

## **I. Introduction**

For those who aren't familiar with the story of Joseph from the Bible, there is another way you may have learned the story. Some know the story of Joseph from the Andrew Lloyd Weber musical "Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." The musical is available on DVD from Netflix if you're interested.

Despite being sold into slavery and ending up in jail, with God's help Joseph made the best of the bad situations he found himself in. To put Joseph into perspective and see where he fits in, the patriarchs of the Hebrews are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Abraham lived about 2,100 BC). Jacob had 12 sons by four different women, and these sons formed the basis for the 12 tribes of Israel. Joseph and Benjamin are the only sons from Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, and they were the last to be born because she had trouble conceiving.

The story of Joseph is recorded in Genesis, before God established the Jewish religion. Joseph lived between 1,915 and 1,805 BC. Even though Joseph wouldn't have had the fuller revelation of God that came later, he did have some knowledge of God. God also worked through him to accomplish his purposes for both the Egyptians and for Jacob's family and their descendants.

## **II. Hostile Brothers**

### **1. Jacob's Error**

Jacob made the mistake of showing obvious favoritism towards Joseph, probably because his mother was Jacob's favorite wife. He even gave Joe a special coat, variously translated as a coat of many colors or a coat with long sleeves. Showing such blatant favoritism wasn't a wise thing for a father to do, and it annoyed the other brothers quite a bit.

### **2. Joseph's Error**

To compound the problem, Joseph would tell his older brothers about the dreams he had, which involved the brothers bowing down to him. These dreams actually came true, as we find out later in the story, but Joseph shouldn't have antagonized his brothers the way he did. Sometimes you have to bite your tongue to keep peace in the family, but it is worth it. If your family relationships aren't good, that dysfunction can spill over into other aspects of your life. These brothers hated him so much that they were ready to kill him.

### **3. The Brothers' Error**

Jacob must have been aware that his other sons weren't too fond of Joseph, so I'm surprised he would send him on this mission to check on them. But he did, and Joseph obeyed, so I guess both of them must not have realized the depth of the hostility that existed. The brothers saw the perfect opportunity to finish him off when he showed up alone far from home.

Reuben, to his credit, stopped them from killing him. Sometimes you have to go against the crowd and stand up for what is right, often at a cost. Reuben did the right thing, but then fell short by allowing Joseph to be sold into slavery, thus bringing terrible grief to his father. They must have known how this would affect their father and Joseph's mother, so what they did was very cruel on a number of levels.

### **III. Joseph in Egypt**

Poor Joseph. Can you imagine being sent off forcibly to a foreign country, knowing you'll never see your family again, plus losing your freedom? Unfortunately that happened to many Africans during the days of the slave trade, and it's even happening today in large numbers. Many women, and even children, are enslaved and sent to foreign countries against their will. In Egypt, the 17 year old Joseph was sold to Potiphar, who was an important Egyptian official.

#### **1. Potiphar's Wife**

The Bible says the God was with him, and he excelled in his work for his master. As a result of his diligent work, Joseph was put in charge of Potiphar's entire household. Mrs. Potiphar was impressed by Joseph as well, and wanted to get to know him better. When he rebuffed her advances, she brought false accusations against him, similar to what happened at Hofstra University recently.

As a result, he ended up in prison even though he had done the right thing. Potiphar, who had trusted Joseph completely, felt betrayed and was enraged by what he was told happened. But poor Joseph had not betrayed his master's trust, and yet he still ended up being jailed.

Unfortunately sometimes there's a cost to doing the right thing. Despite the present cost, it's always better to do what God wants us to do rather than the easy but wrong thing. As it turns out, his stint in prison ended up getting him before Pharaoh.

#### **2. In Prison**

Being the overachiever that he was and determined to make the best of a bad situation, Joseph impressed the warden. Seeing Joseph's initiative and attitude, the warden put him in charge of the other prisoners. When you don't like the situation you're in, remember Joseph's attitude. He made the best of his bad situations, and this helped make them more bearable than they otherwise would have been.

This prison must have been a minimum security prison for white collar crimes, because both the Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker ended up there. We don't know what they did to

offend the Pharaoh, but the jailer put Joseph in charge of them.

After some time had elapsed, both of them had dreams, which Joseph correctly interpreted with the help of God. The cupbearer was released, just as Joseph had predicted from his dream. The poor baker wasn't as fortunate – I wonder what the poor guy did. Joseph asked the freed cupbearer to mention him to the Pharaoh in the hope that he would be released.

### **3. Interprets Pharaoh's Dreams**

Two years later, Pharaoh had some dreams that he wanted interpreted, and the cupbearer *finally* remembered Joseph. Joseph was brought before Pharaoh and he interpreted his dreams. Pharaoh was very impressed, realizing God (or the gods) was with the thirty year old Joseph.

He sprung him from prison, and made him his prime minister, putting him in charge of the whole country, second only to Pharaoh himself. Within hours, God elevated Joseph from the depths of a prison to the heights of power and prestige. After 13 years as either a slave or inmate, God put Joseph into the position that God had intended for him all along.

God will bless us in different ways if we are plugged into God and are obedient to him, because God has a plan for each of us. Although the Egyptians weren't God's Chosen People, God revealed to them what was going to happen so they could get prepared. God is the God of all humanity, and cares about all people. That's why we Christians are commanded to tell others about Jesus – he wants to have a relationship with everybody.

## **IV. With His Brothers**

Under Joseph, Egypt stored its bountiful harvests during the 7 good years in preparation for the 7 lean years that were coming. When the famine struck, only Egypt was prepared, and people came from all over the region to buy grain from them. As we know from the story, Joseph's brothers eventually showed up to buy grain.

Joseph was now about 39 and looked like an Egyptian, so his brothers had no idea that this official was really their little brother all grown up. The Egyptian language was completely different from what the brothers spoke, so Joseph used an interpreter to continue his little charade.

### **1. First Test**

As we know from the story, Joseph wanted to see if his brothers had changed their ways, so he provided a little test for them. He accused them of being spies and put them in jail for three days. Then he made an agreement with them: they could all go home except for one of them, Simeon. He wouldn't be released and they couldn't get any more grain unless they returned with their youngest brother Benjamin.

### **2. Second Test**

In the second test, Joseph had his silver cup put in Benjamin's bag of grain. When it was discovered there by Joseph, he saw that Judah was willing to take the fall for Ben. This showed they were now changed men, and finally he revealed to them that he was indeed their long lost brother.

### **3. Joseph Forgives Repentant Brothers**

When they learned who this harsh Egyptian official really was, they were terrified – understandably so. They figured they were as good as dead, having done what they did to him 22 years earlier. Being a big-shot Egyptian official, Joseph had the power of life and death over them.

But Joseph assured them that it was God's plan for him to be in Egypt so that many lives could be saved. What the brothers meant for evil, God intended for good. That's something we should all remember during difficult times – God can have good come out of any situation.

### **V. Pharaoh's Generous Offer**

Good came out of this for Joseph's entire family. When Pharaoh heard about Joseph being reunited with his brothers, he made the generous offer for them to relocate to Egypt. He would provide for them, and give them some prime pasture land for their flocks to graze.

Often when we do good or have a good name, others will benefit, just as others can suffer as a result of our bad deeds. Joseph's entire family of 70 people benefited from his position in the Egyptian government and his good name with the Pharaoh. The descendants of Jacob lived for 400 years in the land of Goshen near the Nile delta in Egypt.

### **VI. Conclusion**

We often don't have a choice regarding our circumstances, but we do have a choice as to how we will respond to those circumstances. As we've seen, Joseph trusted God and God was with him. With God's help Joseph made the best of bad situations. We can do the same, knowing that God can and will use these situations for good.

If we wallow in pity, simmer with resentment, or otherwise have a bad attitude, God can't use us and we'll be even more miserable. I'm not trivializing some of the terrible situations we can find ourselves in. But I am saying that we can respond to them in ways that will make them more bearable, as Joseph did, with God's help. In these uncertain times, let us stay close to God, choose to be dependent on God, and be spiritually and emotionally ready for what might come. God won't let us down, but will help us through the tough times, giving us peace and comfort like we've never seen before.

Let me end with this brief story of how somebody dealt with a heartbreaking situation and how good came out of it:

Years ago, Lloyd John Ogilvie, the newly appointed U.S. Senate Chaplain at the time, wrote that the previous year had been the most difficult one of his life. His wife had undergone five major surgeries, radiation treatment, and chemotherapy. Several key staff had moved on to other assignments, which added pressure and uncertainty to Ogilvie's work. Problems which he could have tackled with gusto under normal circumstances seemed to loom in all directions. Discouragement lurked around every corner. Prayer was no longer a contemplative luxury, but the only way to survive. He said:

“My own intercessions were multiplied by the prayers of others. Friendships were deepened as I was forced to allow people to assure me with words I had preached for years. No day went by without a conversation, letter or phone call giving me love and hope. The greatest discovery is that I can have joy when I don't feel like it.” (Quoted in David Walls, *Finding God in the Dark* [Victor Books, 1993])