

The Greatest Story Ever Told

A Back-to-Basics Catechesis

The Story of Joseph

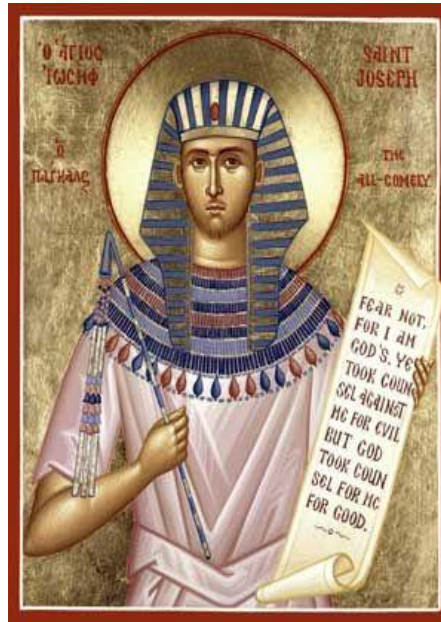
Jacob had returned to the Land of Canaan. He had reconciled with his brother Esau. As noted in the previous flyer, Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel. He also had two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah who were the maidservants of Leah and Rachel, respectively. A concubine is a woman who lives with a man but has lower status than his wife or wives. All of this violates God's original plan for Marriage (see Gen 2:24) which is one man for one woman until death do them part, bearing fruit in their children. But during the long reign of sin that came after the fall, God overlooked things that he would later correct, like divorce and polygamy. As we shall see, polygamy leads to many internal problems in families.

From these four women, Jacob had twelve sons and one daughter (Dinah). From Leah, Jacob bore Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. From Zilpah he bore Gad and Asher. From Bilhah, he bore Dan and Naphtali. Rachel remained barren for many years, but finally she bore Joseph and later, Benjamin.

Now, as was the case with his own parents, Jacob played favorites. He loved Rachel most of all and it grieved him that she was barren. When she finally bore Joseph, he doted on Joseph, lavishing him with many gifts, including an amazing and colorful tunic. Further, Joseph was truly a gifted man of many talents. Hence, his brothers were both jealous and envious.

What causes the most strife in polygamous situations is not that the various wives fight. Rather it is the struggle of the many sons by different

mothers to attain status and rank highest in terms of inheritance. And thus, as Joseph is so favored by his father Jacob, the other sons sense that Joseph, though the youngest, would receive the bulk of the family inheritance. It didn't help that Joseph spoke of his own prophetic dreams that indicated that one day, his brothers would bow to him (which they would).



In response to this, his brothers plot to kill him. They lured him into the wilderness on a false pretext and entrapped him. Just before killing him, they realize that they could make money by selling him into slavery to a passing group of Ishmaelites. This they do and then kill a goat, soak Joseph's garments into its blood and return to their father, Jacob with the lie that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. And Jacob mourned bitterly.

Thus, we see how awful greed can become, along with envy. Some will do almost anything to satisfy their

greed. Even today, some will arrange the death of others to collect insurance money, others will steal and defraud, still others neglect important duties like parenting to emphasize career and money. Jacob's sons commit an atrocious crime against their brother and have little care for the weeping of their father.

But God...

But God can make a way out of no way and even use our sins to bring about greater things.

In Egypt, Joseph is sold to Potiphar, a high-ranking Egyptian soldier. Potiphar, seeing the talent and intelligence of Joseph, places him at the head of his household, to oversee it. And Potiphar was greatly blessed for the blessing of the Lord was upon Joseph. (Gn 39:3)

Thus far, Joseph has landed well. But the Lord often chooses to test those whom he has chosen to prepare them for even greater things. Potiphar's wife had her eyes on Joseph for he was a handsome man (Gen 39:6). She sought him day after day to lie with her. But Joseph was a righteous man and would not violate his master's wife. But one day she so insisted that she grabbed him by the cloak as he fled her presence. Angered at his many refusals and now, having his garment in her possession, she accused him of sexual advances and seduction. Potiphar grew furious and placed Joseph in the king's prison.

Surely this false accusation was a tremendous blow to Joseph. First rejected and sold into slavery by his brothers, now in prison for something he did not do. But once again, the

Lord can make a way out of no way. Even in prison the Lord showed Joseph favor. The warden, seeing Joseph's talents, placed him in supervision over the other prisoners. Wherever Joseph went, he was a natural and effective leader.

Among many of Joseph's talents was the interpretation of dreams. Two of Pharaoh's high officials, the chief butler and the chief baker, were in the prison for some unknown offense. One night they both had troubling dreams. Joseph noted their distress and offered to interpret the dreams. For the butler came the good news that Pharaoh would soon restore him. But Joseph's interpretations were no mere flattery for such high officials. To the baker he gave the sad news that Pharaoh would have him executed. And it happened just as Joseph said.

With the chief butler now restored to his high role, God had a plan. One day Pharaoh too began having troubling dreams. But none of the Magi of Egypt could give a satisfactory interpretation. The chief butler now remembered Joseph and urged Pharaoh to summon him. This was done and Joseph gave an interpretation filled with hope and ultimate troubles. Pharaoh's dream meant that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine. Clearly it would be necessary to save as much food as possible during the years of plenty to survive the famine.

Major Promotion

Pharaoh saw Joseph's talent and leadership, but Joseph gave God the glory. *And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?" Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you."*

...See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." (Gn 41:38-41) Joseph was thirty years old when he became the Prime Minister of all Egypt.

Look at God. He can write straight with crooked lines. In every setback Joseph experienced, there was a hidden blessing. God was up to something good and even used the wicked acts of others to place Joseph just where he needed to be for himself and others. Indeed, many will be saved because of what Joseph has suffered thus far. And this points to Christ by whose sufferings we too are saved.

The famine did indeed come after seven years of plenty. And when the people cried out, Pharaoh said "Go to Joseph and do what he says." (Gn 41:55) Joseph opened the stores of grain and the people were well fed through the famine.

Meanwhile, back in Canaan

The famine reached Canaan as well, and Joseph's brothers along with Jacob were languishing. Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain. He insisted that Benjamin remain behind. He had been born by Rachel after Joseph's departure. Jacob and Rachael could not bear to lose Benjamin whose birth had consoled them after the loss of Joseph.

Turnabout

Entering Joseph's presence, his brothers did not recognize him. They figured they were done with him a long time ago. Can you imagine Joseph's shock as his own brothers came in and bowed to the ground before him? He remembered the dream he had, that one day his brothers would bow to him. Rather than directly confront and punish them, he decided to test them. He questioned their true motives in coming to Egypt. It was not to buy grain but instead to spy on the land and discover its weaknesses. But they insisted that they were "honest men"

and came only for grain. Joseph persisted in his charges and had them arrested! He gave them an option. Since he had learned of the birth of another young brother, he offered to release all of them except Simeon. They were to return to Canaan and bring young Benjamin. Reuben rebuked his brothers and told them they were being punished by God for what they had done to Joseph. Joseph overheard this and wept as the brothers departed for Canaan.

Jacob resisted releasing Benjamin to them, but finally relented due to the severity of the famine. Returning to Egypt with Benjamin, they met again with Joseph who had prepared one last test for them. He hid a precious cup in Benjamin's bag and when the cup was declared missing, had it found in Benjamin's possession. But one of the brothers, Judah, offered to be punished rather than Benjamin lest they once again lose another brother and break Jacob's heart.

Joseph realized now that his brothers had truly repented and finally said to them, "I am Joseph your brother. Do not be afraid, for God used your act to send me before you to save you.... What you intended against me for evil, God intended for good, in order to accomplish a day like this—to preserve the lives of many people." (Gn 50:20) And with weeping the brothers were reconciled to Joseph.

Be Amazed

Do you see what God can do? He can even take our sins and accomplish our salvation by it. He shouldn't have to, but he can! Joseph points forward to Jesus. We turned on Jesus and had him killed. But by this very act God chose to save us.

Only God can accomplish such deeds, be so awesome and be so merciful. As God did with Joseph, he does even more perfectly through Jesus. The Lord too will test us, but only to perfect our conversion. Yes, God can make a way out of no way!