

Genesis 37: Joseph the Man of Vision

By
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*“Now Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan.”
-Genesis 37:1*

In Genesis 37, the author of Genesis is taking the narrative in a new direction. For a while we have been discussing the life of Jacob, and while he lives until the end of the book, the focus of the narrative switches to Jacob's sons, with special emphasis on the life of Joseph. By doing this, the author of Genesis, whom we believe to be Moses, lays the historical background for why the nation of Israel came to Egypt in the first place, but he also balances the narrative of Genesis out by giving an almost perfect pattern of the Messiah to come.

Remember that the book of Genesis begins with mankind in a state of perfection that was lost through the transgression of Adam and Eve as they acted upon the deception of the serpent. God then promises the serpent that his victory would be hollow and, relatively, short lived:

*“And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.”
-Genesis 3:15*

Throughout this book we have seen various figures follow the pattern of the Messiah, the one who would come to save the world from their sins. We have read about figures like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and now Jacob. All good men within their own generation who accomplished great things, but all deeply flawed and unable to truly resemble the coming Messiah who would save us from our sins. But in the story of Joseph we have, arguably, the best analogue for the ministry of Christ in the Old Testament. Joseph is shown throughout this narrative as being almost perfect. This is not to say that he had no flaws, but for the purpose of the narrative, these flaws are not focused upon.

Instead he fulfills this archetypal role almost perfectly. He is esteemed by his father and sent to watch over and correct his fallen brothers, but is instead betrayed to a fate worse than death. But in his exile, God prepares a salvation for His people through the suffering of Joseph. He descends to the lowest pit, only to ascend to the highest office of the land where he uses his power to protect the land from a coming famine, saving

his family from certain death, and even reconciling with his brothers in a way that directly foreshadows the salvation and reconciliation that comes from the ministry of Christ.

This also means that Joseph's life does more than just serve as a pattern of Christ, he also represents a very powerful symbol for us to look up to. Once again this doesn't mean that Joseph is perfect, but as the apostle Paul encourages those that he was leading:

"Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."

-1 Corinthians 11:1

In the ways that Joseph's life emulates Christ, he can help us grow in our pursuit of Christ.

Jacob

"This is the history of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers. And the lad was with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of many colors."

-Genesis 37:2-3

In order to do this, it would be a good idea to first look at how various people respond to Joseph, starting with his father. This story is a very good example of how complex the narrative of Scripture is. It would be very simple for us to look at Jacob in this story and condemn him outright. After all, the breakdown of his family is not only his fault, but it was also something that should have been understood by Jacob. Jacob himself came from a family that practiced favoritism and it not only ruined his own life, but ended up turning Jacob and Esau against one another and destroying the fabric of his own family. And yet, here he is repeating the same error of his father and poisoning his own children against one another.

But, if we take a closer look at the story, while it is an unavoidable truth that Jacob is in the wrong, his mistake is not as obvious as we would like it to be. In the case of his father Isaac, Esau was favored, not for the quality of his character, but because Isaac valued his strength and his skills as a hunter. Jacob on the other hand was favored by his mother, not because of his good nature, but because of his more gentle

temperament that linked him to his mother and kept him as a docile and “good” son for her to baby.

In a similar way, Jacob married into a family that practiced toxic favoritism as well. Rachel was favored by her father, Laban, almost exclusively because of her good looks, and therefore, the high bridal price he could get for her. Similarly, Laban mistreated Leah because she was, seemingly, not very good looking and therefore was preventing him from marrying off Rachel since Leah was the older sister and, according to custom, had to be married off first.

However, what we learn from these first couple verses, as well as the rest of the book of Genesis, is that Jacob’s favoring of Joseph was not altogether unjust. It wasn’t only due to superficial qualities in Joseph that Jacob favored him. We are told of these superficial reasons in this chapter, and others. The first being that Joseph happened to be the firstborn of his favorite wife. Although many other sons were born to Jacob before Rachel was able to conceive, Joseph always favored Rachel and therefore desired to give her firstborn the status of preeminence within the family. Remember that during this time, the firstborn of the family had a place of preeminence, would be favored to take over the family after the death of the father and receive the lion share of the inheritance.

Superficial Favoritism

We can tell that Jacob was already treating Joseph with this type of preference throughout his life, most notably shown by giving him the famous “coat of many colors”. We aren’t terribly certain about what this coat was, it is possible that it was literally made of many colors, which would have been very costly to make. Or, some translations render this cloak a coat of long sleeves. During this time, sleeves took extra fabric and required more sewing and therefore would be more costly. Or it could just refer to the material as being “finely woven”.

Regardless of what this coat actually looked like, the point is clear. Jacob doted on Joseph more than his brothers and was giving him a place of prominence within the family. Such a costly cloak would not have been a suitable garment for a shepherd working in the field, but it would only be suitable for someone who was acting as an overseer over the shepherds. And this is exactly what we see.

“Then his brothers went to feed their father’s flock in Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers feeding the flock in Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” So he said to him, “Here I am.” Then he said to him, “Please go and see if it is well with your brothers and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me.” So he sent him out of the Valley of Hebron, and he went to Shechem.”

-Genesis 37:12-14

Notice that Joseph is not sent to work with his brothers in the field, but to “bring back word” to Jacob. Meaning that Jacob was sent to oversee his brothers, not to help them in their more mundane task.

We are also told that Jacob was “*the son of his old age...*” There are a couple ways to take this phrase, but I think what is most likely is that Joseph, at this point, was the baby of the family. This might sound odd because we know that Benjamin was born after Joseph, but there is some evidence that this story isn’t told in an exact chronological order. Evidence for this can be seen after Joseph tells his second dream to Jacob and Jacob responds by saying:

“What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?”

-Genesis 37:10

Even though Rachel died in Genesis 35 after delivering Benjamin, Jacob refers to her as if she is alive. Since the narrative of Genesis 37 seems to take place over a space of time, it is reasonable to believe that the author of Genesis has told us this story out of order to help us understand the life of Joseph better, even though it is out of chronological order.

This is an aside, but it is something that modern readers need to understand about ancient historians. In our modern culture we place heavy emphasis on exact accounts of history that mold to a rigid chronological order. But ancient historians felt no such constraints. Oftentimes critics of the Bible point to supposed contradictions in the narrative, especially when they compare the four different gospels and they say that since the order of events is sometimes confused, the Bible contains errors. However, what they miss is that our modern standard of historical narrative was something foreign to the ancient world and therefore would not have felt a need to hold to it, nor were ancient readers scandalized by these kinds of storytelling techniques. They valued narrative over the rigid preservation of chronological facts, which I am thankful for.

That out of the way, this would mean that Joseph was the baby of the family for numerous years before Benjamin came along. It is often the case that the baby of the family is given attention and affection that the older siblings lack. The first reason is because when parents first start having children, their life is usually a bit chaotic. The dad is usually getting his career together and therefore the family has limited resources.

But when the baby of the family comes along, things are typically more settled financially and so there is more money to spoil the youngest.

Also, with the older kids, parents are figuring out how to parent best. They don't know how to work together well and they are largely ignorant of how to be good parents. After a few kids though (in Jacob's case 10 sons and at least one daughter) they have worked out the kinks and know how to parent their kids. Also, they now have the aid of more grown-up kids to help them parent their younger children. This means that they benefit from more attention and care than any other child.

There are more reasons, but for the sake of time I will only point out one more. When kids are being born in rapid succession, parents can feel overwhelmed and the stages of development fly by and go beneath their notice. But when they have a youngest, they savor the stages of development believing that it might be the last time that they will be able to witness these things. Therefore, the youngest seems more special and pure than the older siblings and their achievements are celebrated more.

I don't say this to excuse Jacob's behavior, but it does help us have a little grace for him and to remember how easy it is to commit this sin. It isn't enough for us to understand a simple truth like "favoritism is wrong", we also have to understand the reasons why we might do this and fight against them, actively. While Jacob's mistake wasn't malicious, it still had severe effects on his other children and we must also be careful of making the same mistake within our own families.

Favoring the Good

"Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers. And the lad was with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father."

-Genesis 37:2-3

This part of the story shows us that Jacob's favoritism is even more nuanced though. It isn't just that Jacob favored Joseph for superficial reasons, but it seems that Joseph was being favored because he had truly excellent qualities that shined a bad light upon the objectively bad character of his brothers. Remember that Jacob's sons have already shown themselves to be deceivers and murders in Genesis 34. While their anger was justified in this story, they clearly exceeded normal justice and performed a truly heinous action. Also, from the rest of this story, we see that while, once again, their anger at Joseph was partially justified, their behavior certainly wasn't. They first try to kill Joseph, but then decide to sell him into slavery and lie to their father about this.

It is clear that in many ways Jacob had failed to properly raise his sons, but he is trying to rectify that mistake in his older age and, naively, hoped that Joseph's good qualities would "rub off" on his sons. Parents often think this way. They say things like "Why can't you be more like your brother." And they will put siblings in charge of one another hoping that the more solid child will be able to correct the wayward child. This type of thinking, while misguided, is not malicious or evil. However, it remains an incredibly dangerous strategy that can easily build this kind of deep and murderous resentment that we see in this story.

Unfortunately, this kind of thinking is all too common. Not only do parents mimic this idea, but so does society as a whole. It is considered good sense that we put "struggling" children in classrooms with more responsible kids, or that businesses will place more competent employees in charge of less competent employees. This mentality has even permeated our views on the justice system. We tend to think that the worst thing that we can do for criminals is keep them in prison where they will be negatively influenced, but instead they should be out in society where they can be positively influenced.

As I said, this type of thinking is not totally crazy, but it is deeply misguided and exists on the same faulty foundation of reasoning that caused Jacob to make his own fatal mistake.

"If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?"' " Then the priests answered and said, "No." And Haggai said, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean." Then Haggai answered and said, " 'So is this people, and so is this nation before Me,' says the LORD, 'and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.'"

-Haggai 2:12-14

This passage, though it is about the purity laws, expresses this point fairly well. If you take something dirty and touch it to something that is clean, does it become clean? The obvious answer is no. Just as if I place someone who is sick in the room with someone who is healthy, do they become healthy? Again, the obvious answer is no. Why? Since we live in a fallen world in which death is the end of all life, we are literally struggling to survive each and every moment. Our health is all too frail and therefore, in this world sickness is contagious while health is not.

This same principle applies to the areas of sin and righteousness. Every experiment we have run on this principle turns out the same results. If you stick a negative influence in a classroom, or in a corporate team, or in society itself, they will bring the average down, they will almost never be raised up. The reason for this is fairly simple. The path of least resistance for man is not virtue but vice. It is far easier to be selfish and lazy than it is to be disciplined and generous. It takes active, constant effort to practice virtue, whereas it only requires a lack of effort to practice vice.

When a person who has no interest in becoming virtuous is placed in an environment with someone who is committed to virtue it tends to have a double effect on both parties that is equally negative. For the one who is committed to goodness, oftentimes, the influence of the less virtuous will be attractive and pull them down. Failing that, it will produce in them a false sense of superiority that will puff them up and cause them to look down on their more wayward peers. We see this with Joseph, even though it seems to be a more unconscious and innocent behavior, he does seem to take pride in his coat, his position over his brothers, and his prophetic dreams.

However, for the ones who aren't interested in virtue, it will only breed more resentment. We will talk about this more in a second when we describe the brothers of Joseph, but this is the recognizable and consistent pattern in human behavior. The only person who was actually able to overcome this norm was Christ Himself. This is why Christ consistently healed people by touching them. He was showing that He was the One who could overcome the pronouncement of Haggai. To put it more simply, Jesus was so full of life, (in fact He was Life itself in bodily form), that He was immune to disease, but was actually able to transfer His health to other people. For Christ, His health and goodness really were contagious because He was incorruptible.

Even when He was brought down to the grave, He was not corrupted by the grave, but actually redeemed the grave by bringing life into it, and therefore made a way for us to be saved and brought into the kingdom of heaven. Now, death does not serve as a means of corruption for the Christian, but as a means of acquiring the incorruptible nature of our Lord.

“So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.”

-1 Corinthians 15:42-44

God is the One who can influence the unrighteous and bring them to glory. This is an action that He alone can accomplish, humanity is unfortunately unable to replicate this ability. While Joseph does save his family *physically* he does not save them *spiritually*. The spiritual redemption of his brothers happens apart from him, he only serves as a means of reconciling his family through their repentance, but he did not cause his brothers to repent. In the same way, we can, and should, help others in their repentance, but we can't force someone to repent.

“And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.”

-2 Timothy 2:24-26

Notice that Paul says that repentance is a gift given to men by the grace of God. Mankind can't create repentance in another person, only God can perform that feat. Our role is not to coax it out of someone, nor is it to try to show infinite grace to someone who is in sin. Instead, it is to in *humility* correct those who are in opposition. Meaning that we have to guard ourselves from the temptation of moral superiority, but at the same time, and in whatever capacity we are given, to rebuke the mistake of those who are in sin:

“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For each one shall bear his own load.”

-Galatians 6:1-5

This is something that Jacob could not do. Once again, this wasn't an evil action on his part, but he did give into his passive nature and tried to avoid rebuking his sons for their many errors. Instead he was hoping that maybe Joseph would be so good to his brothers that they would magically follow his lead. But this didn't happen, nor could it happen. But where Jacob failed, God didn't. As we went over last week (albeit out of order) Judah in the following chapter is not transformed by grace per se, but through a rebuke towards his sinful behavior from a pagan woman.

While this mentality flies in the face of our modern thinking, it is the only way that someone can actually be brought to repentance. While compassion, gentleness, and

understanding are necessary in helping someone see the error of their ways, without clear and firm rebuke, they will only become more solidified in their error. But even then, just because the rebuke is given, they must then choose to receive that rebuke and move through the arduous task of repenting.

Failure to Mourn

“And he recognized it and said, “It is my son’s tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces.” Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, “For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning.” Thus his father wept for him.”

-Genesis 37:33-35

This is another element of the story that does implicate Jacob in sin, but is still sympathetic. Remember that Jacob has just suffered the loss of three of the most important people in his life. In Genesis 35 Jacob lost the maidservant of his mom, (who was the last real connection he had to his mom), his father Isaac, and Rachel. While he handled the previous losses fairly well, the loss of Joseph was too much for Jacob and now he has broken down in his grief. This can easily happen to any of us.

As leaders of our home we are called to lead our families well and that includes grieving appropriately. It is necessary and good for a parent to be undone by the loss of one of their children, but we can see in future chapters that Jacob never really recovers from this loss and stays in his despair and self-pity until Joseph is shown to be alive.

So again, while understandable, this also reveals the unjust favoritism that Jacob showed to Joseph. Without his favorite son, he loses all interest in trying to father his other children. This is a simple yet deadly mistake to make. While grief is a powerful and necessary process, its end is to accept the loss that we incurred and to move on. This doesn't mean that we cease feeling sorrow for our loss, only that we have accepted our new reality and are open to seeing new potential instead of only wallowing in our sense of loss.

This type of mourning is exactly what Jacob exemplified in Genesis 35. While Rachel is dying she names her son Ben-oni which means “son of my sorrow”. Jacob wisely changes his son's name to Benjamin meaning “son of my right hand”. While Jacob mourned the loss of his wife, he was still open to the bright possibilities in his son's future. To put it another way, he didn't allow the loss of the past to keep him from enjoying his present or hoping for the future. In this instance he does the opposite. When Joseph died, a massive part of Jacob died with him.

The little fathering he was doing towards his other sons ceases entirely and Jacob becomes a shell of his former self. While it is hard to feel sorry for Jacob's sons, since they did betray Joseph and lie to their father about it, the key here is that Jacob didn't know that and still "punished" his children by allowing his grief to swallow him up. So again, while this was an understandable mistake, it remains a mistake and has some pretty dire consequences.

The Brothers

"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."

-Genesis 37:4

This leads us to Joseph's brothers. Once again, they are not portrayed as cartoon villains who betrayed innocence without a second glance, but they are individuals who allowed themselves to be swallowed whole by their bitterness and resentment.

"...looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled..."

-Hebrews 12:15

The scariest thing about bitterness is how subtle it is. This is why the writer of Hebrews calls bitterness a "root". Just like a root it grows underneath the surface and begins to consume more and more resources before it is finally ready to emerge on the surface and bring forth fruit. The brothers were not aware that they were being eaten up by their resentment, but that was exactly what happened. The writer of Genesis cleverly shows us how this root developed in their lives. First the brothers couldn't speak peaceably to Joseph. This means that they had shut out their brother. They were not yet criticizing or attacking him, but they had begun to alienate him and push him aside.

For many of us, when we start to feel bitter towards someone else, we subtly push them out of our lives. We assume that if we create distance between ourselves and them, that our bitterness will go away, but the opposite seems to happen. As the bitterness grows, the sons of Jacob become increasingly violent, slaughtering a neighboring tribe in their wrath. This is another interesting fact about bitterness, it doesn't stay contained towards the person who wronged you. That would be nice, but it never actually works. Slowly we will find bitterness growing more and more within our hearts and subtly we will find ourselves lacking patience and kindness towards those around us.

“A man of great wrath will suffer punishment; For if you rescue him, you will have to do it again.”

-Proverbs 19:19

Just like substance addiction, the more we feed our wrath, the more it feeds on us. The children of Jacob have now begun to show physical manifestations of their wrath and it only grows more hostile from there. This continues when they openly criticize Joseph's dreams:

“And his brothers said to him, “Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.”

-Genesis 37:8

Although this is an understandable reason for being angry at Joseph, they still don't actually express their anger at him. Maybe they saw this as restraint but in reality, since they only hated him in their hearts, Joseph seems pretty oblivious to the effect he was having on his brothers. This is why he tells them an almost identical dream just a few verses later. At no point in this account does he pick up on his brother's hatred and doesn't even consider it a possibility that they would betray him in the fashion that they do.

Since bitterness grows in darkness, it develops usually out of sight from even the person that we are bitter towards. And since we distance ourselves from the person we are mad at, they don't even understand that we are bitter at them and they might try to pursue us even more. This will result in even more wrath though, and usually a profound outburst of wrath.

“Now when they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him. Then they said to one another, “Look, this dreamer is coming! “Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, ‘Some wild beast has devoured him.’ We shall see what will become of his dreams!” But Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands, and said, “Let us not kill him.” And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit which is in the wilderness, and do not lay a hand on him”—that he might deliver him out of their hands, and bring him back to his father. So it came to pass, when Joseph had come to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the tunic of many colors that was on him. Then they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat a meal. Then they lifted their eyes and looked, and there was a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead with their camels, bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry them down to Egypt. So Judah said to his

brothers, "What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? "Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother and our flesh." And his brothers listened. Then Midianite traders passed by; so the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt."

-Genesis 37:18-28

While Reuben does try to rescue his brother, it is left ambiguous as to whether he was doing this out of kindness towards Joseph or fear of getting in trouble (the oldest in families tend to bear an outsized portion of blame). But what is clear is that he too is resentful towards Joseph which is why he was ok throwing Joseph in the pit. This is the full flower of wrath. We have moved from distancing ourselves from the person we are angry with to seeking actively to harm them. They are so filled with indignation towards their brother that they casually eat a meal while he is crying out from the pit and then callously sell him into slavery in Egypt.

When wrath takes full form in our hearts, all compassion and mercy will dry up for the person we are angry at. We might secretly desire them to be harmed or even publicly rejoice when they suffer misfortune. This bitter vindictiveness doesn't usually take the really blatant and violent form that it does for Joseph's brothers, but it still has a similar effect on us internally. But why would someone allow for this sin to consume them? Or to put it another way, what do we gain from feeding bitterness in the first place?

The Wages of Sin

"...choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward."

-Hebrews 11:25-26

While Scripture teaches us that the ultimate reward for sin is death (Romans 6:23), the immediate reward for sin is always beneficial. If sin carried no immediate reward, it wouldn't be tempting to us. The reason why sin is hard to resist is precisely because of how attractive it is, and because it does offer us a real benefit. I think it is often hard for us as Christians to admit that. We demonize sin so much that we hope that no one ever turns to it. But without telling people about the benefits of sin we haven't prepared them for the truly powerful temptations of sin.

Bitterness is no different. Bitterness is a truly useful sin to feed simply because it distracts us from more negative and less pleasant emotions. We talked about some last week in that when we blame others we don't have to recognize guilt in our own lives,

but in actuality bitterness is a pretty formidable shield against all negative emotions. For instance, people who struggle with fear and timidity can turn to bitterness to motivate them to speak up, although they will usually speak up in an overly aggressive manner. But for the brothers of Joseph I believe that the other two emotions that they were shielding themselves from were sorrow and helplessness.

We are told in the previous verses that the hatred for Joseph really began when they saw that their father preferred him to them. This is interesting because the actual emotion that they should have been feeling was sorrow. They were unloved by their father and therefore they should have expressed that loss through grief and sorrow. But instead, they focused their emotional energy on hating Joseph. This doesn't even make sense because Joseph was in no way responsible for their fate. If anything they should have been made at their father who committed the sin of favoring their brother, Joseph didn't really have a say in whether or not Jacob favored him.

Why didn't Jacob's sons hate him though? Because deep down their anger was a shield towards their regret. They still desperately wanted their fathers approval and hoped that by getting Joseph out of the way he would finally love them properly. This is the madness of sin. We think we are acting rationally, but in reality we have invited in a spirit that both confuses us and binds us. The brothers are no longer acting rationally or in self-control. They are acting out of a mad bitterness that is focused on the wrong source. This happens because bitterness was never the point, it was a solution to a completely different problem.

The other emotion that it was covering was their feeling of helplessness. No one likes to feel out of control, but what the emotion of sorrow leads us to is acceptance of a reality that we don't want. Meaning that true sorrow leads a person to genuine surrender. It would have been a hard journey for these boys, but they could have learned to accept the fact that their father didn't favor them. Ironically, if they actually did that, Jacob may have begun to love them properly, but instead they moved into denial. Anger can make us feel like we are in the driver's seat again. It is similar to alcohol in this way in that it can make us feel confident. As though we don't have to accept our fate, but instead can rage against it. This is what C.S. Lewis observed in the motivation of demons when they rebelled against God in John Milton's poem "Paradise Lost".

"There must be a way out of these intolerable sensations; and the way out that occurs to him is rage. It is a way out which often occurs to human beings in a similar position. If the knowledge that we have betrayed what we valued most is unbearable, perhaps furious enmity against it will drown the knowledge. Anger, hatred, blind fury-these are pleasant compared with what we are feeling at the moment. But is fury safe? That does

not matter. Nothing can be worse than the present. To rush blind-headed at the thing we have wronged, to die hitting it-this would be the best that could happen to us. And who knows ? We may hurt it a bit before we die.”

-C.S. Lewis - “Preface to Paradise Lost”

But what Milton correctly shows in the increasing rebellion of the demons is that Hell is truly a bottomless pit. When you think you have reached the bottom, there is still an infinite distance further that we can fall. Joseph’s brothers may have had the very same opinion, that things couldn’t possibly be worse than they already were, but they were wrong. As bad as it was to have Joseph be preferred over them, it was far worse for the “ghost” of Joseph to haunt their house and sink their father into an abyss of self-pity. While sin always promises liberty, it can only ultimately grant us death.

The harsh reality is that we can’t actually escape the Hell we have sunk ourselves in by fighting against it, only by humbling ourselves. Joseph’s brothers learn this lesson the hard way. They do end up repenting of their sin and doing the hard work of giving up their resentment and reconciling their family, but this process is years in the making and is filled with regret and tragedy. Giving up resentment may have been the hardest thing I ever had to do. I had many “good” reasons to be mad, but none of these reasons justified my bitterness or made it any more tolerable.

The strength to forgive, to move on, and to learn to deal with the less desirable emotions of sorrow, regret, guilt, and loss of control are not easy, but they are worthy. And this leads us to Joseph himself.

Joseph

“Now Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him even more. So he said to them, “Please hear this dream which I have dreamed: “There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Then behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf.” And his brothers said to him, “Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Then he dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, “Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me.” So he told it to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?” And his brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter in mind.”

-Genesis 37:5-11

For the sake of time I will go through this point a lot faster than I would like, but in order to understand Joseph and his dreams, we first have to understand the culture that Joseph would have lived in. And we will continue to explore this concept throughout the rest of the book of Genesis because it is key to understanding Joseph's life and his connection with dreams.

Understanding Participation

As modern people, we tend to read ancient texts like the Bible and assume that the people who lived long ago thought in much the same way that we do. As such, when we read about Joseph believing his dreams are a prophetic vision, many modern people roll their eyes and look down on the "primitive" culture that Joseph was a part of. In other words, we think that ancient people were ignorant of our modern science and so they came up with "superstitious" explanations for the natural phenomenon that they were ignorant of.

So instead of Joseph understanding neuroscience and knowing that his dream was nothing more than an event occurring within his own brain, stimulated through normative sleep patterns, he assumes that the images he receives in dreams are of divine origin. They believe that the same is true for the ancients who thought that thunder was caused by Thor's hammer or lightning by Zeus, but once mankind "evolves" we learn the true causes of these events and can move past our foolish superstitions. However, this line of reasoning is incredibly ignorant to how ancient man actually thought. Take the following quote from the French anthropologist Levy Bruhl:

"It is not correct to maintain, as is frequently done, that primitives associate occult powers, magic properties, a kind of soul or vital principle with all the objects which affect their senses or strike the imagination, and that their perceptions are surcharged with animistic beliefs. It is not a question of association. The mystic properties with which things are imbued form an integral part of the idea to the primitive who views it as a synthetic whole. It is at a later stage of social evolution that what we call a natural phenomenon tends to become the sole content of perception to the exclusion of other elements which then assume the aspect of beliefs, and finally appear superstitions. But as long as this "dissociation" does not take place, perception remains an undifferentiated whole."

-Levy Bruhl - "How Natives Think"

That's a bit of a mouthful, and let me try to break down his point as simply as I can using normal human development as an example. When a person is first born their thinking is "monistic", meaning that they see everything around them as a singular

extension of themselves and their own imaginations. That is why young children can't play games with other people until they are around the age of 4. The reason is because in order to play a game, you have to share a "world" with another person and follow agreed upon rules. Young children can't do this and so if you try to play a game with a 2 year old they will go out of turn and usually end up playing an entirely different game than the one you set up.

This is also why young children can't carry on conversations. They don't fully understand the "rules" of conversation and so they end up talking over you, they don't know how to reciprocate with thoughtful questions, and they change the subject as frequently as they like. They also don't know how to share and can't stand not getting their way. All of this is a part of their mindset. They aren't more "primitive" in the sense that we tend to use it, they are instead "uncivilized", they haven't learned to exist as a part of a collective whole since they only understand themselves.

As we grow older we move into a more "dualistic" phase of life. Now we do recognize the difference between ourselves and other people, but we don't fully understand these differences. Because of this, adolescents are usually trying to figure out who they are, but they do this by either conforming to groups that they want to fit into, or in opposition to things that they don't want to fit into, like their parents. This phase is useful because now they can "share" imagination and therefore they can have conversations and play games, but their identity is not fully formed yet. Also, they tend to struggle with empathy towards those who are different from them and usually act in a more tribalistic "us versus them" mentality towards others.

They then move into a "synthetic" phase of life and recognize how their identity is different from other people while maintaining a unity with others that are unlike them. For instance, an adult will hopefully have a healthy understanding of their parents that allows them to both distance themselves from the mistakes of their parents but also honoring what their parents did right. The clearest version of this takes place in our sexuality. We are attracted to a member of the opposite sex and become unified to them *through* our bodily differences. We also become more conscious and therefore can make value judgments rationally and not just react to things intuitively.

This is how Levy Bruhl is explaining the development of societal consciousness. It's not that every one in a particular society thinks the same way, only that there is a mentality that is *prevalent* in a given society. So, older societies that are less developed tend to view the world in this "monistic" way. They visualize their world almost as a singularity and see deep "participation" at every level. They see physical reality as representative as spiritual reality and therefore they ascribe deep cosmic significance to almost every

phenomenon. So what would be a normal “dream” to you and me becomes deeply significant, at every conceivable level, to the people group with this mentality. To them there is no such thing as “coincidence” nor is there anything without meaning, it is all deeply meaningful and expressive of higher realities.

This means that ancient man didn't struggle with what we today call “existential angst”. Existence for them was not trivial, everything, especially our lives, had deep cosmic meaning and significance just as every action in the tribe had deep meaning and significance. This is why they filled their lives with expressive, embodied ritual:

“Participation’ begins by being an activity, and essentially a communal or social activity. It takes place in rites and initiation ceremonies resulting in:

“Collective states of extreme emotional intensity in which representation is as yet undifferentiated from the movements and actions which make the communion towards which it tends a reality to the group. Their participation in it is so effectively lived that it is not yet properly imagined.”

-Owen Barfield - “Saving the Appearances”

Their reality isn't really *understood* in the modern sense, but it is embodied in a mystical sense. This ritual and deep participation gave them an incredible source of meaning and significance that was unquestionable and deeply beneficial. In the modern world, though we have “seen through” the phenomenon of this world and have given them all cold mechanistic explanations, this has left us hollow and desperate for higher meaning. So though we are more “rational” than our ancestors, this hasn't actually benefited us in the areas that are most relevant to us. For mankind doesn't primarily want wisdom or intelligence, we ultimately want meaning and significance.

Modern Longing For Meaning

In the ancient world, everything that someone did, from hunting, to farming, to parenting, had cosmic relevance. These things were symbolized in dance, ritual, and art and were venerated constantly by the community. Tribal cultures don't struggle with our modern issues with depression and anxiety because their significance was embodied at a fundamental level. This reality has made people in our modern culture desperate for this old form of participation. The problem is, once you have progressed beyond this “participation” mindset, going back is almost impossible.

Modern westerners have become obsessed with older eastern religions that are more embodied, like Yoga, Buddhism, or even in Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy. They see this as a way forward, not understanding that it is actually a way back. Even in secularism, they are trying to formulate a new ideal of participation through materialism. This

explains the modern obsession with neuroscience. Instead of giving significance to the soul and explaining phenomenon through the cosmic, modern man is now reducing all signification to the biological. We have made all human experience little more than firing of neurons and a combination of vital neural chemicals. This explains the secular obsession with “the science”, the modern “rituals” that emerge from these scientific and political movements, and the modern “art” that is heavily ideological.

This is a rejection of the “dualistic” phase and an attempt to move back to the “monistic” phase of development. It is no wonder that in a culture that is desperately trying to revert back, that most adults are reverting back to a more infantile state of dependency and entitlement. We don’t want to grow up, move forward, and find meaning, we want to go back to being children and avoid responsibility. However we can’t do that, our minds have reached a phase of development that we *need* meaning that is both understood and embodied.

When the psychologist Carl Jung lived amongst a tribal community he noticed that every morning they would spit in their hands and then “show” their hands to the sun. When he asked them about this ritual they said they didn’t know the meaning but respected the tradition of their elders. After spending time with the tribe he came to this conclusion:

“What is the meaning of the Elgonyi ceremony just cited? Clearly it is an offering to the sun which for these natives is mungu—that is, mana, or divine—only at the moment of rising. If they have spittle on their hands, this is the substance which, according to primitive belief, contains the personal mana, the force that cures, conjures and sustains life. If they breathe upon their hands, breath is wind and spirit—it is roho, in Arabic ruah, in Hebrew ruach, and in Greek pneuma. The action means: I offer my living spirit to God. It is a wordless, acted prayer, which could equally well be spoken: “Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

-Carl Gustav Jung - “Modern Man in Search of a Soul”

The tribe, for the most part, had not entered into the dualistic phase where they could critique the traditions of their fathers, and therefore couldn’t understand or explain their behavior. Instead, their behavior *participates* with cosmic reality that moves beyond their understanding. We see this same type of behavior practiced in the Old Covenant by God’s people. The Old Covenant is almost entirely embodied with deep ritual and feast days. However, in the New Covenant we are not compelled into the same type of formulaic rituals of the Old Covenant, but why?

“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”

-Colossians 2:16-17

“Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.”

Galatians 3:24-25

The rituals of the Old Covenant existed at this time of mystic “participation” in which the people of God, not yet ready to *understand* Him directly could embody their worship of Him and therefore intuitively *know* Him. This is what Paul means when he says that we were under the “tutor” of the Law. It’s not that the Law was bad, but that it was there to prepare the people of God to know God directly. Not just through ritual, but actually know *about* God and receive Him by *faith*. This does not dismiss works as some have falsely stated.

Even though the dualistic mind comes next, it is still incomplete and if it remains incomplete necessarily leads to all the modern problems that I have detailed above. So now that God’s people can know about God by faith and actually be forgiven on our belief and not our works, it would make sense to throw out the law and relate to God simply through our intellect right?

“Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!”

-James 2:17-19

No, we have to move past the dualistic mind and not just recognize our identity outside of our works, but learn to bring these two halves together in harmony. The Christian life is the marriage between faith and works, what is embodied and what is believed. This is the true trajectory of faith and the one that we all have to understand. It is right for the Christian to see the distinction of faith and works, and even to see the hierarchy of faith over our works, but this doesn’t mean we throw out our works altogether.

The fact of the matter is that we need this synthesis to rediscover meaning. If we throw out all tradition and assume that we can simply *understand* meaning without embodying it, we will end up empty and hollow. And in Christian terms, this would also give us a “dead faith”. But we also can’t go back to only embodied rituals. Since our minds *can* understand significance, ritual without understanding and faith will give us all the worst

components of tribal mentality that we need to move on from. Beyond that, the rituals will have lower significance for us because we don't understand them, and our mindset is not primarily in the context of this deep participation that the ancients enjoyed. We instead need to move onto the synthetic phase and learn to bring these two realities together. That we both rediscover the wonder of ritual, that is not legalistic or cultic, but understood and practiced as an embodied faith. What does this have to do with Joseph though?

The Role of the Prophet

“And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.”

-Malachi 4:6

Biblically, what the prophets did was bring these two realities together. What it means to “turn the hearts of fathers to the children” was for the elders of the nation to give the children the learned traditions of their past. But to “turn the hearts of the children to the fathers” was to have the children *understand* the traditions and to practice them consciously. This allows for a higher level of participation that gives us *understood* and *embodied* faith. This is why the prophets of God speak through oracles and visions:

“Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.”

-Proverbs 29:18

The prophets receive the symbols of God in visions and revelations, they then give the *meaning* of these visions to the people. This is what Moses did when he ascended up to mount Sinai and then returned with the tablets of the Law. His job was to bridge the higher and the lower, to bring true meaning to the people. We can see from Joseph's dreams that this is what he was meant to do for his family and the world. In the first dream of Joseph, Joseph and his brothers gather sheaves of wheat and their sheaves bow to his. In the next dream Joseph is shown the sun, the moon, and 11 stars bowing to him. We tend to focus on the obvious interpretation, that Joseph's family will ultimately bow to him, without asking a more basic question, why these two dreams? Why not just get one dream, and why is it not more clear?

One explanation is that Joseph is given first an earthly dream, and then a cosmic one. The earthly dream has more to do with Joseph's physical role in his family. Notice that the sheaves bow to his sheaf and not to him. The brothers interpret this as them simply bowing to Joseph, not realizing that this is a dream about Joseph's work upon the earth being superior to theirs. In other words, Joseph's dream has him accomplishing a work

that is more honorable than his brothers and even earns him their respect. This literally happens when Joseph's role in Egypt saves his entire family.

The second dream is cosmic, he isn't shown his physical work, but a spiritual pattern. Joseph is shown, both by the author of Genesis, as well as throughout the Scriptures, to embody the role of the Messiah. There is even an interesting parallel between Jacob's reaction to Joseph and Mary's reaction to Christ. Immediately he is rebuked, but then Jacob really meditates on this reality:

"And his brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter in mind."

-Genesis 37:11

Mary rebukes Jesus for going to the temple without their permission, but then we are told:

"Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart."

-Luke 2:51

Both parents are recognizing a cosmic significance to their children. They are seeing that their sons will embody a higher reality that is shown in Joseph's vision, and Jesus' statement that He should be about His Father's work. And this is the work of the prophet, to take the vision of God and make it a reality upon the earth. They do this both through explanation and through action. To give a simple example of this, think of the true visionary or artist. Anyone can have a "vision" or ideal of how to improve their life or society, but what separates the normal person from the true visionary is their ability to make that ideal a reality.

The same is true for an artist. Many of us can picture a beautiful image in our minds, but to actually give that image a beautiful form is beyond most of our abilities. This is the unification of heaven and earth, the person who can take what is in their imaginations and make it real. At the highest level of this principle we see Jesus. Jesus tells His followers about the Kingdom of Heaven, but then He acts out the Kingdom of Heaven through His life, death, and resurrection and by doing so creates a bridge between heaven and earth.

In a similar, though much less significant way, Joseph receives the vision of God's salvation for his people, and then embodies this reality first by suffering "for" the sins of his brothers, and then by delivering them from the famine. This makes a bridge for his family that allows for reconciliation. This makes a way for his dream to become more

than just a vision in his own head, and instead it makes it a reality upon the earth. He then helps his brothers see the way to make things right between them and God:

“Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. “Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.”

-Genesis 50:19-21

Not only do his words give them the opportunity to seek God, but then he acts in the pattern of God by forgiving them and then providing for them. Not only that, but he shows them the reality of God’s providence, even in their evil behavior. The prophet unites all possible meanings. He shows the lower and the higher, the earthly and the cosmic all at once and does this not only through his words, but through his works.

As amazing as this pattern is to recognize in the prophets of God, it still does have even deeper meaning and significance for us. The call that all of us have on our lives is to act in the pattern of Joseph. This means that we don’t just confess our faith, which is important, but to embody and explain our faith.

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear...”

-1 Peter 3:15

The way forward in our modern culture is going to have to be through this concept of synthesis. The church has to rediscover the beauty of tradition and ritual but we need to embody it through faith and understanding. This extends not merely to our services, but throughout our lives. There is much more to say about this topic, but as we go through the life of Joseph we will see more and more how he acts as that bridge and hopefully we can learn to become like him.