

### ***“Wrestling With God—The Final Chapter”***

Today we bring this series of messages to a close. We’ve been taking a look at the life of Jacob, one of our spiritual ancestors. The reason we’ve been looking at his life is because we can learn a great deal about our own lives, about God, about what God expects of us. I’ve found this to be a pretty powerful journey and a lot of you have said the same.

Today we’re going to look at Jacob and his son’s, in particular his son named Joseph—another one of our key spiritual ancestors. Let’s jump right into the scriptures. This Genesis 37:1-4. **“Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. This is the account of Jacob’s family line. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers...and he brought their father a bad report about them. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him” (Genesis 37:1-4).**

Joseph is Jacob’s favorite son. He gets special treatment and attention from his father as a boy and teenager. He ends up running errands for Jacob and not really doing the hard work that some of his brothers are doing. Jacob has Joseph checking up on his brothers and Joseph ends up giving a bad report about them to their dad. This doesn’t necessarily endear him to them. We don’t know what the bad report was—they were lazy, they were careless, not good shepherds—whatever it was, dad, Jacob, got on to them and they started to really dislike Joseph.

But things got much worse for Joseph, and it was his own fault. Joseph had dreams. God gave him dreams where he could see the future. **“Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, ‘Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.’ His brothers said to him, ‘Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?’ And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said” (37:5-8).**

Joseph has these dreams from God, and that’s good thing, but what Joseph, at 17 years old, doesn’t have yet, is wisdom. Wisdom knows when to speak and when to keep the mouth shut. There are some things that you might know as fact, but you don’t necessarily have to tell everything you know. I’ve learned this the hard way! Joseph learned it the hard way too.

So Joseph is dad’s favorite, he’s got his fancy robe, he doesn’t have to work as hard as the rest of them, he tattles on them, he has these dreams that he should have kept to himself. Resent, bitterness, hatred start to build in his brothers.

And one day Jacob says, “Joseph, I want you to go out and check on your brothers and the flocks and tell me how things are going.” Joseph goes out to check on them. This is 37:17. **“So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. ‘Here comes that dreamer!’ they said to each other. ‘Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams” (37:17-20).**

We talked about this being a dysfunctional family! I mean, there were times that my brother and I fought, and scrapped, and at times loathed each other. But I don’t think we ever plotted to kill each other! What does this tell you about these brothers, and their hatred? What does it tell you about their character?

In the end they decide not to kill him, but instead sell him to some passing slave-traders. So they sell their brother as a slave and pocket 2 silver coins apiece. The whole time Joseph is pleading with them, “Please, don’t do this. Please.” But they were happy to get rid of him.

Now, of course they had to tell their dad something. So they took Joseph’s fancy ornamented robe, killed a goat, dipped the robe in the blood, took it back to their father as if wild animals must have gotten him. It says this: **“Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.’ So his father wept for him” (37:34-35).**

What kind of sons sell their brother into slavery, tell their father a boldface lie, watch as their father is grieving, and pretend to comfort him when they know the son is still alive? They did some other very evil things later on that you’ll read about this week. Part of what we’re meant to do as we read this story is to say, “Gosh, my kids aren’t that bad!” You’re meant to see the fact that even the Patriarch of Israel had sons who didn’t turn out quite like

he wanted. And this is part of life. Part of life is that sometimes children hurt their parents. Part of life is that sometimes our kids don't go in the direction we had planned. Even though you do all the right things!

My mom was visiting last week and we were talking about my growing up years how difficult I was as a kid. My mom said, "Aaron I spent a lot of nights crying about you and your behavior and praying for God to help me raise you. Lots of tearful times. Lots of sleepless nights." I was a really bad kid.

Scripture promises this: "**Train up a child in the way they should go, and when they are old, they will not depart from it**" (**Proverbs 22:6**). When they are OLD. It doesn't say when they are 16 they won't depart from it, or when they're 22. But when they are old, they will not depart from it. And for most of us that's what happens. We go through a period of time and we may push God away. We may push our parents away. But our parents continue to pray for us, and they continue to love us, and they sometimes give us tough love, and somewhere along the way, we find our way back home.

Just out of curiosity, how many of you in this room, from the age of say, 15 to 30, you did things that if your parents knew, they would have been horrified? And look at you now...you're sitting in church!

That leads into the next scene which is **Joseph's Story**. Joseph is sold to the slave traders who take him down to Egypt and they sell him to a man named Potiphar. As Joseph is sold into slavery, what was he feeling? He'd essentially been a prince in his family; he came from having the finest things that his father could give him, to being sold as a slave. He's got to be wondering, "How could this happen? And where is God in the midst of this? And God, you gave me these dreams, and how am I a slave in Egypt now?" I would have been thinking those thoughts. "This is not how I planned for my life to go!"

But we don't read about that in this story. Instead what we read is that Joseph determined to do the next right thing. He was going to try to follow God and to do God's will and to live as a person of integrity, even in this disappointing circumstance.

Eventually he gains the trust of his master, and ends up handling all the household affairs with diligence, and wisdom, and integrity. In fact, because of Joseph's abilities to manage Potiphar's assets, Potiphar does very well financially. This is what we read in 39:6: "**So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate**" (39:6). Joseph is prospering in his less-than-perfect circumstances because he's facing those circumstances with integrity.

But the tide turns. He's doing the next right thing, but not everybody is. "**Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me!' But he refused**" (39:6-8). Joseph has been living with integrity, she keeps propositioning him every day as soon as Potiphar leaves the house. She doesn't take no for an answer. Joseph persistently does the right thing. He tells her that he cannot cheat on his master or be a part of her cheating on her husband. One day she gets more aggressive and grabs him by his robe and says, "You are going to sleep with me today." He pushes away from her, she pulls the robe right off him and he runs outside.

This time she's angry. She's been spurned one too many times and when her husband gets home, she brings out Joseph's robe and tells her husband, "Joseph your favorite servant tried to assault me. I want you to know this and I want to know what you're going to do about it." Of course, Potiphar is furious. He takes Joseph and has him thrown into Pharaoh's dungeon.

So Joseph has gone from being a prince in Canaan, to being a slave in Egypt, to becoming a prisoner in Pharaoh's prison. He's on a downwardly mobile slide. Each career move is worse than the one before. So now what's he thinking? What would you be thinking if you did the right thing and you got thrown in prison for it? He's got to be thinking, "God, where are you? I've tried to follow you and I've tried to do what you said to do, and I've tried to live for you, and look where it's landed me! In a dungeon! Maybe it would be better if I were not following you."

I've had people say things like that to me, because it feels like that sometimes. People who've said, "I became a Christian, I began to follow Christ, my life got worse, not better." I once had a man tell me that he was fired from his job because he refused to do something that went against the core beliefs of his faith. They wanted him to do something unethical, to prove himself to them. He refused and was fired. His decision to follow Christ got him fired from his job. Sometimes that happens.

The gospel doesn't promise that if you do the right thing you'll always be rewarded. In fact, just the opposite. Jesus told his disciples, "If you follow me they'll persecute you, they may arrest you, and sometimes they will try to kill you."

Joseph is thrown in prison and somehow he gets to a place where he says, "Even here, under these circumstances, I will still follow God. I don't get it, but I will trust him." Joseph decides again, to simply do the next right thing.

Let's take a look at how that works out for him. This 39:20. **"But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there" (39:20-22).** Do you see a trend here? He's a slave in Potiphar's house and he puts Joseph in charge of everything. He finds himself in prison and the same thing happens. He lives with integrity, he does the next right thing, and he's put in charge of all the prisoners.

But look at what else happened here. The scripture says that he was in prison and the Lord was with him. The Lord was with him. He was in prison for 10 years. We face a difficulty, a hardship, for 6 months, or two years, and it feels like an eternity. He was in prison for 10 years, and a slave for 3 years before that. And God was with him.

In the Old Testament we find God saying, "When you pass through the flood waters, when you go through the fire, or the valley of the shadow of death I will be with you." He doesn't say, "I will keep you from going through the floods, or the fire, or the valley of the shadow of death." He says, "I know you're going to go through it! And I will be with you."

Sometimes life is going to be hard. It's definitely not always going to be fair. And the answer isn't to turn away from God. The answer is to recognize that God walks with us through the hell that we face. Jesus promise was to be with his followers to the end of the age, he promised to send his Spirit, the Comforter to be your guide. Let's be clear what God has consistently said. And this is what we find in Joseph's story. The Lord is with him in prison.

That leads us to the next scene. **Joseph's Release.** While Joseph is in that prison, Pharaoh gets mad at two of his servants and sends them to the same dungeon. One is his baker, the other his cupbearer (butler). Of course who does the prison warden put in charge of them? Joseph. While they're there the cupbearer has a dream that's confusing and disturbing. Joseph says, "God has given me the ability to interpret dreams, tell me yours." He tells Joseph his dream and Joseph says, "God is saying to you that in three days, you're going to be lifted out of this dungeon and Pharaoh is going to restore you as his butler. It's good news for you."

Then he says in 40:14, **"When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison...The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him" (40:14, 23).** Sometimes we feel like we've been forgotten by others, and even forgotten by God.

Two years go by and Joseph has been forgotten. But something interesting happens one day. Pharaoh has a dream, a really disturbing dream, and he knows it means something really big and important. None of his advisors, or wise men can tell him what it means. And suddenly the butler says, "Hey, wait a minute, I just remembered something. Two years ago I met a guy in prison named Joseph, and he knows how to interpret dreams." Pharaoh says, "Well, what are you waiting for, go get him and bring him here!"

Joseph comes to Pharaoh and he tells Joseph his dreams and Joseph says, "I think this is what God is trying to say to you. The next 7 years will be years of plenty and abundance. Things are going to be great, unlike anything you've ever seen. But during these next 7 years you need to be setting aside one fifth all the grain and produce and store it in your storehouses. Because after that will come 7 very lean years. Years of drought and famine. Be prepared for this famine that's coming."

Joseph interprets the dream and here is what Pharaoh says in 41:39, **"Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.' So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt'" (41:39-41).**

Remember how unwise Joseph was in the beginning? Now, because of the hardships he's endured, the slavery and imprisonment, he's gained wisdom. Tough things have a way of giving us wisdom. Those experiences actually help us, if we let them. That's what happened to Joseph.

Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of the whole land of Egypt. This foreigner, this former slave, former prisoner, has become the Prime Minister of Egypt! I love stories with happy endings, don't you?!

This is really remarkable. All during those 13 years of slavery and imprisonment, Joseph couldn't see what the outcome would be. All he could see was the hell he was walking through, but he was determined to persevere. Like his father Jacob who wrestled with God and didn't let go, Joseph was determined to persevere and hold on to his faith and not let go no matter what his circumstances were. And finally it all begins to make sense.

But there's more to the story. Remember Pharaoh's dream. There were to be 7 years of plenty where Egypt would store up grain and produce in order to get ready for 7 years of famine. The famine comes after that first 7 years. And there is enough to eat for the people because of what Joseph has done.

And two years into the famine, it spreads to the land of Canaan and the story comes back to Jacob again. Jacob is now 130 years old. And he turns to his oldest 10 sons and tells them, "Go to Egypt to buy grain so that we don't starve to death." So the 10 sons go to Egypt and because they are foreigners in that land they have to make a special request to buy grain. And guess who they have to stand before to make their request. The Prime Minister. Their brother. The one they wanted to kill, the one they sold into slavery. He recognizes them, but they don't recognize him now because he's 13 years older and is walking like an Egyptian. They stand before him and they beg him to allow them to buy grain so their family can survive.

There are some beautiful things and twists and turns in the final part of this story that you're going to have to read on your own. But when you get to the end of it he reveals himself to them. He says, "It's me, Joseph, your brother." And at that moment they are terrified thinking that he is going to seek revenge on them for what they did. Now that he's the second most powerful person in the land they realize he could snuff out their lives in an instant. But Joseph shows them grace and mercy. They have a joyful and tearful reunion.

Then he says this 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**" (50:20). What we see in Joseph's story is a crucial interaction. God does not make the bad things happen in Joseph's life. His brothers choose to sell him into slavery, Potiphar's wife chooses to falsely accuse him. But as Jacob chooses to do the right thing in the face of adversity and evil, it gives God an open door to take something that was intended for harm and make good come from it.

Listen, the story of your life is not yet written. The choices you make, how you respond to the blessings and tragedies in your life is up to you. You write the story of your life in cooperation with God. When you do the next right thing, you open the door for God to take those things and make good things happen from them. That is what Jacob did so well in his life. That is a lesson we can apply to our lives.

Part of what we do is we trust, like Jacob and Joseph. "Even when I'm in the dungeon, wrongly accused, I know that God is going to be with me in the prison, and he is able to use even this to accomplish his purposes."

In the end Joseph sends for his father Jacob and Jacob and the entire family come and live in the land of Egypt. Jacob wrestled with God and he never let go. His story, and Joseph's story, is an invitation for us to do the same. So that when you get to the end of your life, you can look back and say, "Look what God did here, and here, and here. Thanks be to God for what he has done in me." And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Talk to God for a minute. You might say, "God I place my life in your hands, and pray that you take even the painful things and use them for good. I pray that you would use me for your purposes. And help me to hold on tight to you and never let go."

Lord, we pray for our children, for those who are wandering from you, or have turned their back on you, we pray that you would hold them tight. Draw them back to you. We pray that you would help us in those times when we feel like we're in Pharaoh's dungeon, or slaves to something, to trust you and never let go. To do the next right thing and to know that somehow you're going to make all of these circumstances in our lives come together in the end for your glory and for our good. We give our lives to you in your holy name. Amen.

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