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JOSEPH AND HIS FAMILY

One of the very best Bible stories for studying lots of different ways life can form and re-form is the life of Joseph. It's one of the most detailed stories in the Bible, spanning nearly half the book of Genesis. In this study we will look at the long list of ways in which Joseph's life changed around him, sometimes by his own choice, but often not. How did Joseph develop his sense and then maintain it through all his adversity?

FIRST: PRAYER

Always begin with prayer. Ask God to bless your study and discussion, and to help each of you to learn important ways you, too, can develop and maintain your sense of identity as a child of God, no matter what happens in or around you.

PREPARATION

If you have access either to the book *Patriarchs and Prophets*, or to the online version you can find at whiteestate.org, read about Joseph and his family on pages 208-217. Here are some important statements from those pages if you can't read the whole section:

[On his way to Egypt, Joseph] "Bitterly he wept at thought of that loving father in his loneliness and affliction. Again the scene at Dothan came up before him. He saw his angry brothers and felt their fierce glances bent upon him. The stinging, insulting words that had met his agonized entreaties were ringing in his ears. With a trembling heart he looked forward to the future. What a change in situation--from the tenderly cherished son to the despised and helpless slave! Alone and friendless, what would be his lot in the strange land to which he was going? For a time Joseph gave himself up to uncontrolled grief and terror.

But, in the providence of God, even this experience was to be a blessing to him. He had learned in a few hours that which years might not otherwise have taught him. His father, strong and tender as his love had been, had done him wrong by his partiality and indulgence.

This unwise preference had angered his brothers and provoked them to the cruel deed that had separated him from his home. Its effects were manifest also in his own character. Faults had been encouraged that were now to be corrected. He was becoming self-sufficient and exacting. Accustomed to the tenderness of his father's care, he felt that he was unprepared to cope with the difficulties before him, in the bitter, uncared-for life of a stranger and a slave.

Then his thoughts turned to his father's God. In his childhood he had been taught to love and fear Him. Often in his father's tent he had listened to the story of the vision that Jacob saw as he fled from his home an exile and a fugitive. He had been told of the Lord's promises to Jacob, and how they had been fulfilled--how, in the hour of need, the angels of God had come to instruct, comfort, and protect him. And he had learned of the love of God in providing for men a Redeemer. Now all these precious lessons came vividly before him. Joseph believed that the God of his fathers would be his God. He then and there gave himself fully to the Lord, and he prayed that the Keeper of Israel would be with him in the land of his exile."

READING ONE: JOSEPH'S BOYHOOD

Genesis 29:15-30

This is the background against which Joseph's life began.

Spend a few moments discussing the way you think the women felt in this situation.

1. Is plural marriage God's plan as shown in the Garden of Eden?
2. Did they have any choice over their destiny?
3. How do you think Jacob felt?
4. Was there anything he could have done to change things?
5. Do you think this is partly a consequence of the fact that Jacob himself had been deceitful in his youth?

The next chapter, Genesis 30, gives the main circumstances into which Joseph was born.

1. Read verses 1 and 2, scan the next section, and then read verses 22-24.
2. How many more women does Jacob take as wives?
3. What kinds of issues can you see developing in this complicated family?

Today we sometimes use the term “blended families” to speak of families which have been shaped by remarriage after a spouse is lost to death or divorce. Perhaps you or someone you know has a blended or complicated family. Perhaps you move from one parent to another, or you live with one and never see the other. You may have half- or step-siblings.

What are some of the difficulties you have to face? (People may share if they wish, but don’t have to, especially not things that are too personal. You can discuss general issues without getting into family matters.)

Gen. 35:16-18

1. What happens here? Once again, through no choice or action of his own, Joseph’s life took a different shape. Did you ever wonder who took care of the two brothers? One particular wife? All of them? We don’t know. Certainly one of them must have fed the baby.
2. The details of Joseph’s life fill chapters 37 all the way to 50, the end of Genesis. His life is formed and re-formed over and over again, but now he is old enough to make choices that will help or hinder him.

Gen. 37:2-4

1. What are the issues that are building up in Joseph’s family?
2. What advice would you give if you could travel back in time and talk to this family?

READING TWO

Gen. 37:5-11

1. Do you think Joseph is at all to blame in this situation? Why or why not?
2. What would you do differently?
3. Do you know any stories of families today that have had issues similar to this?
4. Read the rest of the chapter.
5. Do you live where people travel around pasturing animals? Today it might be easier to find them—or it might not. How would you go about finding some of your relatives if they were out in the country and you didn’t know exactly where?

6. What has been clearly happening in the hearts of Joseph's brothers?
7. Make a list of the different brothers' suggestions. Were some more compassionate than others? Keep this list to refer to during the conclusion of this study.
8. How would you feel if you were Joseph, lying in the pit? If it were your own family who put you there? What would you do?
9. How do you think Joseph felt as he was on his way to slavery?
At this point, Joseph has a very serious choice to make. Will he continue to be the "tenderly cherished son" who has been rather spoiled? Will he fight his fate and make more trouble for himself? He could have, you know.

List some unwise choices Joseph could have made at this point, ones that perhaps you would be tempted to make in the same situation. Or will he make his father's God his God and choose to grow up and be faithful, no matter what? We can know what choice Joseph made by what happens to him later.

Scan Genesis 39. This shows Joseph's life going up and down like a hilly road.

1. Make a list of the bad, then good, then bad things that happen.
2. What is the one constant in this story? See verses 2-5 and 23 for a hint.
3. How does this tell us what choice Joseph made while he was led away to slavery?

READING THREE

Scan Genesis 40.

1. What happens to Joseph in this chapter?
2. Which verse shows something that gives him hope of getting out of prison?
3. Which verse shows that he won't get out after all?
4. How long does it take? (41:1)
5. Do you think it's possible that in heaven we will learn that many more lives were blessed by Joseph's faithful presence in that prison than we hear about in the Bible story?

Genesis 41:1-16

Does this story sound familiar? What other Bible character have we studied that interpreted a king's dream? The dreams are very different, but each character says basically the same thing to the king.

1. *Read verse 16.* What does Joseph tell Pharaoh?
2. *Scan verses 25-36.* What advice does Joseph give?
3. *Read verses 37-45.* At last, the biggest transformation came into Joseph's life. He became prime minister of Egypt and during the famine that followed, the lives of millions, in several countries, were in his hand. What are the factors that had been active in Joseph's life all along, through everything, that made God able to trust him with such responsibility?

What are the choices you can make, no matter how complicated your family or your circumstances, that will put you in the path of the blessings God has planned for you?

CONCLUSION

The last nine chapters of Genesis tell the story of the famine, of Joseph and his brothers and of their eventual reunion. We can't look at the whole story today, but we can review the highlights. If there is someone in your group who can briefly tell the story, let him or her do so. If not, you can look at the outline here.

1. Gen. 42: Who came to Egypt and why? Who did not come along with the others and why? How did Joseph treat them?
2. Gen. 43: What is different about this trip? How does Joseph treat them? Why do you think he cries in verse 30?
3. Gen. 44: Why is it Benjamin Joseph chooses to accuse? What do you think he is trying to learn about his older brothers? Which brother pleads the hardest for Benjamin and why do you think he did this?
4. Gen. 45: How does Joseph react this time? Why?
5. Read verses 4-15. Now go to chapter 50 and read verses 15-21. What do you learn about Joseph's character and about how his brothers have developed in all these years?
6. What can you do to be such a compassionate and forgiving person?
7. Do you think Joseph would have been like this if he had stayed at home? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

A tableau is a group of people frozen into position like a living picture. Sometimes it is made by looking at a picture of a group of people, choosing people to play each person in the picture, then getting into position. Today, someone who is not in the scene can take a picture once the tableau is complete.

Another way to make a tableau is just to invent the scene and create it. Choose one to three scenes from Joseph's life, choose people to play each part, and create a tableau. (Example: a scene of one or more brothers receiving money from one or more Midianite traders, while one ties Joseph's hands. The facial expressions are important. The brothers should look angry, the traders should look cruel, and Joseph should look frightened and despairing.) Once you have the scene the way you want it, freeze and have some pictures taken. You could do several and hang them in your church or school in chronological order as a way of telling the story of Joseph.

CLOSING PRAYER

Praise God for taking such faithful care of Joseph. Be specific in asking Him to bless each person and help them to develop a clear idea of who they are in Christ and maintain that connection throughout all the complicated circumstances of life.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, body + heart + mind = one living soul.

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: Think about the story of Joseph. What elements of his life can you connect with, that may help you in your own life? Even if you don't have step-siblings or half-siblings, there may be complicated relationships you can prayerfully write about in your prayer journal and ask God for advice on how to build closeness and compassion into them.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Jacob was a loving man. He rather comes across, though, as a weak man who gave in to pressure from others. What are some things he did right, things you would like to emulate? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week..

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Joseph had to have a strong mind in order to take control of the harvests for those seven good years and save enough for the lean years. What are some ways you can use your intelligence to help others this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* Clearly, Joseph was a physically healthy and strong person. Make a list of the ways we can tell this from the Bible story (walking miles seeking his brothers, working as a slave, etc.) What are some things you do that keep you strong and fit?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* Mrs. White says that Joseph “gave himself fully to the Lord.” You can see that his body, mind, and heart worked together. He even loved his brothers so much he wept over them when he met them, even though they had sold him! How can you be like that? Can you find a promise or promises that will help you?

DAY SIX: As you think about your family, community, and church, are there complicated elements? Do you need God’s help dealing with a complex family structure? Or do you know someone who is in that situation and could use a friend? Ask God how you may be of service.

DAY SEVEN: Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned.

- Write a poem or song or story.
- Create a poster.
- Write a letter.
- Paint or draw a picture.
- Make a sign.
- Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings.
- Build something.
- Create a podcast or blog post or Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!