

Joseph Sold into Slavery (Genesis 37)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

I. Background and Introduction

- a. Jacob has returned to his homeland in Canaan after 20+ years in Haran. He has a large family, including 12 sons, and much wealth.
- b. The focus of the **Genesis** narrative now turns to one of Jacob's sons, Joseph.
- c. In this lesson we hope to:
 - i. introduce to Joseph and his story,
 - ii. look at a very important word that first appears in this chapter, and
 - iii. answer one of the greatest spiritual mysteries (and most important questions) of all time.

II. Significance of Joseph

- a. Consider how much text in **Genesis**, which has 50 chapters total, is devoted to the story of Joseph: eleven chapters (out of the last 13 chapters in the book).
- b. Compare that to other popular **Genesis** characters, who figure more prominently in the New Testament.
 - i. Adam: three chapters in **Genesis**
 - ii. Noah: four chapters in **Genesis**
 - iii. Melchizedek: only three *verses* in **Genesis** (yet discussed extensively in **Hebrews chapters 4-7**)
 - iv. In **Genesis**, only Abraham (father of faith) and Jacob (father of the 12 tribes of Israel) are covered to the same extent as Joseph.
- c. Yet Joseph is barely mentioned in the New Testament. Also, Christ is *not* descended from him. For many years I wondered, "Why so much coverage of Joseph? What is the spiritual significance of Joseph to us?"
 - i. To answer the question of why so much text devoted to the story of Joseph, we will take the same 3-level approach to this last major part of **Genesis** as we have been taking in prior lessons. The three steps are:
 1. **Level One:** Look at the basic storyline, including the details

2. **Level Two:** Consider moral lessons for us to learn from (examples of good character as well as the bad).
 3. **Level Three:** Are there any possible allegorical foreshadowings contained in the story? Any clues from New Testament writers (under inspiration of the Holy Spirit), or things pointed out by early Christian writers (not inspired, but perhaps worth considering)?
- d. Where is Joseph mentioned in the New Testament? Two places that I am aware of:
- i. Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin, in **Acts 7**, where he summarizes history of the Jews. There, he speaks the most about Abraham, Joseph and Moses.
 - ii. "By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and *gave instructions concerning his bones.*" (**Hebrews 11:22**, NKJV)
 1. What is *that* referring to, regarding Joseph's dead bones? We hope to examine this in a later lesson.
- e. Significance of Joseph in the grand story of the history of the Jews in the Scriptures:
- i. The events of Joseph's life are pivotal in preparing the way for everything that would follow.
 - ii. God had told Abraham in **Genesis 15**, "Know for certain that your seed will be strangers in a land not their own, and will serve them; and they will afflict and humble them four hundred years. Also, the nation they serve I will judge; and afterward, they shall come out with great possessions." (**Genesis 15:13-14**, LXX, OSB)
 - iii. Joseph was the man God used to relocate all the seed of Abraham's promise (the Jews, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) from Canaan to Egypt. Joseph 'set the stage' for the **Exodus chapter 1**, and everything that would follow, where God would fulfill his promise to Abraham: delivering the Jews after 400 years of affliction in Egypt, and bringing them back to conquer and inherit the land of Canaan. (That story is told in the books of **Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy** and **Joshua**.)
 - f. In future lessons we plan to consider some wonderful character qualities that Joseph has, as well. He provides a great model for us to imitate, in several key areas (purity, faithfulness to God in difficult situations, willingness to forgive those who sinned against him).

III. Joseph Hated by His Brothers (Read **Genesis 37:1-11**)

- a. Summary of the details of the story

- i. Joseph is 17 years old, in Canaan with his family, shepherding. He is the second-youngest of the 12 brothers. (Among Jacob's sons only Benjamin, his full brother by Rachel, is younger.)
- ii. He gives a bad report regarding conduct of his brothers, to his father Jacob/Israel.
- iii. Joseph is the favorite of his father.
 - 1. Jacob gives his son a special tunic, "of many colors".
- iv. Joseph has two dreams:
 - 1. The sheaves dream. Each of the brothers is binding sheaves of grain. Then Joseph's sheaf stands upright and the sheaves of his brothers bow down before his sheaf. (Brothers angry; see this as a dream of Joseph ruling over them.)
 - 2. The sun/ moon/ stars dream. In this dream the sun, moon and 11 stars are bowing down to Joseph. His father protests.
 - a. Sun = his father, Jacob
 - b. Moon = his mother (however, his mother Rachel is deceased at this point)
 - c. Eleven stars = his 11 brothers
- b. Joseph's brothers hate him. Why?
 - i. Sin exposed. He gave a bad report about them to their father regarding the sons of Bilhah (Dan and Naphtali) and the sons of Zilpah (Gad and Asher).
 - ii. Envy. Their father loved Joseph more than the other brothers.
 - iii. Resentment/ jealousy. They did not want to have him ruling over them.
 - iv. (Can you think of anyone in the New Testament that had people hate him for the same reasons?)

IV. Joseph Sold into Slavery by His Brothers (Read Genesis 37:12-36)

- a. Summary of the details of the story
 - i. Jacob sends Joseph to find his brothers, who are tending the sheep at another location.
 - ii. Joseph's brothers, in Dothan, see him coming and plot to kill him. They plan to cover up the crime by telling their father that a wild beast had devoured him.
 - iii. Reuben (the oldest brother) is the good brother in this story. He does not want to kill Joseph, and secretly plans to rescue him from the pit.

- iv. The brothers take Joseph's colored tunic and cast him into the empty cistern (pit).
 - v. Brothers take a break, and have a meal. Ishmaelite spice traders on their way to Egypt appear.
 - vi. Judah proposes that they sell their brother to the traders, instead of killing him. Joseph is lifted from the pit, sold for 20 pieces of gold, and bound for Egypt as a slave.
 - vii. Reuben returns to the pit (unaware of what had transpired with the traders), sees that Joseph is not there; he is distressed (tears his clothes) and confused. He says, "The lad is not there; and I, where shall I go?"
 - viii. The brothers kill a goat, dip Joseph's colored tunic in its blood and bring it back to their father to deceive him, pretending that they found the tunic that way.
 - ix. Jacob identifies the blood-stained, colored robe as Joseph's. He weeps and mourns, unable to be consoled at his son's apparent death.
 - x. Joseph arrives in Egypt; he is sold as a slave to Potiphar, captain of the guard and officer of Pharaoh.
- b. What is the motivation for the crime the brothers commit here?
- i. "Let us now kill him and cast him into some pit... We shall see what will become of his dreams." (**Genesis 37:20**. LXX, OSB)
 - ii. The brothers are resentful, especially of the prophetic dreams that Joseph would end up ruling over them. They attempt to block the prophecy by killing him.
 - 1. This reminds me of **Matthew 2:13-18**, where Herod the Great kills all the children in the region of Bethlehem. He was trying to block the prophecy of **Micah 5:2**, which said that the great ruler was to be born in Bethlehem.
 - 2. Lesson for us: you can't stop a prophecy! Don't even try.
- c. To this point, did Joseph do anything wrong?
- i. It seems to me that Joseph did nothing wrong here.
 - ii. He gave a bad report to his father, but apparently his brothers were doing something unrighteous.
 - iii. His father loved him best and gave him a special coat, but that was not his fault.
 - iv. He reported the dreams to his brothers and to his father, which may have seemed arrogant to them; however, those were the dreams that God gave him. Plus, those dreams *were fulfilled!*

- d. What sins were his brothers guilty of? (Other than Reuben; and maybe Benjamin, who may have been too young to participate.)
- i. Four of his brothers were doing something unrighteous in their shepherding.
 - ii. "But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak civilly to him."
(**Genesis 37:4**, LXX, OSB)
 1. They envied Joseph's close relationship with their father.
 2. They hated Joseph and could not speak civilly to him.
 - iii. They planned to murder him (premeditated).
 - iv. The only reason they did not kill him was that Judah said, "What profit is there if we kill our brother?" Instead, they sold him into slavery for gold coins.
 - v. They conspired to deceive their father with the bloody colored tunic. Even when their father was broken-hearted, weeping and mourning, they maintained the lie.
 - vi. They managed to break five of the 10 Commandments that would be given later (from **Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5**):
 1. dishonoring their father (#5),
 2. conspiracy to murder (#6),
 3. stealing (tunic) (#8),
 4. bearing false witness (#9), and
 5. coveting (#10).
- e. Note that there are several very specific, vivid details included in this story. The details might not seem essential to the main thrust of the story (Main storyline = Joseph's brothers hated him and sold him to some traders bound for Egypt, then lied about it and concocted a story that he was eaten by a wild animal.) **Question:** Why are there so many (apparently extraneous) details provided in this story? For example:
- i. Why does it make a point of saying it was a multi-colored coat that his father gave him?
 - ii. It says that his father loved him more than any of his brothers because he was son in his old age. However, Jacob was even older when he had Benjamin.
 - iii. Why does it mention that he was cast into a dry pit as a temporary holding place, from which he was then lifted out? And why does it mention that Reuben comes back to the place later, and is totally confused when he does not find Joseph there?

iv. Why does it mention that the Midianite traders were carrying aromatic spices? Why was it necessary for us to know that detail?

1. **Answer: In a later lesson** we will revisit the question as to why there are so many of these details included in the story.

V. A Significant Word is Introduced in this Story

a. After Jacob saw the bloody tunic of Joseph and concluded his son was dead, it says he put on sackcloth and mourned for many days. Then it says:

i. “And all his sons and his daughters gathered themselves together, and came to comfort him; but he would not be comforted, saying, I will go down to my son mourning to Hades; and his father wept for him. (**Genesis 37:35**, Brenton’s English Translation of the Septuagint)

ii. In this passage, from the LXX, we have the first place in the Bible that the word ‘*Hades*’ appears.

iii. The Greek word ‘Hades’ is equivalent to the Hebrew word ‘Sheol’. It is the abode of the dead, the place where the souls of the deceased go to wait for the day of final judgment.

1. For those whose Old Testament is translated from the Masoretic Text, this also is the first place where ‘Sheol’ is found in Scripture.

iv. When the translators come to this word:

1. sometimes it is simply left as ‘Hades’ (when translating from the Greek of the New Testament or from the LXX Old Testament);
2. sometimes it is left as ‘Sheol’ (when translating from the Hebrew of the Old Testament);
3. sometimes it is translated into English as “the grave” (which I find confusing, since this also can refer to the place in the ground where a dead body is deposited); and
4. sometimes (such as in the KJV) it is translated as “hell”.
 - a. Translating ‘Hades’ as ‘hell’ has caused a LOT of confusion. ‘Hades’ (the temporary abode of the souls of the dead, awaiting final judgment) is NOT the same as ‘gehenna’ (the lake of fire, into which Satan, his angels and all the wicked will be cast on the Day of Judgment). Yet in some older translations both of these (very different) words often are translated ‘hell’.
 - b. If you look at some older English dictionaries, you will see that people in the past had more of an appreciation that the English word ‘hell’ had multiple meanings.

5. Don't just take my word on this. You can easily confirm this yourself, with a Greek interlinear Bible that has the ancient Greek text with English underneath each word. The Apostolic Bible Polyglot, developed by Charles Van der Pool, has both the LXX and New Testament in interlinear format. This resource can be accessed free online.
- b. This passage in Genesis is the first specific mention of what happens to our spirits after we die. Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, understood that after death, our spirits descend to Hades.
 - i. Job, who according to **Job 42** in the LXX was the great-grandson of Jacob's twin brother Esau, also was familiar with the concept of Hades as the place where the spirits of the dead go. Consider **Job 17:13**.
 - c. This word 'Hades' was pivotal in Peter's famous speech in **Acts 2** on the Day of Pentecost. There, Peter defended the resurrection of Jesus based on what David had said 1,000 years prior. Peter quotes from **Psalms 16**, quoting directly from the Greek of the LXX (where this typically is designated **Psalms 15**):
 - i. "Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption." (**Acts 2:26-27**, NKJV)
 - ii. Peter later makes the point, "he (*referring to David*), foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption." (**Acts 2:31**, NKJV)
 - iii. From Peter's explanation we can also confidently answer the question of where Jesus was between the time that he died on the cross on Friday, and was resurrected on Sunday.
 1. As we discussed earlier in Genesis, man is composed of two parts: physical body and spirit. At death, the spirit departs from the body.
 2. Jesus' body was in the tomb for those three days.
 3. His spirit, according to Peter, was *in Hades* during that time.
 4. When Jesus was resurrected on Sunday morning, his spirit departed from Hades, and was reunited with his body that had been resting in the tomb. Jesus made it clear that it was not a ghost (a disembodied spirit) that the apostles were seeing.
 - a. Jesus appeared to the skeptical apostles after his resurrection. From the gospel of **Luke**: "Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, 'Peace to you.' But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a

spirit. And He said to them, 'Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.' When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. But while they still did not believe for joy, and marveled, He said to them, 'Have you any food here?' So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence." (Luke 24:36-43, NKJV)

- b. In the famous passage where Jesus confronts the unbelief of 'doubting Thomas': "Then He said to Thomas, 'Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.'" (John 20:27, NKJV)
- iv. Peter also alludes to Christ's spirit descending to Hades in his letter, **1 Peter**, where he says,
1. "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison," (**1 Peter 3:18-19**, NKJV)
 2. Peter says that by the Spirit, Christ "preached to the spirits in prison". From the beginning, Christians have understood that this referred to what Christ did when he descended into Hades. He "preached to the spirits in prison" there.
 - a. Hades therefore being the place where the souls of the dead were in some sense 'imprisoned'.
 - b. Christ "preached" to those who were there. What did he say? Did he preach the gospel to those who had died beforehand, or tell them what was yet to come?
- v. Paul also alludes to this in **Ephesians 4**:
1. "Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.' (Now this, 'He ascended'—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?)" (**Ephesians 4:8-9**, NKJV)
- vi. Does "lower parts of the earth" refer to Hades? Consider this in light of what Jesus himself said in **Matthew 12**:
1. "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the

prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (**Matthew 12:38-40**, NKJV)

- vii. Jesus said he would spend three days in “the heart of the earth”. Paul said he descended “into the lower parts of the earth”. Peter said Jesus’ spirit was in Hades, and says he preached to the spirits “in prison”. All are different expressions referring to the same event. This also is reflected in the Apostles Creed, an ancient foundational statement of faith that may well have been something a convert would profess before being baptized. (Structure of the Creed is: I believe in the Father...and in the Son...and in the Holy Spirit.)
 1. Old form of the Apostles Creed (Greek) says, regarding the Son, “Who was crucified, died and buried, He descended to the lowermost parts (some versions say “to Hades” or even (as I originally learned it as a child) “to hell”).
 2. Same term for “lowermost” used in the old Creed as Paul used in **Ephesians 4**.
 3. Note that belief that Christ descended into Hades was considered a foundational, core teaching in the church long ago. Why is that neglected now, a time that corresponds to much confusion regarding what happens after we die?
- d. Now we understand what happened to Jesus. What will happen to us when we die?
 - i. At funerals we often hear preachers say things like, “I’m sure that Jack is now in heaven....” The Bible does not teach that we go straight to heaven immediately after we die. That is not what happened to Jesus, and according to the Scriptures is not what will happen to us! Instead, when we die our spirits will go to Hades, following the example set by Jesus.
 - ii. “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.” (**Luke 16:19-23**, NKJV)
 1. Early Christians understood from passages like this that when we die, angels escort our spirits to Hades. That is the waiting place for the spirits of those who die.

2. Hades has two regions in it: one of comfort (where Lazarus and Abraham were) for the righteous, and one of torment (where the rich man was).
- iii. “The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.” (**Matthew 12:41–42**, NKJV)
 1. There will be one Day of Judgment for all mankind. Similar to what Jesus taught in **Matthew 25** in the story of the Sheep and Goats.
 2. People who had died, from different periods of time (Queen of Sheba, men of Nineveh, Jews of Jesus’ time) would all rise and be judged at the same time.
 - iv. Jesus also said, “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” (**John 5:28–29**, NKJV)
 - v. Paul goes into detail regarding what happens after we die, in 1 **Corinthians chapter 15**. He says that if we follow Christ, our fate will follow the pattern he established.
 1. “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming.” (**1 Corinthians 15:20–23**, NKJV)
 2. “The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.” (**1 Corinthians 15:47–49**, NKJV)
 3. “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on

incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 15:51-58, NKJV)

- a. Our lives will follow the pattern set by Jesus, if we follow him: Life, death, descent to Hades, physical resurrection and transformation, eternal heavenly glory.
 - b. In the end, death and Hades (the fate lamented by Jacob, Job and David) will be defeated. Hades will be emptied.
 - c. In view of what lies before us, Paul admonishes us to "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."
- e. Recap of what the Bible teaches regarding 'Hades', a word introduced in the LXX in **Genesis 37** in Jacob's mourning for the fate of his son Joseph:
- i. Hades (Greek term) = Sheol (Hebrew term) = intermediate resting/waiting place for spirits of the dead; sometimes rendered "the grave" in English translations.
 - ii. After Jesus died, while his body was in the tomb for three days, his spirit descended into Hades.
 - iii. Jesus confirmed in **Luke 16** what Jacob had said in **Genesis 37**. Hades is where our spirits go when we die. Regardless of what you may hear at funerals, we do not go straight to heaven when we die. Final judgment for all will occur on the Last Day, when Jesus returns.
- f. What we do in this life really matters!
- i. As Christians, we are in a unique position to understand the answer to one of the greatest secrets of the universe: what happens when we die. Let's be steadfast and persevere until the end.
 - ii. If you are not a Christian, what can be more important than ensuring that you are prepared for the Day of Judgment? Prepare for that now, while there is still time, before your soul is waiting in Hades for Jesus' return.
- g. If this teaching on Hades (and the historic Christian teaching regarding what happens after we die) is new to you, some recommended resources to learn more include:

- i. Audio lessons by David Bercot, available through Scroll Publishing
 1. *What the Early Christians Believed about Life After Death*
 2. *Christ's Descent into Hades*
- ii. *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (edited by David Bercot), articles on:
 1. Intermediate State of the Dead
 2. Descent into Hades
- iii. Apostolic Bible Polyglot (interlinear Greek/ English LXX and NT) by Charles Vander Pool, to see for yourself how and where the word *Hades* is used.
- iv. Our expository series on **1 Corinthians**, the lesson on **chapter 15**.