

*A Resilient Life: The Joseph Story*

**Week One: Resilient People Know Hardships will Come**

New Hope Thursdays

September 25, 2008

We all know that life isn't easy. Each new week brings new challenges which sometimes are so daunting we wonder if we will find our way through them. The faithful life is a *resilient* life. The Old Testament story of Joseph is a story of a resilient life. Joseph faced one daunting challenge after another yet his faith sustained him through them all. In his story we'll discover how *resiliency* can be part of our story.

**Weekly Schedule:**

Sept 25	Resilient People Know Hardships Will Come	Genesis 37
Oct 2	Resilient People Have Integrity	Genesis 39
Oct 9	Resilient People Know that God is Good	Genesis 40-41
Oct 16	Resilient People Persevere	Genesis 40-41
Oct 23	No Class – Fall Break	
Oct 30	Resilient People Can See the Big Picture	Genesis 42-45
Nov 6	Resilient People Can Forgive	Genesis 50:15-21
Nov 13	Living a Resilient Life	Genesis 50:22-26

Except for October 9, each lesson on Thursday night will be followed by a sermon on the same passage the following Sunday. The lesson on October 9 will be preached on the weekend of fall break, October 26.

I will provide copies each week of a study guide that will include the passages we're studying that evening. However, I encourage you to bring your own Bibles with you to read as we move through the story. We'll be using the NRSV translation.

**Resilient People Know Hardships Will Come**

**Genesis 37**

What comes to your mind when you think of Joseph's story? What details of the story can you come up with? At your table, come up with as many details as you can. Keep your Bibles closed, please! No peeking below, either!

What are themes in the Joseph story can you identify?

## I. Some Background

Joseph was one of twelve sons born to Jacob (later to be named “Israel”). Jacob, as you may remember, was not the most outstanding of Biblical characters. Cheating his brother Esau out of the family birthright was just one of his questionable actions.

Jacob’s sons were born to four different women.

Leah: Reuben (Jacob’s first-born), Simeon, Levi, Judah,

Issachar and Zebulun

Bilhah: Dan and Naphtali

Zilpah: Gad and Asher

Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin

Rachel was Jacob’s first love (Genesis 29:20). She was barren for many years but finally conceived and gave birth to Joseph, and then, Benjamin (Joseph’s final two sons). Rachel died in giving birth to Benjamin.

Joseph’s story is told in chapters 37-50 of Genesis. It is much longer and more detailed than the other stories in Genesis. His story will set the stage for the Exodus story to come.

## II. The Story Begins

*Genesis 37:1-4 A Sibling Rivalry*

**<sup>1</sup>Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>This is the story of the family of Jacob.**

**Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. <sup>3</sup>Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. <sup>4</sup>But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.**

### Comments:

- a. Story begins in Canaan (Promised Land) and ends in Egypt. Exodus begins in Egypt and ends (almost) in Canaan.
- b. Notice the emphasis on this being “the story of the family of Jacob” (v.2). There’s more going on here than Joseph. His story is part of a much larger story.
- c. We are immediately introduced to the family tensions that set the tone for *all* that is to come in this story. Joseph was favored by his father which caused his brothers to hate him.
- d. “Long robe with sleeves” was a sign of nobility and privilege. “Many colors” comes from the Greek and Latin translations of this text.

### Question:

Interesting isn’t it that something as common as sibling rivalry is the backdrop to one of the greatest stories in the Bible. Not only that, this sibling rivalry led to significant turns in the story of God’s people. What does this show us about how God works?

### *Genesis 37:5-11 The Dreamer*

**<sup>5</sup>Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup>He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed. <sup>7</sup>There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” <sup>8</sup>His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.**

**<sup>9</sup>He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” <sup>10</sup>But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, “What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” <sup>11</sup>So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.**

**Comments:**

- a. Notice that no interpretation of the dreams is given, but the brothers assume they know what they mean which enrage them even more against their brother.
- b. The dreams are a foreshadowing to what is to come.
- c. It is these dreams that trigger the brothers to act.

**Question:**

Why do you think the dreams enraged the brothers so?

*Genesis 37:12-17 Journey to Dothan*

**<sup>12</sup>Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup>And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." <sup>14</sup>So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.**

**He came to Shechem, <sup>15</sup>and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup>"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup>The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan.**

**Comment:**

- a. Shechem was about 50 miles away, Dothan was another 15 miles in distance. In order to find good grasslands for their flocks, shepherds often had to travel great distances.
- b. The word "well" in v.14 is the Hebrew *shalom*.
- c. The second paragraph is a rather strange bit of detail. It doesn't add anything to the story, however, it does heighten the drama. It also speaks of the detail that is included in this story.

### Question:

Do you find it odd that Jacob would send his son so far from home to find his brothers when he knew they had such animosity toward him?

### *Genesis 37:18-28 The Plot*

**<sup>18</sup>They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. <sup>19</sup>They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup>Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” <sup>21</sup>But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” <sup>22</sup>Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. <sup>23</sup>So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; <sup>24</sup>and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.**

**<sup>25</sup>Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup>Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup>Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. <sup>28</sup>When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.**

### Comments:

- a. It’s ironic that the brothers mock Joseph as a “dreamer” yet because of their actions, his dreams became a reality. They thought they were killing his dreams, but it was not so.
- b. Notice Joseph does not speak at this point. He is a silent character in the unfolding drama.
- c. Reuben, the oldest son, takes the responsibility of at least trying to do his brother less harm. As the oldest, it was his role to think of his father. Hard to imagine, however, how his plan could have worked

out. Joseph would surely have returned to his father and told him all that had happened.

d. The brothers strip Joseph of his robe seemingly taking away his status as the favored son.

e. The pit was a cistern—a dug-out hole for the storage of rain water.

f. The thought of making a bit of money causes the brothers to spare Joseph's life. These brothers are gems, aren't they?

g. The significance of Egypt in the history of God's people begins right here in v.28.

h. Other than Reuben, at this point not one brother seems concerned about how their father will respond to the plot they are carrying out.

### Question:

What "sins" lurk in this passage? How many can you identify?

### *Genesis 37:29-36 The Aftermath*

**<sup>29</sup>When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. <sup>30</sup>He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?" <sup>31</sup>Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup>They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." <sup>33</sup>He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." <sup>34</sup>Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup>All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him. <sup>36</sup>Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.**

### Comments:

a. Reuben, as the older brother, is distraught because he knows that he will be held responsible by their father.

- b. They now compound their tragic actions by deceiving their father. Irony here again in that Jacob is the one who deceived Isaac to get the birthright from Esau. Now his sons deceive him.
- c. Jacob sent Joseph to discover the *shalom* of his sons. Now there is anything but *shalom*.
- d. *Sheol* was thought to be the realm of the dead.
- e. The hatred of the brothers seems to have triumphed over the love of a father.
- f. The final verse of the chapter, however, points to a future. The story is not yet finished.

**Question:**

No one in this story is innocent—even Joseph contributed to the tragedy that unfolded. What lesson is there in this?

**Something to Think About**

*Resilience* is the ability to recover from adversity. In the weeks to come, we'll see the resilience of Joseph in the face of one adversity after another. What contributes to our ability to be resilient?

God is not mentioned in this first part of the Joseph story. But that doesn't mean God is not at work. Isn't it often true that in the midst of hardships, God does seem absent? Yet, in our better moments, we trust that somehow He is at work. Faith, "the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1), is the backbone of resiliency.

As Joseph knew well, hardships in life will come. But faith in the God who is always at work to carry out his purposes enables us to live a resilient life.

**"The theme of the Joseph narrative concerns God's hidden and decisive power which works in and through but also against human forms of power. A 'soft' word for that reality is *providence*. A harder word for the same reality is *predestination*. Either way—providence or predestination—the theme is that God is working out his purpose through and in spite of Egypt, through and in spite of Joseph and his brothers."**  
from *Genesis*, by Walter Brueggemann, p.293.