

THE HOSTAGE WHO RULED EGYPT

Scripture Reading: Genesis 39:1-6, *Living Bible*

“Joseph. Joseph! Come here. I have something for you.” Jacob’s bearded face betrayed a broad grin as he saw this remarkably handsome son of his old age coming toward him. As wrong as it was, Jacob could not help the fact that he loved this teenage son more than all of his other sons.

After all this was Rachel’s first-born. Rachel was the wife he had truly loved, the one for whom he had worked 14 years. Now that Rachel was dead, Jacob’s heart was more closely knit to Joseph than ever.

“Try this on for size, Joseph.” “Father, what is this? This is a beautiful coat.” [We don’t know for certain that it was a coat of “Many colors” but we do know that it was the kind of coat worn only by people of distinction and authority.] “You must have made a mistake, Father, I shouldn’t be wearing a coat like this.” “Oh yes, I made it just for you.”

The moment young Joseph put on that coat, he sealed his fate. It was the last display of favoritism Jacob would ever show to Joseph. His other sons would see to that. Jacob was already in trouble. The boys whom he had raised were far from being angelic. They had learned how to vent the rage and hostility that come from a polygamous situation. Jacob had known much grief because of these boys. In addition to that, he had this one son who was extremely handsome and who had outstanding qualities. Joseph had told his brothers (who already despised him) that some day they were going to bow down and worship him, because he had had a dream that revealed that to him. The Bible also tells us that Joseph had brought an ill report about his older brothers to their father. To put it mildly, there was little love lost among these brothers.

Jacob should have been smarter than this, but he decided to give Joseph a special coat, in spite of all this existing friction. This tended to signal to the brothers that their father might be considering bypassing the oldest son who should receive the birthright and give it to Joseph. (After all Jacob was not the older son in his family but he received the birthright.)

Joseph was different. Not only was he handsome of face and figure, as the Bible says, but he had a disposition and personality to match his looks. He was kind, patient, cheerful, thoughtful, outgoing, well organized. People instinctively responded to him (as evidenced by his later contacts with individuals in Egypt.) A remarkable young man of only 17. Whether he was born that way and his father loved him because of it or whether he became that way because his father loved him, is difficult to tell.

The brothers did have a problem. Maybe Joseph was superior. It is possible for your kid brother to be superior, but like all older brothers they regarded him as a little twerp, a spoiled brat. It is true that he had become vain. His father had indulged and spoiled him. It is too easy for those of us who are older in the family to forget that gifts can be dispensed to anybody, the youngest or the oldest in the family.

There are some notable examples in the Bible of younger brothers in the family who took over. Can you imagine David’s older brothers’ chagrin when Samuel anointed this little boy coming in from the fields? Perhaps those of us who are older brothers and sisters in the church should not underestimate that kid brother or sister.

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There will always be problems in families where one child is especially gifted, particularly if it is one of the younger children. But those of us who are members of a family where one child seems to get the larger portion of the gifts, the abilities, the looks, ought to learn not to resent that so much as to admire it, to attach ourselves to it and profit from it. We don't have to be quarreling with a David; we can become a Jonathan to a David. We can become an Andrew to a Peter, or a Barnabas to a Paul.

It was customary when you had large flocks to take them grazing wherever you could find good pasture, and it was common to graze as far as 100 miles from home if that were necessary. Jacob's sons, who were responsible for the flocks, decided that they had to take the herds to Shechem and they were gone for a long time. Jacob had not heard from them and he became worried. Since this was after the coat incident, it is possible that the sons deliberately did not contact their father. Because Shechem was the place where his sons had been involved in an act of violence, Jacob was especially concerned. He decided to send Joseph to find out what had happened to his brothers.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem he was informed that the brothers had moved on to Dothan, about 15 miles further away. He finally caught up with them. When Joseph's brothers saw him coming, they recognized who it was long before he got close to the camp. All of the rage and the anger they had felt over the years because of Joseph's special treatment came out, and they conspired to kill him. They realized that they couldn't just beat Joseph up or push him around a bit to teach him a lesson, because Joseph would go back and tell Jacob and then they would be punished. If they were going to do anything to Joseph, they had to go all the way, so they decided to kill him.

Obviously Jacob wouldn't have sent Joseph to find his brothers if he had realized how angry his other sons were. Apparently they had concealed their frustration fairly well. When Joseph arrived, they seized him. However, Reuben persuaded them not to kill him. They put him into a pit, and Reuben planned to come back later and release Joseph when the other brothers weren't around.

Before Reuben could return, however, the brothers saw some traders passing by on their way to Egypt and decided to solve their problem by selling Joseph to them as a slave. They took him up and sold him for 20 pieces of silver. They tore his coat—the symbol of his special treatment—and dipped parts of it in blood and returned to their father to tell him that Joseph had been attacked and killed by a wild beast.

Joseph, of course, was filled with terror. He knew what it meant to be a slave, for being a slave in Egypt in those days was a fate worse than death. Joseph begged, cried and pleaded with his brothers not to sell him but they would not listen.

Jacob went berserk with grief when he heard the tale brought by the older brothers. His grief was so deep and pronounced that it did not pass for many months. His sons were shocked at the extent of their father's pain over what had happened. They kept the secret within themselves for almost an entire lifetime.

As the caravan wound its way south toward Egypt, Joseph could look off into the distance and see the mountains and hills around his home. He tells himself that he will never again see his home or his father's face. Joseph—the spoiled brat—breaks down, the dust swirling through his tears. He cries and he moans. After he has gotten rid of this agony, he begins to think about his father's God.

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The research that is going on now concerning the psychology of hostages is very interesting. There are apparently two ways to react. Most people carry scars for years from their experiences as captives. They become passive. They tend to identify with their captors and even to adapt their captors' thinking. Some people come out of captivity supporting the cause of the people who took them prisoner. (Patty Hearst is one good example.)

Others, like the ambassador of the United States who was captured in a South American country, come to see good in the experience. He said, "I would never have chosen to have had this experience, but in a way I'm grateful that it happened to me. It's changed me for the better. My values have shifted. I'm much more contemplative and introspective. I feel I'm much more humane and patient. I'm not in a hurry to see things done the way I used to be, because you can't be in a hurry when you are being held a hostage." He feels his skills as a negotiator with people who are very hostile have gone up dramatically because of his experience.

Apparently Joseph decided to take hold of the situation and not to capitulate. He did not become passive. He did not identify with his captors. The thing that made the difference was the covenant his father and his family had made with God. He believed that no matter what happened, God would be with him and care for him. Joseph decided to make the best of a very bad situation. And the Bible says that the "Lord was with Joseph."

When Joseph arrived in Egypt Potiphar purchased him. Potiphar was one of Pharaoh's officials and a wealthy man. Joseph was not cut off in that home from educational opportunities. He learned, he studied, he read, he came to know Egyptian culture, science and religion. In this environment, which was not ideal for a Jewish young man, Joseph was able to adapt. He must have learned some things about himself. He must have come to realize that he was a brat, that his brothers had a right to be angry with him, even though that couldn't excuse their behavior toward him.

He was no longer the favorite son. He was a slave. He would have to prove himself. The scripture reading tells us that Joseph worked hard and was a very capable manager and Potiphar eventually turned over all of the affairs of his household to Joseph. He was exceptional. It wasn't a mistake that Jacob had made.

The *Anchor Bible* translation of the following verses is very interesting. He was managing the whole of Potiphar's property and Potiphar was becoming even more wealthy:

Joseph was handsome of figure and features. After some time, his master's wife fixed her eye on Joseph, and said, "Sleep with me." He refused. "Look," he told his master's wife, "with me here my master gives no thought to anything in this house, having entrusted to me all his possessions. He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld from me nothing except yourself, for you are his wife. How then could I commit so great a wrong, to stand condemned before God?" And much as she cajoled him day after day, he would not agree to lie down beside her or stay with her. (Genesis 39:6-10)

It's one thing to be tempted once with a shocking proposal and to recoil in horror and say no. It's another thing to have it as available as the atmosphere you breathe. Joseph was in the prime of

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manhood with all of the normal passions of maleness and here was an experienced, alluring, seductive, aggressive woman regaling Joseph with promises of how much she is going to do for him if he will just cooperate.

Joseph might have been tempted to rationalize that she could have procured his freedom and allowed him to return to his home. But nothing would budge Joseph. One day she lost control and grabbed Joseph when they were alone in the house. Joseph ran away, leaving his coat behind. Furious at being rejected, Potiphar's wife screamed so the servants could hear her and she accused Joseph of rape.

Joseph was put in jail. That was a surprise in itself because Egyptian law was very clear that when slaves overstepped their boundaries they were killed. It would have been very easy for Joseph to have received a death sentence.

Ellen White makes a very interesting suggestion, which some scholars have also thought must have happened: Potiphar did not believe his wife's story. He couldn't humiliate his wife by doing nothing, so he does the humane thing: he puts Joseph in jail and hopes by this act to avoid shedding innocent blood and at the same time preserve his wife's honor.

Joseph was indeed a remarkable man. It would have been so easy to give in to Potiphar's wife, but the outside pressure was not as strong as Joseph's inside braces. He must have had steel going up his moral spine. Joseph was moral; he was responsible. He could not be unfair to Potiphar in this way.

The main thing that comes through is that Joseph could not be unfaithful to God. That was the key. There has to be ultimate truth, ultimate purity, ultimate righteousness to which one is attached, or else the temptations of life are just too much in many circumstances. If there isn't a God and if we don't have principles, why shouldn't we exploit one another? Why shouldn't we manipulate one another as if we were pawns on a chessboard? Why not step on other people to get to the top? Why not seize the opportunities?

One man I respect told me that he is faithful to his wife primarily because of his love for God. That's not an insult to his wife; he is simply saying, "I love my wife. We have a good marriage. What really undergirds everything is the fact that I have a relationship with God that I cannot compromise."

So it was with Joseph. He must have known that lust is a destructive passion. It makes people callous, brutal and cynical. People become addicted to promiscuity, to shallow relationships, to superficiality. They won't let other people get close to them. They use their sexuality as a defense, not as a means of sharing. Love gives, focuses, shares, wants depth.

Joseph, trying to be good, trying to be faithful to his master and to his God, gets an ironic kick in the head. He is punished for not committing the crime he is accused of committing. If there were ever a point at which Joseph should say to Yahweh, "I am throwing in the towel. Serving you is useless. Just when I get to the point where things are looking good and I'm adjusting to Egypt, I'm running Potiphar's household, and I've got major responsibilities, you let this happen to me."

Joseph didn't say that. In fact there isn't even a trace of bitterness or cynicism in Joseph. Instead he goes down to the prison and eventually ends up managing the prison. The chief prison keeper was so

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impressed with his abilities, honesty and trustworthiness that he makes him the chief over all of the other prisoners.

The Lord was with Joseph and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. We can see how honesty, caring, trustworthiness, and being thoughtful and intelligent are rewarded sooner or later. Even if Joseph had been killed, it would still have made no difference. One of the things that the writer of this story is trying to tell us is that circumstances do not ultimately matter. Setbacks don't ultimately matter. Unjust treatment doesn't ultimately matter! What matters ultimately is what is happening inside. The Lord was with Joseph. That is what matters.

Joseph had been sold into slavery. He had been cut off from his family. He was lied about and almost lost his life. The Scripture puts a big word in—BUT. “But the Lord was with Joseph.” That's the Old Testament version of Paul's statement, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” “But the Lord was with Joseph.”

Have you been treated unfairly? Have people lied about you? Has death or separation cut you off from your family and your loved ones? Have you been sold into the slavery of sin? It doesn't ultimately matter. Remember the BUT in the story of Joseph.

When he was picked up by the traders, the Bible says, “But the Lord was with Joseph.” When he was in prison because of the lies of Potiphar's wife, the Bible says again, “But the Lord was with Joseph.”

Brethren and Sisters, remember that the Lord is with us.