

## Genesis 37 The Extraordinary Story of Joseph

### Introduction

As a young minister beginning work as a school chaplain around twenty years ago it quickly became apparent that many Bible stories and characters were unfamiliar to most of the children in the classes I sought to teach some RE lessons. It was not all a disadvantage. You could tell the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) without ‘everyone’ knowing the ending –a sheer impossibility in church or Sunday School! Yet of the handful of biblical characters that the majority of children had heard of one of them was the main character of this series of sermons. The reason for this is that Joseph was the subject of a musical produced by Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice. From its earliest forms in the late 1960s it appeared in its final form in the West End of London in 1973 and became a great success in the USA on Broadway in 1982. The simple story format sticking reasonably close to the biblical narrative but producing all the show as songs made it a popular favourite for school productions and it was also performed in churches –the first being in Lloyd-Webber’s parents’ church –Methodist Central Hall in London.

Joseph’s early life was one of privilege in a wealthy Jewish home. Until his late teenage years he was sheltered from the challenges most people of that age had to face in everyday living. Through circumstances partly of his own making he lost these original entitlements and endured some incredibly tough years as a slave, prior to becoming the Vizier (Prime Minister) of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. In simple terms it is a riches to rags to riches again life story. However, this teenager whose earlier years were damaged by the poor parenting of his dad, who had made him the obvious favourite at the expense of his brothers, overcame this setback and showed such resilience in hard times that his example has been an inspiration to many people over the centuries. Throughout it all his faith in God matured and deepened. In his 110 years of life covered in fourteen chapters of Genesis there is actually more material recorded in this book than concerning Abraham the father of the nation. Yet, by contrast, in the New Testament, Abraham is mentioned on many occasions and in some key passages whereas Joseph is only referred to four times. In John 4:5 –Jacob gave Joseph a plot of land near Sychar in Samaria; *So [Jesus] came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.* Acts 7:9-16: Joseph’s life is mentioned in Stephen’s recital of Jewish history: *Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him<sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.<sup>11</sup> Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food.<sup>12</sup> When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit.<sup>13</sup> On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family.<sup>14</sup> After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all.<sup>15</sup> Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died.<sup>16</sup> Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money. Then in Hebrews 11:21-22: *By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.<sup>22</sup> By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.* where Joseph is mentioned as one of the heroes of faith in the Old Testament; last of all in Revelation 7:8 there is a reference to the tribe of Joseph. In summary, his was an extraordinary influence and example in his lifetime, but unlike with Abraham there were no covenant promises that affected future Jewish and Christian followers of Jesus, with the exception of the specific generation of Jews who left Egypt at the Exodus in the time of Moses. What can we learn from the life of Joseph?*

### 1. Joseph –a pointer to Jesus

Many Evangelical Bible commentators have pointed to Joseph as a type of Jesus, even though the Bible nowhere explicitly makes this kind of claim; they have viewed his life as revealing a remarkable number of resemblances to the life of Jesus on earth. Although it is right to be cautious about making typological statements, they can help illustrate biblical truths and enable us to grasp principles that might be less powerful in our minds and hearts if only understood in an abstract form. A good example of this is where Abraham is seen as a type of God the Father in the extraordinary story in Genesis 22. Genesis 22:1-2 states: *Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied.*<sup>2</sup> *Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain that I will show you.'* In the Septuagint Greek translation, begun in the third century BC uses the same words as are used in John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* God did not ask Abraham to do what He would not be willing to do Himself in practice approximately 2,000 years later. In the same vein Bible commentators have seen parallels in the story and conduct of Joseph –in some respects- to the earthly life of Jesus. Both were seen as the beloved son of the Father. Both brought delight to their Father by their conduct; both were required to be the go-between person, between their Father and the other brothers. Joseph suffered because his brothers did not grasp his earthly mission; Jesus was crucified because His Jewish brothers did not acknowledge His messianic calling. Both were betrayed and sold for twenty pieces of silver, but both could not have fulfilled the calling God the Father had for them without that betrayal. Joseph became in time the saviour of the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa rescuing them from famine and the potential loss of many lives; Jesus rescues us from our sins and the potential eternal consequences of failing to put our faith and trust in Him. If it had not been for the brother's desire to kill Joseph his destiny could never have been accomplished. Likewise, had not Caiaphas (John 11:49-53) prophesied and plotted against Jesus, His atoning sacrifice could not have happened in the way it did: <sup>49</sup> *Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, 'You know nothing at all!'* <sup>50</sup> *You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.* <sup>51</sup> *He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation,* <sup>52</sup> *and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.* <sup>53</sup> *So from that day on they plotted to take his life.* God the Father would overrule for good the evil plans of the High Priest. In prison in Egypt it appeared that Joseph's life was over with only an early and speedy death sparing him years of misery and ruin. He was innocent of the charges on which he had been convicted after the travesty of a trial and condemned to be confined with two convicted criminals. Our Lord's trial before Pilate was anything but fair and just; His death on the cross, hanging between two guilty men, appeared to be the end of His work on earth. Yet like Joseph His words would bring hope to one man who sought assurances of his future, but also in effect confirming the fate of the other whose death was without any hope. *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at Him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'*<sup>40</sup> *But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence?'* <sup>41</sup> *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.* <sup>42</sup> *Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'* <sup>43</sup> *Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise'* (Luke 23:39-43). The baker would die and the cupbearer would be spared (Genesis 40:21-22). To the amazed Joseph the carpenter in Nazareth the Angel Gabriel would declare of the baby in Mary's womb: *you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.* Jesus repeatedly told His hearers: *Most assuredly I tell you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life* (John 5:24). Joseph had an absolute confidence that God's hand was on his life and that

out of the deepest darkness God's light would shine and His purposes would be fulfilled. He told his fearful brothers after the death of their father Jacob these words 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.* Jesus on the cross would shout *finished* (John 19:30), because the work of atonement was accomplished. God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. The challenge to us, here though is this, what kind of example am I setting as a follower of Jesus? Paul could urge the Corinthians in I Corinthians 11:1: *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.* He had already in the same letter written: *Therefore I urge you to imitate me* (I Corinthians 4:16). Paul had also spoken on this theme to the Greek Christians living in Thessalonica: *So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord* (I Thessalonians 1:6 NLV). How are we following Jesus today and how are we influencing other people?

## **2. Joseph- an example for Christians**

Genesis as a book provides models for us of faith being exercised in practical settings. In line with the rest of the Old Testament there are good and bad examples of behavioural choices by those professing to follow the God of Israel. After a reference to some examples of inappropriate behaviour the apostle Paul made this important point in I Corinthians 10:6: *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.* Therefore, we have a clear justification in this principle to seek to apply the lessons learned from the lives of biblical characters to our own lives today. Joseph's triumph was a triumph of faith. It follows on from other earlier figures who in some respect illustrate the function of faith in the development of the spiritual life of a believer. There are eight main people in Genesis who illustrate this point. First of all: **Adam** who was the first to believe in God and have a relationship with Him. Adam was justified by faith through His trust in God and even though he and Eve fell into sin, the blood of animals was shed to provide a covering for them. He accepted God's simple assertion of the future saving work of the Messiah in Genesis 3:15 that evil would not ultimately triumph. *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel.* This is the first biblical lesson about the nature of faith. **Abel**, who offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain (Hebrews 11:4) illustrated the basis of our faith that blood had to be shed to pay the penalty of our sins, pointing forward to that ultimate perfect sufficient sacrifice of Jesus that would save us for all eternity. Hebrews 10:11-14: *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.* <sup>12</sup> *But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God,* <sup>13</sup> *and since that time He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool.* <sup>14</sup> *For by one sacrifice He has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.* **Enoch**, the man who modelled in daily life God's holy and righteous standards, illustrated for us the walk of faith –what it means to follow the Lord in an age when hardly anyone else was doing so (Genesis 5:21-24). **Noah**, his better-known descendant who built an ark to save the lives of eight people and representative animals from God's creation illustrated the perseverance of faith, by keeping on building a giant boat for around 120 years with the mockery of other people ringing in his ears. Hebrews 11:7 stated: *By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.* **Abraham**, the greatest example of a person of faith in Genesis showed the obedience of faith even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his only son from his marriage to Sarah should God require such an act (Genesis 22:1-18). **Isaac**, by then a young adult, possibly physically stronger than his father through the power of faith resisted the natural human desire to oppose what his father had indicated was the will of God. Did the

lesson learned that day stand him in good stead when as an elderly man after the awful deceit by Jacob on his now blind father, affirmed that the blessing he had invoked on his younger son still stood. (Genesis 27:33: *Isaac trembled violently and said, 'Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him – and indeed he will be blessed!'*). **Jacob** the next patriarch who lived such a wayward life was eventually to surrender his life to God and illustrate the discipline of faith. God never gave up on this foolish man and finally at Peniel (Genesis 32:26) Jacob cries out: *I will not let you go unless you bless me.* There he received God's blessing. His own son **Joseph** illustrates for us the triumph of faith as he would rise from slavery to rule over Egypt. Genesis 41:41-43 states: *So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.'* <sup>42</sup> *Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain round his neck.* <sup>43</sup> *He made him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, 'Make way!'* Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. He did not compromise his principles and stood firm even though it might have cost him not only his liberty but also his life. From Joseph we can learn how:

To overcome envy

To face adversity

To resist illicit sexual advances

To plan for the future

To forgive those who wrong us

To dispel doubts about forgiveness

To have faith in God's promises

To recognise the sovereignty of God, even in the wrongs done to us by others [These points are made in J.M. Boice, *Genesis*, Vol.3, pp. 859-861 & L.B. Flynn, *Joseph: God's Man In Egypt*, pp.5-6;].

Despite his imperfections, Joseph in many respects is an example for us as Christians.

### **3. Joseph – a model of providence**

Paul in Romans 8:28-30 wrote: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.* <sup>29</sup> *For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.* <sup>30</sup> *And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified.* This glorious chain of the redemptive purposes of God sets out for us the biblical doctrine of the providence of God. There is no human story in the Bible that illustrates this point more clearly than the life of Joseph. It could never have been Joseph's ambition to be Prime Minister of Egypt. He could never have known about the future devastating flooding in the Nile Valley for seven horrendous years that could have been a total catastrophe for the entire region. He may not even have known that the dynasty in Egypt at the time was an African one, whose ethnic roots were in Sudan or Ethiopia and whose attitude with respect to issues of racial tolerance were highly commendable. By contrast, a few hundred years later in the time of Moses a new native dynasty arose from the north of Egypt that promoted serious racial intolerance and would never have contemplated giving the role of Vizier to an outsider no matter how desire the social or economic circumstances had become. When in the Egyptian prison what was the likelihood of being in a cell with a man who could eventually recommend him to the Pharaoh? There are so many significant incidents in his life that any narrative that suggests luck or chance was the key factor in his life seems inadequate. His own declaration, albeit with the wisdom of hindsight, seems to point to this higher purpose. In Genesis 50:20 Joseph told his brothers: *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.* Paul reminded the Corinthians Church in his first letter of how so often God accomplishes His greatest works on earth through individuals of the humblest of

backgrounds. *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.* <sup>27</sup> *But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.* <sup>28</sup> *God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are,* <sup>29</sup> *so that no one may boast before Him.* <sup>30</sup> *It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.* <sup>31</sup> *Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.’* (I Corinthians 1:26-31). How many examples spring to your mind? Some that come easily to my mind as I am writing this message include: William Quarrier, the boy brought up in deepest poverty who as a barefooted hungry eight-year old on the streets of Glasgow vowed to change the plight of desperate children on the streets of our major cities if God granted him the opportunity. He did and the Quarrier’s Village at Bridge of Weir was a testimony to the success of His calling. Gladys Aylward, the household maid rejected by a series of British missionary societies as unqualified, who did an extraordinary work for God in China in the last century. Mary Slessor, the factory girl from our own city of Dundee and proudly commemorated on Scottish ten pound notes, who accomplished so much amongst the cannibals of Western Nigeria. Michael Faraday, a humble laboratory assistant who rose to become one of the greatest scientists ever raised up in our land...How many more stories could be added here?

What about your testimony and mine? Are there not apparent coincidences that are more likely to be God’s hand of providence? In 1995 less than three years into pastoral ministry in my first church I had an unexpected phone call from the Roman Catholic Vicar Episcopal for Education here in Scotland. I cannot recall the man’s name. I know for a fact that he had rung the wrong clergyman in our town, but cutting a longer story short he invited me to allow my name to go forward for possible appointment as the third Church representative on North Lanarkshire Education Committee. It was a strongly contested position with usually up to half-a-dozen candidates putting their names forward for election by the Councillors who voted on the merits of the respective applicants for the position. In the course of our fairly lengthy conversation I realised that though inexperienced I could possibly serve in this capacity. In due course I was nominated and seconded by the local representatives of the two largest Churches in Scotland, had the unanimous backing of my local inter-Church fraternal and the formal written support of the Baptist Union of Scotland. Some years later I learned that the decision that first election was keenly contested but my candidacy was successful and I had the honour of twice being re-elected to serve until 2007 when I moved to this church. There were other aspects of that opportunity that were providential, but seeing God’s hand at work in that situation was most encouraging. Each of us has experienced our own journey of faith and seen situations where God has worked in ways we had not expected that have been for our good and sometimes also for the benefit of other people; as we go through the different stages of the life of this extraordinary Jewish man may God encourage us also to see His hand at work in our lives as well, Amen.