams, he responds with an even stronger statement about the Main Character in his life...

“‘I cannot do it,’ Joseph replied to Pharaoh, ‘but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.’” **Gen 41:16**

I love the confidence in God that Joseph likely gained in prison. Hardship either makes us or breaks us, and I think we see here a Joseph that's been refined.

- God gives him the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams: 7 yrs of plenty in the land followed by 7 yrs of famine.
- But Joseph shows his innate leadership quality, providing a solution to the problem before he's asked. He's not pushy, but he's intentional. There's a difference. Listen...

“...Now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh...” **Gen 41:33–35**

How Great is Our God?

- Pharaoh responds by making Joseph governor of Egypt, but is it really Pharaoh that makes him governor—or God? Once again, though the Scripture doesn’t record the specific phrases, we see that *God is with Joseph* and *divine favor* rests upon him.
- Then in Genesis 43, we read that the famine spreads to Canaan, the land where Jacob and his sons live. Only God orchestrates the boundaries of nature—opening the floodgates of the heavens and closing them—to impose a famine on Canaan that would bring Joseph’s brothers to Egypt for grain.

Finally, Some Real Emotion!

All this time Joseph has endured one hardship after another, and we’ve seen no hint of emotion (though I think that is partly because we’re meant to understand GOD as the main character, not Joseph). When he’s reunited with his brothers, we finally see the humanness of Joseph revealed—and our REAL GOD working through that too.

- When Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt seeking food—from the hand of Joseph himself—Joseph’s emotions run the gamut: shock, delight, sadness, confusion. He’s basically a giant ball of emotion.
- He tricks his brothers multiple times and puts them through several tests: to prove they’ve changed, to know his father is alive, and for a chance to see his younger brother, Benjamin.
- When Joseph finally reveals his identity, it’s an emotional family reunion. (Read Genesis 42-45 for the full account). His brothers are terrified, then skeptical, then relieved.
- Pharaoh hears of Joseph’s reunion with his brothers and is pleased. He invites Joe’s family to Egypt—*telling them not to bring their “stuff” with them from Canaan*. (This is an important detail later.)
- When the brothers return to Canaan and tell Jacob that Joseph is alive, he is skeptical at first, but then delighted! He prepares to go to Egypt though he is deeply afraid.
- Emotions all over the board in this section!

How Does Our REAL GOD Deal With Emotion?

He appears to Jacob in a dream—like the first time He ever spoke to Jacob. How tender. How intimate. How kind...

“‘I am God, the God of your father,’ he said. ‘Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes.’” **Gen. 46:3–4**

- Note that God spoke to Joseph the same way He spoke to Jacob—in dreams. Father and son likely shared this close spiritual bond which probably made Jacob’s favoritism even more pronounced.

Jacob’s REAL GOD shows up at a time of great turmoil with a promise and an assurance to quiet Jacob’s fears. Did Jacob trust God fully and obey Pharaoh’s command to *leave all his possessions in Canaan*? Nope.

“So Jacob and all his offspring went to Egypt, *taking with them their livestock and the possessions they had acquired in Canaan.*” **Gen. 46:6**

Real People in a Real Mess

When Jacob arrives in Egypt, his long-lost son Joseph is both happy and stressed to see him. Dear old dad begins his stay in Egypt by disobeying Joseph’s boss, so Joseph gives him a detailed script of what to say *when* he’s brought before Egypt’s king (Gen. 46:33-34).

Because Jacob *will be* summoned to the king.

Our REAL PEOPLE choices get us into hot water that only our REAL GOD can get us out of!

REAL GOD Intervenes

- Pharaoh’s first question to Jacob: How old are you?
- Egyptian age of perfection is 110; Jacob is 137, which gains immediate respect from Pharaoh.
- Pharaoh gives Joseph’s family the BEST land for grazing flocks—their flocks and Pharaoh’s flocks (Gen. 47:6), which essentially makes them Pharaoh’s servants.
- Joseph enslaves all of *EGYPT* by bartering Pharaoh’s stored grain for people’s land and their labor.

“So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields, because the famine was too severe for them. The land became Pharaoh’s, and Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other.” **Gen. 47:20-21**

Servitude – Slaves in Egypt. Does that ring any bells?

Remember the original covenant God made with Abram—when Abe cut the animals in half, and God walked between them as a smoking pot and flaming torch? **Gen. 15:13** says:

“Then the LORD said to [Abram], ‘Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there.’”

God begins building the nation of Israel (Jacob’s sons) when Joseph is governor of Egypt. In 400 years, our REAL GOD will save them from *self-inflicted* bondage! Why *self-inflicted*? Because:

1. Joseph—a son of Israel—instituted slavery in Egypt, and
2. Jacob’s sons could have left Egypt at anytime after the famine ended.

Their bondage came from small choices made every day to live a life of comfort in a land not their own instead of living in obedience in a Land chosen by God. Our bondage is the same today—small choices every day to live in what seems like comfort instead of obedience to God.

However, even though REAL PEOPLE make self-inflicted harmful choices, some of us are transformed in this life, and God continues His far-reaching plan of restoration.

Jacob’s Blessing

We get a glimpse of that restoration in Jacob’s blessing to his sons on his deathbed. Though he’s still playing favorites with Joseph’s sons at the end (giving Joseph’s two sons the double portion of a firstborn and giving the greater blessing to Joseph’s younger son, Ephraim), we see a sweet maturity in Jacob’s relationship with his God in these final moments.

“Then he blessed Joseph and said, ‘May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, *the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm—may he bless these boys...*’”

Genesis 48:15-16 (*emphasis added*)

Remember back in Genesis 28, after God had promised to be with Jacob and bless him abundantly, Jacob had given a half-hearted promise to sort of accept God *if* He did all He promised. But this is a different Jacob. This is 137 year-old Jacob, who knows what His REAL GOD has done for him. Beautiful, isn’t it?

Joseph's Transformation

In the wake of Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers fear he'll exact his revenge, but the favorite son has been transformed as completely as his father. When his brothers fear the seventeen-year-old brat, Joseph answers instead like a man who knows the REAL GOD.

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” **Genesis 50:20**

Our Transformation

We, too, can be transformed from a weak faith (like Jacob) or through our hardships (like Joseph). Just like God was the Main Character in Joseph's story—working behind the scenes in every life event, good or bad—so He is the Main Character in your story and mine.

Try a little exercise with me...

Take a piece of paper and divide it into two columns. Label the left column “Good Things God Has Done,” and label the right column “Hardships God Allowed.” Fill the two columns with events in your life, and try to match the good things that have come from the hardships. Like Joseph, I'm guessing you'll find that many of the hard things will have brought about some good in the long run. It's how our REAL GOD blesses His people.

I'm convinced that one of my greatest sins is neglecting to acknowledge God's work in my life. This simple activity helps us acknowledge that our REAL GOD is active in *every* event of our lives—the fun and happy as well as the challenging and stretching. It. Is. Transforming.

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