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Food for Thought: Lessons from the Life of Joseph

The story of Joseph (the Old Testament Joseph) puts us in touch with one of the most admirable men in the Bible—a man of great integrity, patience, faithfulness, wisdom, and forgiveness. Joseph's story obviously shows us that even when God has plans to use us, it can take many, many years for that plan to come to fruition. It is also clear that being part of God's plan or a work of His devising does not mean we won't suffer or be treated unfairly in life. Joseph suffers emotionally and, no doubt, physically; he ends up in prison after doing the right thing (not the wrong thing); and even after he meets the Pharaoh's Butler and interprets his dream, Joseph remains in prison for two additional years before the Butler remembers him and recommends him to Pharaoh. Joseph's story contains many other lessons as well (more than will fit into this brief discussion), but let's look at some of them:

One of the very first lessons comes right at the story's beginning. It is the simple lesson that it is a bad idea to play favorites. It brings about bad fruit. Jacob has made no secret (to his sons or anyone else) that Joseph is his favorite son (with Benjamin coming in at a close second). This favoritism has been shoved in his other sons' faces for years. What fruit does it bear? It drives men to nearly commit murder. It succeeds in driving them to cast off their brother from the family in a way that would mean he would never be seen again (at least that was their intention at the time), and to tell their father a lie that would cause him great pain. And for the rest of their lives the brothers regret their decision; what they do to Joseph is not a decision that makes them happy. Playing favorites bears bad fruit.

It is also interesting to note that even though Joseph would become a man of great wisdom and integrity, as a teenager, he did something foolish. After he had the prophetic dream indicating that one day his brothers and parents would bow down to him, he lacks the maturity to know that it might be best not to tell them about the dream or at least to begin with a suitable preface (like "I had the craziest dream last night..."). If as great a man as Joseph could be a little foolish and insensitive as a teenager, then there's hope for the rest of us.

Another important element in Joseph's story is that this very skill he lacked as a teenager—looking beyond oneself and instead noticing and thinking about other people and how they feel—is a skill that God develops in Joseph during his years in Egypt. In Potiphar's house and later in prison serving the warden, Joseph is a skilled manager, and that means he had to be not only organized and someone who can think ahead, but he also had to have good people skills. His sufferings probably caused him to develop those skills. He knew what it was like to be a slave or a servant or a prisoner. He had become someone who had developed the ability to notice others, to be sensitive, and to have empathy. When Joseph is sent to prison and there is noticed by the warden and rises to become the warden's second in command, it is clear that Joseph has truly developed these important characteristics. When he sees the Baker and the Cup Bearer the morning after their strange dreams, Joseph notices that something is wrong and cares enough to ask them about it. Because he notices, cares, and asks, they describe their dreams. And that, of course, leads him to be called upon much later to hear and interpret Pharaoh's dreams, which leads to his becoming second in command in all of Egypt. And it is this position, which allows him to implement plans to survive the coming famine—an action which saves all of Egypt and countless others, including his father and brothers and their children. It is clearly because God gives Joseph the correct interpretations of dreams that the country is saved, but it is also because Joseph had learned to notice and care for other people, including prisoners. Without that, he would never have noticed the Butler's troubled spirit or asked him what was wrong and would thus never have been brought before a troubled Pharaoh to interpret his dreams.

Looking back at the beginning of the story, we see another point worth noting. You probably remember that when the rest of Joseph's brothers were minded to kill Joseph, Reuben suggests they throw him in a pit instead (and he secretly plans to come back later to rescue Joseph). While Reuben is gone, the brothers decided to sell Joseph to the passing caravan, so when Reuben comes back to set free Joseph, it is too late—he is already gone. But he definitely gets credit for trying. His part of the story also teaches a lesson. Reuben outwardly looked like he felt exactly the same as his brothers felt about Joseph, but inwardly his thoughts were very different from theirs. Reuben's part in the story is a good reminder that we often do not know what is going on inside others—we can be completely mistaken about other people's thoughts and motives.

Joseph's story also highlights the important theme that people can change for the better. When Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to buy grain during the famine and fail to recognize him (though he recognizes them), Joseph puts them through several tests—not to punish them or wreak revenge, but to find out whether they have changed. Do they still hate him? Are they sorry? And when he overhears them saying things that make it clear that they do greatly regret what they did to him and then they later also show a willingness to suffer to protect Benjamin's life (Judah offered himself to be a substitute for Benjamin, for example), Joseph is so moved that he has to leave the room to weep. He does not leave because he wants to be alone and think of ways to avenge himself. He leaves because he is so moved by the fact that they have changed, and their change of heart makes all the difference. Knowing

that God is always offering people the chance to change (and the help they need to do so) is a part of the good news of the gospel that is beyond price.

--Sally Mahoney (nee McKenney)