



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers  
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 6  
ABRAHAM'S SON  
JOSEPH**

**FEBRUARY 5-11, 2007**

DAY	DIRECTED READING	DEVOTIONAL READING	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i> READING
Monday	Genesis 45-46	Psalm 26	Genesis 45 – 46:4
Tuesday	Genesis 47-50	Psalm 27	Genesis 50:15-26
Wednesday	Exodus 1-3	Psalm 28	Exodus 1
Thursday	Exodus 4-6	Psalm 29	Exodus 2
Friday	Exodus 7-9	Psalm 30	Exodus 3

**READ**

Genesis 45:1 – 46:4

Psalms 26

**REFLECT**

We begin this week the story of Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob, but his first son with his beloved Rachel. Joseph's story basically completes the book of Genesis, running from chapter 37 to the end of chapter 50. The story (with the exception of one or two items) is a seamless and dramatic tale of Joseph's rejection by his brothers, his being sold into Egypt, his ups and downs until his appointment by Pharaoh as his highest administrator, and his reconciliation with his family. The plot is compelling and the details are vivid, and it is no wonder that Hollywood has tried its hand at bringing this story to the big screen.

The story begins in the heart of Jacob's family, where the internal jealousies we saw in the birth of the 12 brothers have developed into ongoing animosities. In particular, Jacob's fondness for his departed wife Rachel has allowed him to show preferment to Joseph, and Joseph enjoys flaunting this position with tattling and boasting. He particularly enrages family members by recounting two dreams, which place him at the center of the family, with the others bowing down to him. Jacob observes the problem, but doesn't try to resolve it, and in fact on one crucial day puts Joseph into danger by sending him off to find out what his brothers are up to, some 50 miles from home.

The brothers, at a distance from home, and seeing Joseph approach, decide to kill him and be done with the irritation once and for all. As soon, however, as this murderous spirit, so antithetical to family life, manifests itself, at least two brothers have qualms and begin to try to redeem the situation partly. The result is that instead of murdering him, the brothers sell Joseph as a slave to a group of traders traveling toward Egypt. His life is spared. But the brothers take the famous "coat of

many colors" which was Jacob's gift to Joseph, and they bloody it with goats' blood, and present it to the father as proof of his son's death by wild animals. Jacob is inconsolable in his grief.

Thus begins the outworking of the next stage of God's plan for His people Israel. He takes advantage of these very dysfunctional family dynamics, to bring Abraham's people into a level of opportunity and strength that would otherwise be beyond the realm of possibility. He uses exactly the extreme nature of the family dissonance to bring about an aspect of the plan that is unimaginable: this smallish tribe will indeed become a nation, an immeasurable multitude.

One of the powerful aspects of the telling of the story is that the jealousy and brutality of the brothers is neither softened nor excused. It is cruel, and can never be justified. The pain it inflicts will have its consequences. But the goodness of reconciliation and family solidarity will be reaffirmed and displayed. As with the story of Jacob's deception, so here also God will take seriously Joseph's immaturity and the brothers' jealousy. He will meet the family there, and guide its history, and in the process He will change each participant by allowing them to experience forgiveness and release.

**RESPOND**

Today's Psalm reminds us similarly of the contrast between the ill-will and deceit that marks many social relationships, and the powerful integrity that the Lord fosters in us. In fact it affirms the integrity that we learn from the Lord as one of the best refuges we can have in times of moral and social chaos. Integrity links us with God, and with those who serve Him.

**PRAY**

*Redeem me, and be gracious to me. My foot stands on a level place; in the congregation I shall bless the Lord.* Psalm 26:11-12

D.D.

**READ**

Genesis 50:15-26

Psalms 27

**REFLECT**

Joseph, sold into slavery, finds himself in the home of Potiphar of Egypt, an officer to the Pharaoh (Genesis 39). Right away we are told that something has changed in Joseph's life: "And the Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man" (39:2). And right away we are shown something of this success in the capability shown by Joseph and perceived by his master, who quickly allows him to become a part of the household, and gives him full authority over his estate.

These things signal sudden but real maturity in Joseph. Known in his family for idle boasting and a knack for antagonizing everyone, here he has learned the value of getting along with others – not only his master, but the others of his master's servants as well. More profoundly, he has cultivated in some way a positive relationship with the Lord as a living and guiding presence, already in his 20s. He has thus learned the value of relationship with God so central for his forbears Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but has been able to put it into practice at a much earlier age. In the process he has found a definite skill that is immediately useful to those around him: he has discovered that he is an administrator.

Looking back at the stories of Joseph's forbears, with the poignant accounts of wrenching testing and growth, it is a surprise to realize that we have to assume that all this must have happened as a part of Joseph's brief life with the slavers. We are told nothing about it, but instead we are presented with perhaps the most spiritually mature person, for his age, that we have yet encountered in the Bible. With Jacob, the story was about the growth of one individual in relationship with God. With Joseph, the story will be about the impact that a grounded man of God can have on his family and his society. To put it another way, it is the story of how far God can use one individual when He has their full attention.

The other important attribute of this new Joseph is integrity. It emerges especially as Potiphar's wife takes advantage of her proximity to Joseph to lure him into a sexual encounter. The story makes it clear that Joseph resists because such a liaison would be out of step both with his commitments to his master, and his relationship with his God. In the flawed social context of Egypt, his integrity is a liability rather than an asset, and he is thrown into prison.

At this point, Joseph is both a slave and a prisoner. It is here that we might see best one of the great contrasts between the ethos of the people of Israel and that of surrounding nations. Joseph as a slave lost none of his dignity or self-respect. Becoming a prisoner changes nothing for him in that respect. He is still a servant of the Most High God, and in that identity he can bring integrity and bearing to any situation life has to offer. Joseph, finding an ability to serve *within* his adopted society so completely, nevertheless maintains the reserve that allows him *really* to serve only his God. Here is the dignity that is one of the gifts of relationship with God, and part of the precious heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

**RESPOND**

Our society has much to say about dignity, especially in the need to establish others and ourselves in positions of clear justice and opportunity. Christianity has an especially effective way of offering dignity to whosoever will: our opportunity is to walk as daughters and sons of the living God, and to lead others in the same high calling. In this service is the highest human dignity.

**PRAY**

*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?... Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage. Yes, wait for the Lord.*

Psalms 27:1, 14

D.D.

**READ**

Exodus 1  
Psalm 28

**REFLECT**

Joseph remained in prison a number of years (39:20 - 41:14). Even in this dead-end environment, he was able to exercise his gifts and make a difference to those around him. The prison was one used for the special purposes of the Pharaoh, and Joseph's special administrative skills, as well as his trustworthiness, were well appreciated by the man in charge of day-to-day operations, and so Joseph was given a high level of responsibility. This resulted in the chance to get to know other prisoners, especially the two that would feature in furthering his career.

Pharaoh had recently thrown both his baker and his cupbearer into the prison, and one day Jacob found them both looking dejected. The story was that each had had a striking dream, but they were unable to get the dreams interpreted, not having access in prison to the diviners used by the Egyptian court for such purposes. Joseph surprisingly offers to try an interpretation himself.

Joseph was not unfamiliar with dreams and their interpretation, as we remember from the days he upset the family with predictions of his own grandeur. He was certainly not very wise or successful with talking about dreams then. But again there has been a change, and it is signaled in Joseph's comment as he asks to help the baker and the cupbearer: "Do not interpretations belong to God?" (40:8) He is willing to give this old propensity over to God, and to allow God to use it in whatever way He wishes.

The result is that he is able to interpret both dreams correctly: the cupbearer will be restored to his position in three days, but the baker will be executed on the third day. The cupbearer is appropriately impressed, and promises to return the favor if he can. But he forgets, until two years later Pharaoh is asking for the interpretation of a dream. Then he remembers Joseph.

"Do not interpretations belong to God?" It seems to me that this is a good question for our age. We seem to have multiplied "takes" and "spins" on everything, to the extent that the idea of truth itself is endangered. It sometimes seems that our national politics has come to the point of a battle between two mere sets of viewpoints: red and blue have sometimes seemed more like opposing balloons of rhetoric than two attempts to connect with reality. And yet reality is there, and real solutions are needed. Interpretations are needed that help us see problems realistically and find solutions that work. God is not a stranger to envisioning, imaging, interpreting. Joseph affirms that all of this belongs to God as much as does the truth itself.

The greatest interpretive gap that can exist in human life has to do with whether or not God's promises are true. Life will be interpreted one way if we do not expect God to be an active partner in our lives. It will be a very different prospect if we have begun to be open to God's presence in our lives and in the lives of those we love. St. Augustine found that he was able to look at each sunrise as a specific reaffirmation of the resurrection of Jesus, and our new life in Christ, since Jesus rose at sunrise on the first Easter. I remember when I first read that, I felt a certain amusement at St. Augustine's sentimentality. But darned if, ever since, sunrises haven't had something of that same reality for me! They pulse with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead! And it doesn't feel like sentimentality; it feels like a gift. "Do not interpretations belong to God?"

**RESPOND**

Psalm 28 distinguishes between two kinds of people: those who refuse to acknowledge God as the worker of His works, and those who call upon Him for help each day. As we consider our world – its politics, its social turmoil, the way neighbors, friends, and family are affected – we surely would wish to stand with those who partner with the living God, in practice and in prayer.

**PRAY**

*The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. Therefore my heart exults, and with my song shall I thank him.*  
Psalm 28:7

D.D.

**READ**

Exodus 2  
Psalm 29

**REFLECT**

The prophesied rise of Joseph to power is finally realized when Pharaoh calls upon him to interpret a set of dreams. Joseph's success at explaining them, and his subsequent administrative tour de force, place him as second in power in Egypt (Gen. 41). He thus becomes the instrument of saving his father's family from starvation, and of providing a place where the small tribe of Jacob can develop into the massive twelve tribes of Israel.

The dreams of Pharaoh are well-known to us: the fat cows and the lean cows, the fat ears of corn and the lean ears, are the subject of many a piece of Sunday school artwork. Apt to be forgotten in that more graphic engagement with the story are Joseph's amazing boldness in laying himself on the line with his interpretation, and the burst of administrative activity in which he organized and reorganized all of Egypt to meet the looming threat of drought. Also very clear in this part of the story is the careful integrity in which Joseph acted, never going beyond the commands of his master the Pharaoh, and placing all his energies in the service of Pharaoh's interests.

Although it is not the focus of this section of the tale, there is some irony in the thoroughness with which Joseph proceeds. After we hear of the settling of the family of Jacob in Goshen, we are told that the famine intensified so that the economy of Egypt was fundamentally altered (47:13-20). First, all the money that the Egyptian people had on hand was spent on the food stored by Joseph, and funneled into the coffers of the Pharaoh. Then, since more food was needed, they agreed to

exchange their lands for the status of slaves to be maintained by Pharaoh. The passage ends with the chilling comment, "So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for every Egyptian sold his field, because the famine was severe upon them. Thus the land became Pharaoh's." And the people became his slaves. This was the work of Joseph, on behalf of Pharaoh.

We have seen that the ethos of the Israelite religion is opposed to slavery. God always offers freedom. Joseph in enslaving Egypt is merely a servant of his master, and not of his God. The ownership of land will become a complex and careful concern in settled Israel, with one of the most amazing policies in the history of real estate. Every fifty years, in the Year of Jubilee, all ownership of land would revert to the original owners, no matter what transfers of property had occurred in the intervening decades. We see a deep recognition here of the connection of dignity and freedom to ownership of the land, and at the same time a resistance to any kind of enslavement, even in the event of financial desperation. Surely this is a reflection of Israel's experience of life in enslaved Egypt.

A second irony is that Joseph's diligent work probably helped bring about the circumstances by which Israel was itself reduced to slavery in its 400 years of sojourn in Egypt. The first promise of a relatively free life of agricultural prosperity in Goshen soon vanished, as "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8) and Israel was forced into hard labor. The need for the fulfillment of the promise of a secure land for Israel would become acute, and the enslaved nation would begin looking for its liberator.

But these hints of irony lie in the background, as the story at this point exults in the amazing capabilities of this Israelite, and his astonishing ingenuity, as well as his clear integrity. The Lord is with him, and he is serving the Lord. This all means that his brothers in seeking famine relief will have to deal with him, and that they will also find healing of the family's pain.

## **RESPOND**

As Christians growing in God's service, we often look to others who model for us what that service can mean. We remember those who have showed us what it means to trust in God. We may forget that others may see us as a model, and that the church is always in need of such examples. The opportunities of setting an example in Christian service are perhaps as numerous the as opportunities of service itself.

## **PRAY**

*The Lord will give strength to his people; the Lord will bless his people with peace.* Psalm 29:11

D.D.

**READ**

Exodus 3

Psalms 30

**REFLECT**

The story of Joseph comes to a conclusion as he reencounters his family, and the themes of this long story find dramatic and satisfying resolution (Genesis 42:1 – 47:12). The account of the reunion is a long one, characterized by fascinating and psychologically astute details depicting the emergence of recognition, remembrance, and reconciliation.

Joseph recognizes his brothers long before they realize who he is. He uses the advantage to set in train a complex set of events that bind the family more and more to him, while confusing them about his intentions. They are surprised that the ruler of Egypt gives time and attention to them, and horrified when he accuses them of being spies, a danger to the national security of Egypt. They are at a loss to understand why he insists that Benjamin, the youngest son left at home as Jacob's favorite, must come before Joseph in Egypt. When Benjamin does make the trip, and to the horror of his brothers is imprisoned as a thief, Judah offers himself as a hostage. In the process of these negotiations we see already the fulfillment of prophecy: the brothers more than once end up on their faces before Joseph. The speech of Judah is remarkable for its openness and rambling honesty, and in the plot of this story it is the thing that breaks the stalemate: Joseph is no longer able to keep the ruse up, but discloses who he is to his brothers, and gives vent to the full depth of his emotions. The reconciliation is successful, and Jacob is brought down to Egypt to see his son once more. In fact the whole tribe decamps from the ancestral environs of Hebron, and moves to the lush fields of Goshen to settle there.

Why does Joseph engage everyone in these games of hiding and disclosure? Some read this as a return of Joseph's brash and teasing ways, showing that he has not yet achieved maturity. I tend to side with others, who feel that the story has already shown that Joseph has changed, and that when he manipulates his brothers in this way, he is orchestrating a careful path to recognition and reconciliation that has a certain degree of psychological necessity and wisdom. There are other stories that emphasize the need for care in restoring broken relationship. I think of the final scenes of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus, having returned to his home in Ithaca and slaughtered the suitors, having convinced everyone else that he is the returning lord of the palace, nevertheless sits with his wife Penelope and submits to her long and careful testing: Is he really her husband? Toward the other end of the cultural spectrum, the Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan movie "You've Got Mail" also shows the care the Hanks character takes, in revealing that the ruthless businessman and the sensitive conversation partner are one and the same. In this reading, Joseph is actually using his full powers of human insight and management to produce a satisfactory and healing conclusion to the pain of the family.

The story is clear too about Joseph's own struggle and pain, even in the reconciliation process. While talking with his brothers he must turn aside to weep (43:30), and at the moment of disclosure he breaks into such sobbing that, despite his attempts at privacy, all of Egypt finds out what has happened (45:1-3). He can himself be open to the reconciliation process because he has learned about the God who has brought it about. His one-sentence summary of the meaning of the entire story shows the depths of his devotion to God, and challenges ours as well. He tells his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." (50:20. See also 45:5-7) He is able to accept all his trials as tools in the hands of the Lord for a greater purpose, as he has been able to receive the presence and strength of God all along the path, each step of the way.

## RESPOND

We would never wish to say that God wills pain for us. But we also can take heart from this story, and from other passages of Scripture, that no situation is so bad that God is not able to work within it to redeem it (Romans 8:28). Certainly no situation is so bad that God is not able to make the love of his presence known to us within it (Romans 8:3-39). This is great comfort for us, and great comfort that we can share with others in the time of their need as well.

## PRAY

*I will extol Thee, O Lord, for Thou has lifted me up, and hast not let my enemies rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to Thee for help, and Thou didst heal me . . . .* Psalm 30:1-2

- Dave Dorman