

Amazing Truths from the Pentateuch (9)
God Meant it for Good - The Saving life of Joseph
Genesis 37:1-11

Introduction:-

Soon after I found Christ as my Saviour at Tamworth Baptist Church in the early 1960's, I decided to write and produce a play on the life of Joseph, including the drawing and painting of all the backdrop scenes for the several acts of the play, as well as supply the music background, as well as direct the play. Strangely enough, I was also about 17 years of age at the time, the age of Joseph as his story begins in the Genesis story. What led me to do such a thing at the time now eludes me, but I think that I must have been impressed with the way in which God could bless such a life as Joseph's, from that of humble beginnings, and even slavery, to that of final exultation in Egypt, as a saviour of his own people, plus a saviour of Egypt and the known world of that time. Something within this mix must have stirred my teenage imagination, and so the play was finally put on, but not unfortunately without a number of technical hick-ups and faults. Any way, I gave it my best shots, and despite its faults and failings, a good friend said to me later, "Don't worry Ted about its minor shortcomings, it fully receives my approval, in fact, I want to say, "Good on you, well done !!" Well, many years on now, let me come back to the Joseph story, but this time, to try and pick up some of the secrets of Joseph's life, as well as take a brief look at the larger literary narrative of the Book of Genesis as a whole, that might give us some further clues as to the purpose of the Joseph cycle of stories at the end of the Book of Genesis.

1. First Joseph's Dreams begin to indicate a larger purpose for his life (Genesis 37:1-11)

Contemporary culture encourages people to dream. Follow your dream no matter how big or small - If you believe it enough it will come true - As with the song in the Sound of Music - "Climb every mountain - Ford every stream, Follow every rainbow, till you find your dream!! But how different are the two dreams that Joseph had at the beginning of his story!! Coming from God, they did not reveal Joseph's personal ambitions, even though this is what his family thought, including Jacob himself, although without totally dismissing their relevance for the fledgling family and nation (37:11). In fact, like Jacob himself, whose faith journey began with a dream at Bethel, with a vision of angels ascending and descending upon a ladder, with the Lord standing at the top, so in like manner, Joseph begins his faith journey with two dreams, that actually support each other, in terms of God's future plans that will save the promise originally made with Abraham, and confirmed with Isaac and Jacob, to raise up and preserve a nation, and grant a land, that will finally lead to the blessing of the nations (Genesis 12:1-3). But at this point, Joseph's family fail to see God's larger purposes through Joseph's dreams, and even feel threatened by them. Further, Joseph's favouritism as the pampered son of Jacob's favourite wife Rachel, illustrated by a multi-coloured robe, did not help things either with Joseph's brothers, neither did the "bad" report that Joseph had made about his brothers in 37:2, which most likely foreshadows the brother's intended "evil" mentioned at 50:20, when Joseph finally says: "You intended to harm me, or do me "evil" (same Hebrew word), but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (cf. Romans 8:28). Finally, unlike Jacob whose initial dream at Bethel finally led to his wrestling with an angel at Jabbok, Joseph's initial dreams finally led him to

his exaltation in Egypt, after the struggle of his threefold betrayal, first with his brothers who sold him to the Midianite traders at the instigation of Judah (37:26-36), then in the house of Potiphar, with the false allegations of Potiphar's scheming and adulterous wife (39:1-20), and finally in prison with the forgetfulness of the Cupbearer, whose dream Joseph interpreted in a favourable light (40:1-23). In spite of these set-backs, and difficult periods in Joseph's life, we read that "God was with Joseph." First we could argue that this began with Judah's life-saving intervention from his brother's murderous schemes (37:26-27), and then with the more specific statements to this effect within Potiphar's household at 39:2-6, with the Lord's added blessing upon everything that Potiphar owned, as a precursor to Joseph's final role in the seven years of Egypt's plenty and famine. And even in prison, leading up to this event, "the Lord was with Joseph, and gave him success in whatever he did" (39:20-23). And so even from this vantage point, God would not forget Joseph, but in his own good time, would bring him before Pharaoh.

2. Secondly, the meaning of Joseph's Dreams finally take shape (41:1-50:26)

Finally, Pharaoh himself had a dream which stirred the Cupbearer's sluggish memory. Immediately, Joseph came before Pharaoh, and interpreted his two dreams, which were really only one, thus indicating the certainty of what God was about to do. This also parallels the two dreams which God gave to Joseph at the beginning, which were also only one, indicating his new role which amazingly would find its fulfilment within Pharaoh's dreams and elevation of him within Egypt. Within this scenario, Joseph was quick to point out that only God could give Pharaoh the answer to what he desired (41:16). To which Pharaoh replied, after Joseph had interpreted his dreams and provided precise instructions as to how these should be carried out - "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the Spirit of God?" (41:38). Joseph was then immediately made second only in the throne to Pharaoh, with royal powers and responsibilities over Egypt (shades of Genesis 1:28-31). Soon after this, Joseph's family would come down to Egypt, in search of grain, and bow before Joseph (42:6), in fulfilment of his dreams at Genesis 37:7, 9, and in fulfilment of Genesis 45:7: "But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance." Thus the secret of Joseph's life is seen in two contemporary statements. On the one hand we are told that he prospered in all that he did "because the Lord was with him" (39:2-6, 20-23). On the other hand he declared to his brothers, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God" (42:18). On this last point, with regard to "fear of God", Joseph's reply to Potiphar's wife's advances: "How can I do such a wicked thing and sin against God" (39:9), tells us of Joseph's holy walk and commitment to God. This for Joseph was obviously no flash-in-the-pan walk with God. Sin for him was sin against the moral standards of a holy and righteous God. He found that godliness did pay. And so here we have the secret of Joseph's life: On the one hand we see God's grace, and His sovereign and hidden hand at work in Joseph's life, and on the other hand, we see Joseph's whole-hearted commitment to his God. And yet, if we had been with Joseph throughout his "ups and downs" how would we have known that God was with him? Unlike Jacob he did not "wrestle with God" (Genesis 32:22-32). Through such extraordinary events the Patriarchs knew that God was with them. But not quite so with Joseph. Rather, any blessing that comes to the house of an Egyptian on account of Joseph (39:5), tells us that this is not a story about the success of Joseph, but rather of God's grace, and faithfulness to his promises, working themselves out through Joseph's obedient life. At the same time, all of these things must have been deeply reassuring to Joseph, indicating that "God was with him" at each step along the way. Indeed the words of Isaiah 30:15 could well be

applied to Joseph during this time: "In quietness and confidence will be your strength."

3. Finally, we may see Joseph as a fulfilment of the Ideal Adam (Genesis 1-3).

One further line worth pursuing is a narrative one in which we may see the story about Joseph fulfilling all that Adam failed to achieve at the beginning of the book of Genesis. Why is Joseph the only person described in the book of Genesis as one who was filled with the Spirit of God? The reason why Joseph is the only one who is wise and can interpret dreams is related to his close walk with, and obedience to God. When Adam sinned, he lost his spirit connection with God, and thus his ability to be led by God's Spirit. In his interpretation of dreams, Joseph is able to distinguish between "good" and "evil" which is flagged with the tree of the knowledge of "good" and "evil" back at Genesis 2-3. Only God's Word and command, which Adam and Eve failed to obey with regard to this tree, is fulfilled in Joseph. Because of his fear of God, does God allow him to discern between good and evil, which Adam and Eve were unable to do because of their disobedience. In fact, Joseph's plans appeared as "good" to Pharaoh (41:37), reflecting the true intention of God's creation as "good" back at Genesis 1:31, in fact fulfilling the whole of Genesis 1:28-31 with regard to responsible rule over the earth including food supply! Just as Adam is made vice-regent to rule over the land, so Pharaoh gives Joseph his signet ring and dresses him in royal garments. And just as God provided a wife for Adam in the Garden, and gave human beings the land for all their enjoyment, so Pharaoh gave a wife to Joseph, and put him over all the land (41:45). Further, whereas Eve tempted Adam to sin within the Garden, Joseph resisted and fled from the evil enticements and forbidden fruit of Potiphars wife. Thus a case can be built for seeing Joseph as the "ideal Adam" as we come to the end of the book of Genesis.

Conclusion:-

When all is said and done, Joseph was a living testimony to the truth of Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Yes, you can follow your dream, but only the dream that God gives us, will truly fulfil God's eternal purpose for us. The secret of Joseph's life from the time of his initial dreams to that of his exaltation in Egypt as the saviour of his people, and world, may be seen in his fear of God, and belief in the promises of God first given to Abraham at Genesis 12:1-3, that one day his people would become a nation, and possess the promised land, in order to become a blessing to the peoples of the earth. Interestingly enough, this is how Joseph is finally remembered in God's hall of fame in the Book of Hebrews chapter 11:22, when by faith Joseph speaks about the eventual exodus of his people from Egypt, as well as his own place within the promised land. Finally, from Joseph we learn that God is just as present when he works unobtrusively and even secretly in our lives, as when he performs extraordinary events, like Jacob's wrestling match with an angel. It is a tremendous encouragement and challenge for us to know that we can and should experience God as powerful, and quietly present in our lives in the office, home, factory, and school. All that lies ahead of us in God's plan is not for us to know. Joseph also had to learn this lesson on a step-by-step basis. But we can be absolutely confident that no matter what it is, our Saviour will be with us. It is equally certain that like Joseph, God wants us to be his instruments, his people by which the good news about his son Jesus is proclaimed to all the nations of the world. Therein lies the challenge and blessing of the life of Joseph for us today. Amen