

Lesson 7: Genesis 36-50 Joseph and Judah

Introduction

There are twelve sons. Neither Abraham nor Isaac were that fruitful. With Jacob we can begin to imagine descendants numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. There are twelve sons. But we have this problem. God has made a promise that the nations will be blessed through Abraham's descendants. Abraham could ask the question, "If the promise depends on me, how do I know that I will continue to be acceptable to you O Lord?" God's answer in Genesis 15, "Lay down over there Abraham. I will walk through the covenant animals. I will take the curse for your covenant unfaithfulness. I will die as a substitute for your sin so that you will always be acceptable to me, declared righteous not by your works but by faith."

Okay. Abraham had faith. He trusted God for his own righteousness. But the promise also depends on children like Esau who never seems to have trusted in the Lord at all and Jacob who showed a desire for the promised blessing but struggled through most of his life unable to yield to God. How is this promise going to work when it constantly relies on a new generation that first has to come to faith in God and then has to learn how to live for God? Involving this human family has placed the promise on pretty shaky ground. We have got to wonder how the twelve sons are going to turn out.

Genesis chapter 37 begins with these words, "Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan. These are the records of the generations of Jacob." The genealogy statement "these are the generations of Jacob" indicates that we are moving on to the next generation. Rather than focus on all twelve sons, we get the story of one son, Joseph. His story gives us an example walk with God, while also communicating significant theological realities, about God, man, and the mission. I am going to spend most of this lesson doing an overview of the narrative. I love the narrative of Joseph. And I am going to conclude with some key theological highlights.

Joseph the Pesky Brother (37)

As we have already seen before, we see a sin pattern picked up from father by the son. Just as Isaac favored Esau, we are told in 37:3, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic." Jacob, also called Israel ever since his wrestling match with God, gives preference to this one son. Not only was he the second youngest son, so the son of his old age, he was also the first-born of the beloved Rachel. Jacob is not helping Joseph out with his brothers here. Verse 2 tells us he is seventeen. And his role is to go see how his older brothers are doing with the flocks and then come back and report on them to Jacob. He is the spy. Verse 4 tells us, "they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms." The varied colored robe made matters worse. Christian interpreters have often thought the robe was a fancy reminder to the brothers of their father's favoritism. My Bible has a note beside the word varicolored, indicating that the Hebrew word could also be translated as long. It is a long robe. Scholars have noticed accounts in ancient literature where a long robe is an indication of inheritance. If that is the case, and I believe it is, the long robe of Joseph suggests to the brothers that this little spy is going to be the blessed as first-born. He is going to get the blessing.

And Joseph adds fuel to the fire. He has a dream. And he seems to go among his brothers excited and ready to share his dream without any consideration of how they will view it. And he tells them that twelve sheaves of wheat were bound in the field and all of them bowed down to my sheave. "Isn't that interesting!" Well, no, not to the brothers. They respond in 37:8, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Are you really going to rule over us?" And they hated him even more.

Then he does it again, but this time eleven stars, the sun, and the moon bow down to him. And Jacob gets stirred up this time. Verse 10 says, "And his father rebuked him and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?' And his brothers were jealous of him..."

So, how do we take this young Joseph. We could go on the more negative side and interpret him as a manipulative brat who knew exactly what he was saying and the trouble it would cause. I think there is something of the brat here, but I would not go that far. I do not really see him as manipulative. I see Joseph as a prideful teenage boy who does not give much thought to the feelings of others. He has been the baby. He is used to the attention. He assumes they love him and favor him as his father does. He is the center of his father's world and likely the center of his own world. He might be a good kid. But there is some kind of self-centered naivete in him that expected his brothers and father and step-mother to be excited about his dreams. He does not seem to get the animosity that surrounds him. He certainly shows no fear when sent out as usual to check up on his brothers. He goes again.

And this time, when they see him coming, they grumble, "Here comes that dreamer." They already suspected the long robe meant inheritance. The dreams just put it all out there in front of everybody. Now, they plot to kill him. Reuben, the true first-born, argues for his life and even plans on rescuing him. The first thing they do when they grab Joseph is to strip him of that robe. We are going to notice the recurring theme of the robe or the garment. And stripping it away is taking away the status that Jacob may have conferred. They are removing his inheritance. They are removing the blessing from him. Then they throw him in a pit. And while Reuben is gone, they sell him to slavers on the way to Egypt.

Then they go and lie to their father. Ironically, Jacob the father had also lied to his father to steal the blessing. These sons are lying to their father. And they even use the robe of inheritance as bloody proof. It is this robe that had stoked up bitterness in the brothers. They hold it out, "See this bloody robe." It subconsciously implies, "You are the cause of his death, you put him out there," which of course is not true. Jacob bears fault, but the sons are the ones who acted on their own hatred. Someone might even blame God. He gave the dreams to Joseph. But God did not tell Joseph to go lord it over his brothers and brag about it. Joseph is responsible for his behavior. And the brothers are responsible for their behavior.

Judah in Contrast to Joseph (38)

Before we get to Egypt where the slavers are taking Joseph, we first encounter an unpleasant story about Judah popping up in chapter 38. It puts a screeching halt on our narrative. We are wondering what is going to happen to Joseph? And then we get this weird chapter about Judah's wicked sons and a daughter-in-law acting like a prostitute. Why is this here? That's a great question. It is exactly the question Moses expects you to be asking. The authors of Scripture like to overlap their narratives, and when you see something that pops up in here that does not look like it belongs, you are supposed to pay attention. This story is not here by mistake. It is not poor narrative style. At the very least it creates dramatic pause, enhancing our desire to hear what is happening with Joseph. But there is more to it than that.

Judah had three sons. The first married Tamar. He was wicked, so God took his life. Here is what should happen in that culture. As a childless widow Tamar is left in a very precarious situation. There are very few options for survival. Her husband's brother is expected to step up and take her as a wife. Her first-born son, however, will take on the name and inheritance of her dead husband who was the first-born of Judah.

Inheritance worked this way. The first born gets a double portion to carry on the family name and take care of mother and unmarried sisters. In the case of three sons, the inheritance would be split into four parts. The first-born would take two-fourths and then each other brother one-fourth. That means, if this second born brother does his duty, Tamar's first-born son will get two-fourths of the inheritance while he stays with his one-fourth. If Tamar has no children, then there are only two sons in the running. He would be first-born, so he would get the double portion of two-thirds and the final younger brother would get one-third. That's the decision before this brother who has Tamar. Get Tamar pregnant and take only one-fourth of the inheritance or make sure she does not get pregnant and take two-thirds of the inheritance. He goes for two-thirds, and God strikes him dead.

Judah is scared to give his third son to Tamar. And we should note that she has been upright throughout. The problem is with Judah's sons. Refused the third son, Tamar takes up one of the role's available to women in her situation. It's not the role you want. It's the role of the prostitute. But she has in mind only one man. She tricks Judah into sleeping with her, managing at the same time to get from him his seal and his staff. And later when he becomes enraged at hearing that his daughter-in-law is pregnant, she presents these items to him. This is the man who got me pregnant. Now we are going to see something of Judah's character. It is his seal and his staff. He is the man. First, we saw a lack of moral courage when he tried to protect his son at the expense of shaming Tamar and leaving her with no children. But then, when he is shamed by her for withholding her right to have a child, he accepts the rebuke, admitting in 38:29, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son." He follows that through with action, recognizing her twin sons as his own. Because he finally did what was right, Tamar's sons will bear the name of Judah, and the one named Perez will have a later descendant named David and a much later descendant named Jesus. The story of Joseph has much to do with the story of inheritance. And the story of Judah stays on theme. It also provides us with a character study for comparison. In that sense, the story of Judah serves as a foil, that is a literary example to help us better understand our main character. When we get back to Joseph, we will see his character in contrast to the character of Judah and Judah's sons.

Joseph the Faithful Slave (39)

So, back to Joseph. Sold to Potiphar captain of the bodyguard, we find out in 39:3, "His master saw that Yahweh was with him and Yahweh caused all that he did to prosper in his hand." Another thing biblical authors like to do is to repeat key words in the story, such as the key word robe or hand. Potiphar saw everything prosper in Joseph's hand, so verse 6 tells us that he left everything in Joseph's hand.

We are also told, almost as an irrelevant side note that Joseph is "handsome in form and appearance." But that is not a side note is it? That is motive. The motive of Potiphar's wife. So we see her making sexual advances towards handsome Joseph. And here is how his character matches up with Judah's. In 39:9 he rebuffs her saying, "There is no one greater in this house than I, and [Potiphar] has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" Prior to the Mosaic law being given, we have not had the ten commandments yet, Joseph understood something about the moral character of Yahweh. He understood adultery as a great evil. And so, he did what so many men fail to do. He ran. You want a moral principle from Joseph. There is a great one. Run. One of the guys I was in Bible study with at N.C. State made a conscious decision to walk by the gym at night on his way to Bible study because the gym had big windows in the aerobic section. So, he would test the purity of his mind by walking alongside this long row of college women doing aerobics. That's an awful idea. And he was frustrated at his failure to not think sexual thoughts. Joseph has the solution. "Don't go by the gym. Take a different route. Leave. Escape." Or as Monty Python put it, "Run away, run away."

In the story about Tamar it is the woman who is wronged. In the story about Joseph it is going to be the man. Both things happen in our world. In this case, Potiphar's wife is angry at Joseph's rebuff and so she makes false accusations. Verse 13 tells us, "When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and had fled outside, she called to the men of her household and said to them, 'See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed...and he left his garment beside me and fled...'" In the earlier chapter, Joseph's garment is connected to the lie about his death. It is placed before his father. Here his garment is connected to the lie about sexual violence. There is irony here. Because of his true character, Potiphar put everything into Joseph's hand, except his wife. Now his wife stands with Joseph's garment in her hand, accusing him of false character.

We then read that Potiphar's anger burned when he heard the story, presumably it burned against Joseph. But instead of having Joseph killed, he throws him in prison. I do not know whether to take

this as indication that Potiphar's burning anger was somewhat against his wife as he recognized Joseph was not to blame or if God simply protecting Joseph, having him thrown into prison instead of being executed.

Joseph the Forgotten Prisoner (40)

Either way, Joseph does what is right and ends up in prison for it. That is a truth we must accept. Good moral character can lead to others recognizing and affirming our behavior, as Potiphar recognized and promoted Joseph. But doing what is right is not a guarantee of success or affirmation. As with Potiphar's wife, the result of moral fortitude might land you in prison. We know the end of the story. We already know that God's sovereign hand is guiding Joseph's life. Others mean to do him harm and yet, God is using evil to bring about good. We know that. Still, a person can choose to resist or choose to participate in the plan that God is working out. Jacob chose to resist. He wrestled with God. Suffering came on him not only from outside agents but also as a result of his own behavior. It took a lot of pain to turn him around. What about Joseph? We could say that his naïve teenage pride contributed to the actions of his brothers. Theirs was the blame, but Joseph contributed. Not so here. Joseph did everything right. He found himself a slave in the house of an Egyptian master, yet he did not give in. He accepted his situation and worked as though working for the Lord. And when faced with significant temptation, he did not choose the way of the culture around him. He stood firm, both in faithfulness to Potiphar and more importantly in faithfulness to Yahweh. Now in prison, who could blame him for feeling let down by both? Neither his Egyptian master nor his Lord God chose to save him from false imprisonment. They allowed it.

What now of Joseph's character? What will he do? It is easy to imagine Joseph lost in bitterness or depression or bewilderment. His world has been rocked again, from favored son to slavery, from respected manager to prison. You don't have to curse God, but why make an effort? Just keep your head down and wait for God to do whatever he chooses to do. You are stuck. Give up. That is not what we see Joseph doing. We do not know how long it took for him to get through the shock and disillusionment of his new reality, but he did get through it. He chose to believe in God and be faithful in his present circumstances, obedient as though obedient to the Lord. We have no idea how this story would turn out if Joseph did not act. If he just sulked in his cell. Certainly, God would have continued on as he did with Jacob, getting Jacob to Bethel. But Joseph did act, and as a result, he got to play the role of a positive participant in God's plan.

Joseph's decision to get up and do got him recognized again. This time by the chief jailor. And again, we are told twice in 39:22 and 23 that the man in charge, "committed into Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the jail, so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it." How does Joseph meet the baker and cup bearer if he did not commit himself to positive action, if he just stayed in his cell? We do not know. But he got up. And that made a difference.

Joseph the Wise Counselor (41)

You know the story. Joseph receives a dream regarding each official. One is executed as foretold and the other released as foretold. This is not Joseph's first experience with dreams. Though he handles this one better. Still, his hopes do not pan out. After the dream comes true, we are told in verse 40:23, "Yet the chief cup bearer did not remember Joseph but forgot him." Which to Joseph must have felt like God forgot him. The first verse in the next chapter tells it us it was two years before anybody thought about Joseph again. Are you ready to wait that long? Maybe you have. Maybe you know what long wait though painful circumstances is like. For many of us, we struggle to wait on God to work it out in a few weeks, and then we are ready to quit, much less a couple of years. You sense God is doing something to lift you out of your imprisonment, or your pit, or your hard circumstances. You sense God doing something supernatural. And you are right. He does something spectacular. It could only be from God. But the next day after that, nothing happens. And the next day, nothing happens. Eventually, your emotional state of hope and joy, raised so high by God's work and your expectant release, falls past neutral into disillusionment much deeper than the initial shock of your

fall into the pit in the first place. Your false hope crashes down. For two years Joseph is forgotten. He must have lost all hope in the cup bearer as a source of rescue.

And now, with all hope gone, we are told Pharaoh had a dream. And we smile. Because we know what is coming. We know that Joseph knows about dreams. The dreams are about seven years of plenty and seven years of drought, not only in Egypt, but throughout the Ancient Near East. We are now going to see the character of Joseph shine. He has come a long way from being the spoiled favored son. He has lived life as obedience to the Lord. He has risen up. And he has fallen down. And he has kept going in faith, holding on to his non-Egyptian God and his morals. God gave him a gift for interpreting dreams that he did not initially know how to use rightly. In fact, he initially abused it, bragging to his brothers. But he has grown. And now when asked by Pharaoh to interpret the dream, he responds in 41:16, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

God has been developing Joseph, in his moral character, in his professional abilities, and in the ways of God. These things all come together as Joseph, the believing manager of households and of prisons, interprets Pharaoh's dream, even taking the audacious step of suggesting a course of action, not something a slave prisoner ought to do in the presence of a god-king of a super power. I do not know if Joseph was fully in the moment, giving out the word of God, and he is not even thinking about how his hearer might hear him. That is how he was with his brothers. I like to think he was much more aware of who he was and who he was talking to at this point in his life. I imagine that he saw the line between 41:32 where he was interpreting the dream and 41:33 where he proposed to Pharaoh what to do. I like to think in a quick moment, he saw that line, and he heard from God, and he recognized that this is what God had prepared me for, and then he stepped across that line intentionally in faith. And he took the risk. And he boldly proposed to Pharaoh. And he began his proposal this way, "Now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh take action..." He is telling Pharaoh to take action. He continues on recommending how to store food in the years of plenty to prepare for the years of drought. He is giving a seven-year plan to the ruler of Egypt, of Egypt, a superpower! That's like giving the leader of the US or Russia or Germany or China instruction on internal policy that must be acted on for seven consistent years before anybody knows whether it is a good policy.

But the interpretation of the dream and the insight behind the proposal convinced Pharaoh. Not only did he accept Joseph's recommendation, instead of killing him or throwing him back into prison, but he made the best leadership move of his life, saying in 41:39, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are...see I have set you over the land of Egypt." Leaders love it, if you are going to tell them there is a problem, then give them a practical solution to fix that problem. And so, Joseph becomes one of those rare examples for us in Scripture of a leader who consistently through his life, truly models godly character. He is called discerning and wise and this wisdom comes from trusting God, listening to his voice, and growing through the failures. That's not only in contrast to the character of Judah. That is in contrast to Abraham, who went to Egypt and brought plague on it when he lied to Pharaoh about Sarah. Joseph is going to be a true son of the promise. He brings blessing to Egypt, and not only to Egypt but to the nations. It is a mini-fulfillment of the promise, foreshadowing the greater fulfillment to come. That the descendant of Abraham will bless all peoples.

We are told in 41:46 that Joseph is now 30 years old. God has used the past 13 years in Egypt to prepare him for what must come next. And though it is a monumental task, the organization of Egypt's produce only sets the context for the next crucial point in Joseph's life, and in the history of the covenant of promise. We have to get Joseph's family to Egypt and to do that we need Joseph to forgive the brothers who wanted to kill him and just settled for making him a slave. That's the next great task in front of Joseph. He is just not aware yet that it is coming.

Joseph the Compassionate Brother (42-45)

We are approaching the climax in chapters 42-44. There is a lot of detail here worth getting into. I will only consider the overview with just a few details. Joseph marries a woman whose father is a priest. They have two sons. Manasseh means, "God has made me forget." Ephraim means "fruitfulness" because as Joseph says in 41:52, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." This sounds to me like a man who gives credit to God for all he has, and yet, has also decided to let go of what was. Egypt is his new home. He has let go of his former family and started a new Egyptian family. His roots are here now. He has moved on.

But God does not allow him to forget his brothers. He must face them. You know the story. The brothers hear there is food in Egypt. They come to buy some. In 42:9 we are told that Joseph remembered the dreams he had about his brothers. That implies he had set aside those dreams, but then they come back to him in a rush. He does not seem to know what he wants to do with his brothers. Do I ignore them? Do I kill them? Do I trust them? Do I embrace them? What would you do, the brothers who sold you into slavery?

Joseph accuses them of being spies, presumably to get a response. So, they tell a bit of their story but of course cover up a crucial point. Verse 13, "Your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more." The one who is no more, of course, is Joseph. The youngest is Benjamin, Joseph's only true brother. It seems at this moment, not knowing what to do with these brothers, Joseph longs for family, for his brother Benjamin. So, he imprisons them as spies, perhaps to let them taste what he experienced, perhaps to give him time to decide what to do. Then he tells them that all but one can go. That one will be a hostage until they bring Benjamin as proof that they have been telling the truth. Really, he just wants to see Benjamin. They believe God is punishing them for what they did to Joseph, and they start talking about it not realizing that Joseph understands them because he had been using an interpreter. Joseph is overcome, and he weeps but not where they can see him. Still, he keeps Simeon, while sending the brothers off with the money returned in their bags and the command not to come back without Benjamin.

The weeping and the return of the money shows us that Joseph has strong feelings about his brothers. And we can imagine those feelings being greatly mixed. He does not trust them. He does not reveal himself. I am not sure he knows what he wants to do at this point.

The famine continues. And Jacob realizes he must allow the brothers to return with Benjamin. The brothers return. The text says that they bring money in their hand and presents in their hand. It is the word hand again. Joseph is eager to see his brother Benjamin, but on seeing him he must swiftly leave the room, being overcome emotionally. After composing himself, he comes back out for the meal. Then he sends them off again putting their money back, but also putting his personal cup in Benjamin's sack. The brothers are brought back and accused of stealing. The cup was found on Benjamin and so, we learn Joseph's goal. Verse 44:17 reads, "The man in whose hand the cup has been found, he shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father."

It seems Joseph had forgiven his brothers. "Go in peace." But it is one thing to forgive your family and a very different thing to invite them to come live with you. And Joseph is not ready for reconciliation to that extent. He wishes them peace, and he sends them off but without Benjamin. He had devised this plan to keep Benjamin without revealing himself to them. Then Judah steps up with a plea. This is Genesis 44:18-34.

¹⁸ Then Judah approached him, and said, "Oh my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are equal to Pharaoh. ¹⁹ "My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?' ²⁰ "We said to my lord, 'We have an old father and a little child of his old age. Now his brother is dead, so he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.' ²¹ "Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me that I may set my eyes on him.' ²² "But we said to my lord, 'The lad cannot leave his father,

for if he should leave his father, his father would die.’²³ “You said to your servants, however, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again.’²⁴ “Thus it came about when we went up to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord.²⁵ “Our father said, ‘Go back, buy us a little food.’²⁶ “But we said, ‘We cannot go down. If our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down; for we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’²⁷ “Your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons;²⁸ and the one went out from me, and I said, “Surely he is torn in pieces,” and I have not seen him since.’²⁹ ‘If you take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.’³⁰ “Now, therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad’s life,³¹ when he sees that the lad is not *with us*, he will die. Thus your servants will bring the gray hair of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow.³² “For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him *back* to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever.’³³ “Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers.³⁴ “For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me—for fear that I see the evil that would overtake my father?”

We see a serious change in Judah’s character. He sinned against Tamar but repented. Now he steps up. He did not step up to speak for Joseph when the brothers sold Joseph off. He does step up now to speak for Benjamin, for the sake of his father, and to offer himself as a substitute. In doing so, Judah steps right into God’s plan. His plea breaks down the last barrier in Joseph’s heart and paves the way for the family of Israel to move to Egypt. This is the very next paragraph in 45:1-9.

¹ Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, “Have everyone go out from me.” So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard *it*, and the household of Pharaoh heard *of it*. ³ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Please come closer to me.” And they came closer. And he said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.” ⁵ “Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ “For the famine *has been* in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. ⁷ “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. ⁸ “Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ “Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, “God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ “You shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children and your flocks and your herds and all that you have.

The sons return to Canaan to gather their father, wives, children, herds and possessions. Then they return to Egypt, protected and provided for by their younger brother Joseph. The dream of his youth had come true in the most spectacular of ways. But the brothers have not forgotten what they had done. And even with all the blessing from Joseph, they still wondered where they stand with him. When Jacob dies, they are fearful that Joseph will turn against them. They go to him to ask forgiveness. And Joseph weeps. And he speaks to them, as recorded in the last chapter of Genesis 50:19-21,

“Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ So, he comforted them and spoke to their heart.”

How will God ensure the promise? Will it be ensured by men of character like Joseph? In the end, no. That will be the whole story of the Old Testament. There are a few men like Joseph, you know Daniel,

who stand out in character and wisdom, but on the whole that cannot be the lesson here. Those men are extremely rare. The best of men do really bad things. We do see in Joseph the blessing of stepping into God's plan. We can contribute. That's a lesson we are supposed to get from this. We can make a difference. Our actions matter. But our actions do not change the sovereign plan of God. Even when we fail utterly, God ensures his own promise. As Joseph taught his brothers, "What you meant for evil, God meant for good." The Bible holds these two truths together. First, human beings are responsible for their moral actions. We see this in the lives of men like Abraham and Jacob and Joseph. Second, God's absolute sovereignty is never in question. He is the primary actor in every story. And he will bring it to completion in the way he chooses. That is true in the bigger story of salvation-history and that is true in your story. If you have believed in Jesus, your actions matter. Your sin brings consequence. Your faithfulness brings blessing. But it is not yours to change the final outcome. After calling us to present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness in Romans chapter 6, to step up and do, Paul then assures us that though we participate with God in our sanctification in this life, our initial justification and our final glorification rest fully, 100%, completely in God's hand. And this is how Paul put it in Romans 8:28-30,

²⁸ And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified."

That sums up pretty well Joseph's story. God calls us to be fully engaged. And there is blessing when we trust the Lord and obey him in our circumstances. And in the end, we do not have to fear. It is God who glorifies. He gets us home. We do not have to fear our own pride, betrayal by brothers, slavery, false accusation, prison, being brought before the mighty of the earth. God takes what is meant for evil and uses it to bring about good. God is in charge of the story. And if he says he has got you, he has got you. The promise is safe with God.

Prologue: The First-Born

I do have one last point to make. This point helps to interpret a number of passages in the Bible and also underscores how very much God is in control. This has been the story of Joseph, but you may have noticed it seems also to be the story of Judah. Jacob had twelve sons. Reuben, the first was disqualified as first-born for sleeping with his father's concubine. Simeon and Levi, the second and third were disqualified for using the ritual of circumcision to overcome and murder the men of Shechem. Judah the fourth might then claim the right to the blessing of first-born. And yet, Jacob gives that right to Joseph. In Genesis 48, Jacob says that Joseph's sons will take equal places with their uncles. Remember the first-born is given a double portion of inheritance. So, with twelve portions, you divide everything up into thirteen parts, giving the first-born two parts. By elevating Manasseh and Ephraim to the level of their uncles, Joseph gets two parts, the blessing of the first-born. This is why we have no tribe of Joseph in the rest of the Old Testament. Instead we have the two tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Though there is a little twist. Jacob crosses his arms placing the right hand on the younger Ephraim, designating Ephraim as Joseph's first-born. Which is very much in line with God's practice of not following too closely human custom. This is why the name Ephraim is often used in the prophets to designate the future northern kingdom of Israel, the kingdom that breaks off from Judah. And when that kingdom broke off at first from Judah it was led by Jeroboam of this tribe of Ephraim. He had the greatest claim being from the first-born of Joseph, and Joseph himself being the first-born of Jacob. The blessing of Joseph in Genesis 49:26 affirms his status, "May the blessings of your father be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of the one distinguished among his brothers."

And yet, Judah's claim as first-born is even more strongly affirmed in this blessing section. This is odd, since Joseph clearly gets the double inheritance from Jacob. But this is the prophecy from God about

Judah, 49:10 reads, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet.” God’s plan is that the scepter will not depart from Judah. He will say the same thing almost one thousand years later to David, son of Jesse. In the final plea that broke Joseph’s heart, I can’t help but notice that it was Judah who stepped forward to offer himself up as a substitute. God is in charge of the plan. His promise cannot fail.

Reflection Questions

1. God promised to provide for and protect Abraham and his descendants. Think back over Genesis 12-50 and record a couple of examples for each generation where God provided for and where God protected the members of this family.
2. What do you take away from the story of Judah in chapter 38? What stands out to you? Why do you think Moses wrote this into the story of Joseph at this point?
3. Look for the key word hand in chapter 39. Why do you think that Moses kept emphasizing these words in the narrative? What larger themes in Genesis might the words hand and robe/garment direct our attention to?
4. What stands out to you in the development of Joseph from when you are first introduced to him as a 17-year old in chapter 37 through the 13 years as a slave in Potiphar’s house and in prison in chapters 39 and 40 to his appointment as the manager of Egypt, as a husband and father in chapter 41. What characteristics or skills does Joseph pick up? How does God develop Joseph? How is Joseph described? Considering these questions what stands out to you?
5. What stands out to you regarding Joseph’s interaction with his brothers. Do you think he knows what he wants to do from the start, or do you think he is unsure? What strikes you as important or interesting?
6. How have you seen the principle of Genesis 50:19-20 in your own life story?