

# THE LIFE OF JOSEPH

## Lesson 1

### INTRODUCTION

Genesis 37-50

**Aim:** To survey the purposes for the Biblical record of Joseph's life

#### **Outline:**

#### **The Purposes for the Biblical Record of Joseph's Life**

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**Introduction:** As we begin our study of the life of Joseph, primarily recorded in Genesis 37-50, it will be helpful to examine reasons why Joseph's life is significant and worthy of extended attention.

Joseph is a Bible character who needs little introduction for most of us. Our intimate familiarity with the story of Joseph's life is commendable, but don't we often find that familiarity with Bible passages and stories can unwittingly mitigate our interest and dull our perception of spiritual truth?

We know of Joseph as one whose life encompasses more varied circumstances than nearly any other Bible character. Details of the first 17 years of his life are largely veiled, and we can only view them through the lens of the story of Jacob. The final 71 years of his life are treated with striking brevity. The majority of the material available to us in Scripture concerning Joseph encompasses the 23 years of his life between the ages of 17-40. In that interval, we see him alternately exalted and debased. In each case, he is exalted by the primary authority in his life (father, Potiphar, Pharaoh) but is subsequently brought low by the actions of others. One student of Joseph's life writes: Joseph's "career, like his coat, is of many colors [pieces], varying from the most somber to the most brilliant" (Thomas Kirk, *Life of Joseph*, 1-2).

The variety of colors in Joseph's story is complemented by a variety of purposes for which the story of Joseph is seems to be recorded in Scripture. A study of his life displays a beautifully and divinely crafted portrait of the working of God in the life of a man, a family, a nation, and the world. In each case there are insights into the character of God and into principles for the right conduct of His people. The story of Joseph is recorded in Scripture for at least four purposes: to accentuate his Godly character;

to emphasize his historical role in the life of the nation of Israel, to provide revelation concerning the Providence of God, and to present the similarities of his life to Christ's life.

### **The Purposes for the Biblical Record of Joseph's Life:**

#### **I. Joseph's Life Is Recorded to Accentuate His Godly Character**

Let's take a moment to remember the time when the book of Genesis was originally written and the people to whom it was being written. Moses, living well after Joseph lived, was writing Genesis to a nation of people, freshly delivered from their bondage in the land of Egypt. For more than four centuries, Israel had been living in Egypt surrounded by the glitter of Egyptian life. Through the centuries, as Israel would later prove in the wilderness, Egypt rubbed off on the Israelites in more ways than one. Israel not only served Egypt, but they came to know Egypt's gods (Joshua 24:23; Amos 5:25-26; Acts 7:42-43) and to enjoy the pleasures of the land (Exodus 16:3; Numbers 11:18).

In the book of Genesis, Moses records for these newly delivered Jews an account of their election by God through the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God repeats His covenant multiple times to each of these men. In the life of each patriarch, God patiently develops faith in him. But when we come to Joseph at age 17, he appears before us already with a comparatively mature faith. Faith in God's promise – what a critical need in the hearts of the spiritually immature Israelites! They needed to learn how to trust God's words to them, to be able to cling to them when the way was long, the water bitter, the food scarce, or when enemies opposed them. There is a real sense in which Joseph is being upheld in Genesis as a national

role model for all of the children of Israel in succeeding generations – not only as an example of faith, but as an example of faith that produces obedience. W. E. H. Lecky (1838-1903), a secular but unbelieving historian, suggests that one of Moses' motives in the Joseph narrative is to uphold Joseph's character as an ideal before the infant nation.

In order that the ideals of a race should acquire their full force, it is necessary that they should be represented or illustrated in some great personalities who by the splendor and beauty of their careers could fascinate the imagination of men (quoted in Strahan, *Hebrew Ideals in Genesis*, 275).

Joseph's example has much to commend it on its own merits. Joseph's exemplary obedience to God and his superlative demonstration of forgiveness, united with a seemingly unshakable trust in the rightness and goodness of God, is notable. Joseph had learned to trust God to do what is right for His own glory and for Joseph's good. His testimony is all the more notable when contrasted with the testimonies of his brothers and when compared with the other patriarchs or a later hero of Israel, Daniel.

#### A. In Contrast to His Brothers

Our memories readily supply the contrasting character of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph exudes respect for his father, his brothers trample on their father's heart. Joseph portrays a willingness to accept leadership within his home; his brothers almost rush to forfeit their roles. Joseph obeys God when he is alone; the brothers repeatedly fall when alone and when together. Joseph's brothers need the purging of 22 years before they will openly

acknowledge their wrong and be men of character as Joseph was when he was but a teen.

## B. In Comparison with the Patriarchs

Joseph is unique among the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Not only does the record span the whole of his life from birth to death, but it covers his life in more detail than any of the patriarchs. Also, the record of Joseph's life does not include the personal failures that so often beset the patriarchs.

The history of Joseph . . . differs from all the others which are given at any length in the book of Genesis in that we are permitted to follow it almost uninterruptedly from boyhood to old age. This is one secret of its charm, especially for young readers; the rather, because the qualities which appear in him at first are seen only to grow with his growth and to strengthen with his strength. In him the adage was pre-eminently true that 'the boy is the father of man'; and though his life had its trials and discouragements, the conflicts which he had to wage were all external. . . . From the very first he seems to have been whole-heartedly on the side of God, and his struggles were not with himself in order to maintain that undivided allegiance, so much as they were with others because he was determined to preserve it. His character, indeed, was not perfect, but there was less of alloy in it than in that of most men. We see in it less of the alternation between good and evil, between strength and weakness, than there is in the majority of those whose biographies are given to us in this honest book. There is no unwavering resolution, no petulant impatience, no

unscrupulous self-seeking; and if he never rose to those heights of spiritual communion with God to which Abraham and Jacob were exalted, he never sank to the depths of deceit into which both of these patriarchs sometimes descended. His career is uniquely interesting as that of a good boy who was not a weakling; that of a pious man who was not a business failure; and that of a great man who in the glory of his exaltation, did not outgrow the simplicity of his youth (William Taylor, *Joseph: Prime Minister*, 222-23).

### C. In Comparison with Daniel

During the earliest years of the history of Israel's development into a nation, through Joseph God proves Himself through a young man who remained faithful to Him. Near the close of Israel's Old Testament history, God would prove Himself again in the life of another young man, and He would do so by putting the second young man in similar circumstances as the first.

The one stands at the commencement, the other at the end of the Jewish history of revelation; they were both representatives of the true God and his people at heathen courts; both were exemplary in their pure walk before the Lord; both were endowed with the gift of bringing into clear light the dim presentiments of truth which express themselves among the heathen in God-sent dreams; both were gifted with marvelous wisdom and insight, and for this reason highly honored among the nations (C. A. Auberlen, quoted in Taylor, 223).

II. Joseph's Life Is Recorded to Emphasize His Historical Role in the Life of the Nation of Israel

Moses structured Genesis around the theme of *the generations of*. He begins with the generations of the heaven and of the earth, then proceeds to the generations of Noah, the sons of Noah, etc.

Genesis	2:4	generations of the heaven and of the earth
	6:9	Noah
	10:1	the sons of Noah
	11:27	Terah
	25:12	Ishmael
	25:19	Isaac
	36:1	Esau
	37:2	Jacob

When Moses begins to record the generations of Esau in Genesis 36:1, he traces in a single chapter Esau's descendants until the time of Moses. Then beginning at ch. 37, Moses begins considering the generations of Jacob until the conclusion of the book. At the book's conclusion, Israel is now in Egypt and has been for 71 years (since Joseph was 39; he dies at 110). It becomes apparent that God uses Joseph as His specific instrument to move the embryonic nation into the womb of Egypt for protection and to keep Israel there until she is numerically stronger as a nation.

A. Joseph is God's Instrument to Move the Embryonic Nation into the Womb of Egypt

God desired to move Israel into Egypt for their spiritual protection. Several times in the book of

Genesis God has previously warned His people directly and indirectly of the danger of intermarrying with the pagan nations around them. Genesis 12-38 reveals the multiple temptations of the members of the young nation to intermarry, to blend with the acceptable cultural practices of the pagan nations.

- Sarah and Pharaoh (12:11-20)
- Abraham and Hagar (16:1-4)
- Sarah and Abimelech, king of Gerar (20:1-18)
- Abraham's charge concerning Isaac's wife (24:2-4)
- Esau's error that grieved Isaac and Rebekah (26:34-35)
- Rebekah's desire for Jacob's wife (27:46)
- Dinah and the Shechemites (34:1-31)
- Judah marries daughter of Shuah, the Canaanite (38:2)
- Judah marries his son to a Canaanite woman (38:6)
- Judah bears children from daughter-in-law (38:28-30)

It is almost as if one of worst possible violations was saved to the last as an illustration of how wicked the pagan women could be. Sins of this nature had entered the house of Jacob before (Reuben, 35:22), but now the enticing may very well have taken place in the name of religion. The term that describes Tamar as she called on Judah from the wayside is *kedesha* – “A temple harlot’ – a class of women devoted to lust in connection with religion, and thus marking the lowest point to which it is possible for religion to descend” (W. G. Blaikie, *Heroes of Israel*, 242).



God deems it necessary to remove his people from this setting for 430 years, and during that time the iniquity of these pagan nations would be filling up (Genesis 15:16).

The first three generations—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—had kept themselves pure; but the fourth was evidently acquiring the prevailing taint of the country. It needed to be broken off from the vile habits it was forming, and started anew on a more wholesome footing. In particular, Judah, who was the strongest man of the older brothers, and to whom a splendid *role* was to be given in the future history of the country, who was also an heir of promise, needed some strong, uncompromising discipline to turn him from the course on which he had entered so thoughtlessly when he allied himself by marriage to the Canaanites. Judah appears at this time to have broken away from his brothers and set up an establishment of his own in the midst of the heathen. His moral danger was therefore most imminent. He seems to have allowed himself the license of the country; and had he not been plucked by a strong hand out of the fire, he would have probably sunk in the mire, and become as bad as the Canaanites themselves. The great truth that had already been made plain in the national history had to be specially demonstrated in his case—that it was not nature but grace that made him heir to the blessing (Blaikie, 242-43).

B. Joseph Is God's Instrument to Keep the Embryonic Nation in Egypt until It Has Grown to Full Strength

While in Egypt, Israel was blessed with the choicest land (Goshen) and lived separately from the Egyptians (46:34). Some separation would come about because the shepherds of Israel were an abomination to the Egyptians. Goshen served as a sort of cocoon where God could allow His people to develop and increase with little fear of intrusion. As a result, the people of God would prosper during their days in Egypt (Exodus 1:7).

III. Joseph's Life Is Recorded to Magnify the Providence of God (*cf.*, 45:5-8)

A dominant theme that surfaces in the account of Joseph is the providence of God. In Joseph's life, God's providential dealings are not met with resignation. Joseph embraces them, and in so doing, teaches us how to appreciate God's providential dealings with men.

A. Joseph is Aware of the Continuing Presence of God

We mark . . . in Joseph a constant recognition of the presence of God with him. That, indeed, seems to me to be the one great, all-dominating consciousness of his life. He believed in God, not as far off, but always near; not as sitting aloof from all the actions of men, but as overruling and controlling them; not as an enemy to be feared, but as a friend to be loved and trusted and served. No persecution could keep him from realizing that God was with him, and no prosperity could blind him to the fact that it was to God he owed it all. It seems to me, as I read his history, that it was a constant "walk

with God.” His faith had almost the strength of sight. That which his father wrestled for as a great privilege, and enjoyed but for a brief season, in a special theophany, he [Joseph] seemed constantly to realize by faith, so that he could say, ‘I see God face to face and my life is preserved’ . . . He felt that the Lord was round about him, and whatever men might intend he knows that God always “meant it unto good.” Now this faith in the constant presence of God with him enabled him to maintain that evenliness of disposition. . . . It kept him from being either very much depressed by adversity, or exceedingly elated by prosperity. He did not indeed stoically take things good and bad as they came, neither did he accept them thoughtlessly as matters of course, but he received them as from the hand of God (Taylor, 226).

The consciousness of the presence of God was evident in the dreams, in his response to Potiphar’s wife, in interpreting the dreams in prison, in interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh, in the naming of his children, in his words with his father, in his words with his brothers, and in his request to have his bones taken with them when they departed from the land.

**B. Joseph Patiently Endured the “Bad” as from God**

Hence, though his heart was wrung with anguish when he was cast into the pit, he did not indulge in unavailing regrets; and though ‘the iron entered into his soul’ when he was in

the dungeon, he was able patiently to wait for God's time for his deliverance (Taylor, 226).

C. Joseph Humbly Accepted the Good as from God

. . . but neither did he forget the Lord's hand in his prosperity. This was as undeserved by him as his adversity had been. Both alike came from the Most High, and in both alike God meant it for good. So while he was kept from despondency in the one experience, he was preserved from pride in the other. . . God was with him in the dungeon, and that kept him from overestimating its hardships; God was with him in the chariot [of the king], and that kept him from overestimating its honor. The affliction did not sour his heart, and the prosperity did not turn his head, because in both he felt that God was near him; and when we get to such a faith as he had in the presence and protection of a covenant God, we shall be able to preserve an equanimity like his (Taylor, 26-27).

God works out His great purposes through even the crimes of unconscious men. There is an irony, if we may so say, in making the hatred of these men the very means of their brother's advancement, and the occasion of blessing to themselves (Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible*, 1:240).

*For the wrath of men shall praise You: with a remnant of wrath You will gird Yourself*  
(Psalm 76:10).

#### IV. Joseph's Life Is Recorded to Present the Similarities of His Life to Christ's Life

Since the New Testament never specifically identifies Joseph as a type of Jesus Christ, we must be careful not to portray him as if he is. However, the very fact that a caution of this sort is even necessary emphasizes the resemblance of many aspects of Joseph's story to the life of our Lord. F.B. Meyer observes, the story of Joseph "is Calvary in miniature. It is the outline sketch of the Artist's finished work. It is a rehearsal of the greatest drama ever acted amongst men" (*Joseph: Beloved, Hated, Exalted*, 20).

Others are much more emphatic, declaring not only that Joseph is a type of Christ, but that he is the best example of an Old Testament type to be found.

There is not in Scripture a more perfect and beautiful type of Christ than Joseph. Whether we view Christ as the object of the Father's love, the object of the envy of 'His own,' in His humiliation, sufferings, death, exaltation and glory—in all, we have Him strikingly typified in Joseph (C. H. Mackintosh, *Notes on the Pentateuch*, 127).

We must assign the character of Joseph the rightful place, neither diminishing one particle of God's intention in relaying the story, nor exceeding it.

Many commentators have considered Joseph to be an almost perfect type of Christ. Though a number of interesting parallels can be noted, it should not be forgotten that the New Testament nowhere speaks of Joseph as a type of Christ. In view of the dangers inherent in allegorical interpretation, it is generally

safest to avoid spiritualizing, allegorizing, and typological interpretations in general except where there is explicit Biblical warrant. Since such does not exist in the case of the narrative of Joseph, it seems best not to try to view Joseph any special way as a type of Christ. His story is intensely interesting and instructive without that sort of embellishment (Morris, *Genesis*, 535).

It is proper to identify the similarities in the lives of Joseph and Jesus, and to acknowledge that Joseph's life points us to Jesus and reminds us of Him. Thomas Kirk acknowledges that "the fact that Joseph resembles Jesus in his character and career imparts a peculiar interest to his history" (Kirk, 2).

There is a very remarkable similarity between the character of Joseph and that of Christ, as well as between the events of their lives—only an allowance must be made for the incomparable excellency of our great Redeemer above all the sons of men. As the shadow is to the body, so were all the types and figures of our Lord Jesus Christ to Him, whom they represented (Lawson, *The Story of Joseph*, 1).

I would offer a few words on the question whether Joseph is to be considered as a type of Christ. I am far from thinking that on every point of analogy which may be traced by a lively imagination was designed as such by the Holy Spirit; yet neither do I think we are warranted in rejecting the idea. We have already seen that God prepared the way for the coming of his Son by a variety of things in which the great principles of his undertaking were prefigured, and so rendered familiar to the minds of men; and he pursued the same object by a variety of persons, in whom the life and character of Christ

were in some degree previously manifest. Thus Melchizedek prefigured him as a priest, Moses as a prophet, and David as a king; and I cannot but think that in the history of Joseph there is a portion of designed analogy between them (*Works of Andrew Fuller*, III, 146).

Yet, one of the many points of parallel is addressed in the New Testament. During Stephen's message, he demonstrated how a pattern of rejection existed in the Old Testament. God chooses and/or elevates one to leadership of His people only to have the divinely chosen leader to be rejected. Joseph was divinely chosen and his leadership was rejected. Ultimately this pattern would reach a fulfillment on the Cross (Acts 7:9, 51-53). The story of Joseph. . .

exhibits . . . as Stephen was to show, a human pattern that runs through the Old Testament to culminate at Calvary: the rejection of God's chosen deliverers, through the envy and unbelief of their kith and kin—yet a rejection which is finally made to play its own part in bringing about the deliverance (Kidner, *Genesis*, 179).

**Conclusion:** God inspires the story of Joseph to accomplish specific aims. As we prepare ourselves to delve into the life of Joseph, we must become aware that Joseph is not merely a story to be relayed to children. God gave the story to set before us a godly life in the midst of perversity, to divulge an important part of His covenantal dealings with His chosen people, to teach His people of His omnipotent ability to providentially control even evil men and foreign circumstances in order to fit them neatly into

His will, and to magnify for us a life that manifests many similarities to the promised Messiah. Only as our study is able to magnify these Divine purposes will we be able to appreciate the depth and splendor of God's working in Joseph's life.

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