

GENESIS 24:1–67
A WIFE FOR ISAAC
Story Notes
File no. 15

Abraham is old, Sarah is dead and Isaac is 37 years old. Abraham knows God will carry forward the family line to fulfil his covenant promise, but Isaac must not take a wife from the local ungodly Canaanites. God had appeared to Abram while the whole family was still in Ur, and those who have remained in Haran still retain some trust in the revelation that came to him. His wife must come from this family.

Then again, Isaac must not leave the land, perhaps, lest he be tempted to stay out of the land promised to Abraham, so Abraham's trusted chief servant, Eliezer, is given the solemn task. The seriousness of the work given to Eliezer is clear from the vow Abraham insists that he make. Abraham himself is sure that the chosen girl will be willing to come. The Lord's angel will attend him. But the servant may not be so sure, so he is freed of responsibility if she is not willing to return with Eliezer.

There is no mention of a word from the Lord in this story, but it is full of God's providences, sufficient to prove to Laban and his father Bethuel (Abraham's nephew) that 'the matter comes from the Lord' (v. 50). Eliezer is aware that the success of his journey depends wholly on the Lord's loving kindness to Abraham, and this being reflected in Laban's willingness to release his sister (vv. 12, 14, 27, 49).

So, Eliezer makes his specific plan for identifying the right girl, and of course, the Lord's guidance. He wants her to be willing to give him water, and a volunteer in regard to watering his camels. And she is. He waits to see if his other criteria are met but is sure enough to give her substantial jewellery, perhaps as a sign of good will, but also as a clear indication of the blessing on the one he is representing. He checks her identity and the possibility of lodgings. On finding that she is from Abraham's family, he worships the Lord, and the girl, Rebekah, runs to tell her mother and family all that has occurred.

Laban hears the story, sees the jewelry, and, impressed, seeks out Eliezer, calling him 'blessed of the Lord'.

Eliezer is intent on his purpose and will not eat until all is settled. He tells this family of the Lord's blessing on Abraham and recounts his story in detail so that Laban is clear that he is not dealing with him, or even with Abraham, but with the God who has blessed Abraham, including in this seeking of a wife for his son. Will Laban continue the 'kindness' (loving kindness) God has shown Abraham already? He feels unable to do otherwise—the Lord has spoken! Again, Eliezer worships. He gives the gifts appointed for Rebekah, and for her family.

With Eliezer eager to fulfil his task, and Rebekah willing, they leave with the family blessing on her. Eliezer has not failed, the signs he requested have led him well, and Laban and Rebekah have both been willing. The Lord is still faithfully fulfilling his covenant promise to Abraham.

The long journey home is passed over quickly. Isaac is out meditating when they arrive, Rebekah veils herself for an appropriate introduction to her husband, and the two become man and wife. Abraham's confidence in the Lord who would provide a wife for his son is vindicated. Just as he had learned to trust in the Lord for the birth and for the life of his own son, now he sees that the line, and the blessing on his family, will continue.

GENESIS 25:21–34; 27:1–41

Psalm 105:9

ESAU SELLS HIS BIRTHRIGHT / JACOB STEALS THE BLESSING

Story Notes

File no. 16

25:19-34

The 'generations' of, or history of Isaac (through to 35:29) tells us about his own family and community crises, but then, focuses mostly on his son, Jacob, who will carry forward the blessing first promised to Abraham.

Over 20 years of marriage, Isaac has prayed that his wife will bear a child. Infertility had been the crisis of his father's faith, and he had been conceived only after his father prayed for a child. Isaac also discovers that the blessing of God through his family line will be wholly God's doing. Then, Rebekah finds she has not one but two children. Then, when she seeks the Lord's explanation of the terrible struggle going on within her, she is told that she has not one but two nations within her, and, that there will be struggle between the two. Clearly, this is no ordinary family. The story of faith begun in Abraham and the struggle between his two wives now continues into a second generation with the struggle anticipated between these twins. The older child will serve the younger one. History will proceed by God's choosing rather than by natural selection.

Paul tells us later that God's choice of Jacob is proof that his blessing does not come because of works but because of God's grace (Rom. 9:10-15).

Jacob, as the Lord said, is born second, but comes out grasping his brother's heel, and so, is named from the word for heel (which then becomes associated with deception). Esau is named for his hairy redness, from the word for hair. The two boys develop very differently, Esau in his rugged love of the outdoors, and Jacob in his even temper and civility. Isaac loves Esau, we are told, not for his being the older son but because he loved his son's game. And Rebekah loves Jacob. We do not know if Rebekah tells her husband about the prophecy concerning the future of her sons. There is certainly little in their ordinary life to mark this family out from any other, but God is at work among them.

The character of the two boys is apparent in their youth. Jacob cooks a stew while Esau is out hunting—the phrasing (in Hebrew) suggests he is hunting his brother while his brother is hunting game. Esau comes in demanding to be fed with 'red stuff' and is careless of any promises to which his father regards him as the heir. He is a godless man (Heb. 12:16), and, in a rare moralizing comment, the text says that he despised his birthright. Jacob knows about the promise of blessing concerning their family, probably knows the prediction made to his mother, and is already grasping for what is essentially a gift (Gen. 27:36).

27:1-28:9

Isaac had loved Rebekah but they have grown apart: Isaac seeks to give his favoured son the blessing (confirming the birthright) and Rebekah plans to gain it for Jacob. Does Isaac know about the prophecy given to Rebekah, or of the oath Esau swore to let Jacob have the birthright? Whatever, his love of venison is given as the reason for his preference for Esau and, even now, he wants his venison as a prelude to conveying the blessing.

Rebekah is adept in deception and confidently prepares goat so that it tastes like venison, and dresses Jacob so that he seems to be Esau. Jacob complies even though he can see the possibility of the plan backfiring. Ironically, Rebekah would rather risk her husband's curse than have Jacob miss gaining his blessing, and Jacob takes the same view.

ESAU SELLS HIS BIRTHRIGHT / JACOB STEALS THE BLESSING con't

Now Jacob, fully involved in the deception, lies twice as to his identity and falsely claims that God expedited his hunting. He is yet to learn that his duplicity is not necessary to obtaining God's blessing, but he receives it nonetheless. He will be prospered by God, have leadership among nations, authority in the family and be the focal point for God's blessing and cursing. God will reveal himself through this man and his history and be known forever as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—through whom blessing will come to the nations.

Both father and son are deeply shaken by the thwarting of what they have planned. Isaac has seen the purpose of God proceed despite his preferences, and Esau has seen his own carelessness of divine blessing bear its bitter fruit. Isaac knows there is only one blessing and tells Esau that his future will be in a wilderness, and as a fighter for his freedom.

Rebekah continues to stage manage the family. She sees how bitterly her son rages against his brother and immediately plans to send Jacob to Haran where her brother still lives. This will be only a matter of 'days' she thinks. The plan is put to her husband in terms that her father in law Abraham used in regard to her own coming into this family. Why should Jacob find a wife among the local women? This is also an argument for which Isaac already has some sympathy. Isaac loves Esau but the Hittite wives he has taken are a grief to both parents (26:35).

So Jacob is sent away to find a wife in Haran. He is now sent, knowingly, with the blessing of God Almighty, the God of his father Abraham (17:1). Isaac does not live with the bitterness of his disappointment. He knows that nothing can prevent the Lord from fulfilling his purpose. In contrast, Esau not only wishes to kill his brother, but also takes a wife from the family of Ishmael, specifically to spite the father he has previously loved.

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GENESIS 27:41 — 29:1

Psalm 105:10, 11

JACOB'S DREAM

Story Notes

File no. 17

27:41–28:9

Rebekah continues to stage manage the family. She sees how bitterly her son rages against his brother and immediately plans to send Jacob to Haran where her brother still lives. This will be only a matter of 'days' she thinks. Her scheme is presented cleverly. Why should Jacob find a wife among the local women? This is the same argument her father in law, Abraham, had used when he insisted his servant travel to Haran to find a wife for Isaac. This is also an argument for which Isaac already has some sympathy: Isaac loves Esau but the Hittite wives he has taken are a grief to both parents (26:35).

So Jacob is sent away to find a wife in Haran. He is now sent, knowingly, with the blessing of God Almighty, the God of his father Abraham (17:1). Isaac does not live with the bitterness of his disappointment. He knows that nothing can prevent the Lord from fulfilling his purpose. In contrast, Esau not only wishes to kill his brother, but also takes a wife from the family of Ishmael, specifically to spite the father he has previously loved.

28:10–29:30

Jacob, early in his journey north to Haran stops at Luz. He later calls this time the day of his distress (35:3); clearly he is not a happy man, and, as one who loved to be at home, this is all new. He sleeps, but God visits him in a dream (cf. Ps. 127:2—God gives to his beloved even in his sleep) and speaks to him. Angels ascending and descending on him (perhaps better than on 'it'—the ladder) shows him that there is regular traffic between heaven and earth and that these angels do business for God, focusing on him in particular. He later says that an angel has redeemed him from all evil (48:16), perhaps a reference to what the Lord revealed to him here. Certainly, angels would protect him and no harm would come to his tent (Ps. 91:11-12).

Jesus refers to this incident while talking to Nathaniel, saying that he would see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Heaven's traffic with earth had been through Jacob and the nation that bore his name Israel, but would now flow through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

God repeats, for Jacob, the promises of land, progeny and blessing first given to Abraham. But Jacob is also told that God will be with him, keep him and return him to his home—all things Jacob would love to have. The promises of God take into account, not only his larger purpose, but also, the specific needs of each person among his people. These personal promises: God being with his people (Exod. 3:12; Josh. 1:5; Isa. 7:14) and guarding them (Num. 6:24; Ps. 23; 121) become key blessings for the whole nation. Given that these promises are first made to Jacob, they can be sure that God's promises do not arise because of the behaviour of his people but because of his own purpose and grace.

Jacob has deceived his brother in order to have what God is now promising freely, even to one guilty of deceit. If he thought the Lord was Lord only in the presence of his father, he now knows that this place is God's too and that the promises made to his father will indeed be fulfilled through him. If Jacob has been hesitant to believe he could have the blessing, he now begins to do business with God, albeit in a somewhat negotiating fashion. 'If you do what you say, you will be my God. This will be your house (a promise he later has to be urged to keep) and I will give a tithe of my possessions to you, following the example of his grandfather. With this behind him, he travels on to Haran.

GENESIS 29:1 – 31:55

JACOB WORKS FOR LABAN / JACOB RUNS AWAY

Story Notes

File no. 18

29:1-30

Jacob arrives in Haran. God's promise of blessing has now been made directly to him—he will be blessed with property and progeny and be a blessing in the world. The choice of Jacob is an expression of love (Rom. 9:12-13) but the story shows that his family has little understanding of this. One of their favourite expressions is 'wages' (used 9 times in this passage), a very different approach to God's covenant of grace.

Jacob arrives, like his grandfather's servant who came to find a wife for Isaac (chapter 24), in time to witness the watering of animals. As in the earlier story, a young lady from the Nahor family is soon on the scene. But Jacob has none of the godly poise of Abraham's servant. His familial address, 'brother', is probably over familiar. As he waits for Rachel to arrive with her flock, he remonstrates with the shepherds about watering their sheep immediately and getting them back to pasture. He is unaware of the custom of waiting for all the flocks to arrive and then moving the heavy stone together. When Rachel arrives and he finds that she is indeed of the family of Nahor, he ignores local proprieties and, obviously, with some effort, moves the stone for Rachel. He kisses the girl and weeps in her presence. He is impetuous and seems unable to act with the decorum appropriate to faith in God.

Rachel runs to tell her father of Jacob's arrival. Laban runs to him to greet him affably. He seems eager to greet this family member, but may also expect more of the lavish gifts that Abraham had sent on the earlier occasion. But Jacob is a fugitive, and empty handed. He stays with the family for a month, but then, his future must be decided, and Laban tells Jacob how things now stand. Jacob is his servant, but, given he is family, can ask for wages. Jacob loves the beautiful Rachel and says he will work for seven years for her.

Laban's deceit in giving Leah to Jacob in place of Rachel is breathtaking, though he passes it off as custom. He has secured another seven years of service from Jacob because he has calculated on the love the young man has for his daughter. So begins the unhappy story of Jacob and his marriage to these two sisters.

29:31—30:24

Jacob resents his situation and comes to hate Leah. He seems not to recall that his own presence here is precisely because of a similar deceit against his own brother! God does not agree with this hatred and gives Leah four sons. Each child's name expresses her longing for the love of her husband, and finally, her praise for the God who has heard her prayers. In these and other ways, God gives Jacob opportunity to learn and reflect the grace of the covenant that has been made with him.

Rachel has no children and gets furious with Jacob, though her childlessness is not his doing. Then, Jacob is furious that he is being asked to play the role of God. So Rachel follows the example of Sarah and secures children for herself through her servant girl. She names her children in recognition that God has heard her, and that she has triumphed over her sister.

Leah gains two more children by giving her servant to Jacob as a wife. She seems to have found happiness in this strange family, but Rachel still commands the marriage bed! Leah's longing is for some time with her husband, and Rachel's is being able to conceive, so when Leah's young son finds some small plants that are thought to aid fertility, Rachel negotiates for some of these

JACOB WORKS FOR LABAN / JACOB RUNS AWAY con't

'mandrakes'. Leah gains a night with her husband, and so, Issachar is born. His name sounds like 'wages' because she sees this child as reward for the hard work of letting her servant bear her earlier children. And then, another child is born. She now has six children and believes her husband at least will honour her. Clearly, neither the mandrakes, nor any conniving, have had anything to do with the well being of this family. Everything has come from the blessing of God.

Then Rachel is also remembered. God's love story continues and she bears Joseph, named to express her longing for another child.

Israel's law would later require that a husband be even handed if they had more than one wife (Deut. 21:15-17).

30:25-43

Jacob has worked 14 years for his two wives, his beloved wife has a child and he longs for home. But Laban is not finished, and begins trading again. He may not know of the promise to Jacob, but he can see he is enriched by the presence of this man and, again, asks what Jacob wants for wages.

Jacob has no reason to trust Laban anymore and calculates a way to provide for himself and his family. His wages will be the multicoloured sheep or goats. It seems as though he means to start with those already in the flocks but Laban takes the mottled stock away to be looked after by his sons, three days journey away, so there can be no cheating!

Jacob continues to look after the main herds of white sheep and black goats, but uses what was probably local 'science' or folk lore, a belief that whatever the breeding animals saw as they mated determined the colour of their young. The truth of this belief is not important to the story because we already know that the reason for the prospering of his nominated flock is the Lord's blessing, not any local custom. Jacob made sure the strongest animals bred in this way and then, separated the mottled animals from the plain coloured ones. His flocks of vigorous animals multiplied greatly and Laban's weaker and plain coloured flocks diminished. At the end of six years, Jacob could now afford to care for his family and have the luxury of servants and camels as well. Laban is left with little!

31:1-55

Two things now change everything for Jacob. He can see that his relationship with Laban has deteriorated beyond repair, and God speaks to him. It is time to go home, and God will be with him. He secretly tells his wives of his situation: the disfavour he has fallen into with their father, and the frequent changing of his wages, that is, of what animals he could keep, even though this had been settled beforehand. Whatever kind of sheep or goat Laban nominated as wages, God produced in the mating season. Jacob tells his wives that it was God who showed him that this was how it would be. He tells them that this God of Bethel who had appeared to him 20 years earlier had called him to return.

They agree; their welfare lays with Jacob, not their father. Immediately, he mounts his escape and travels for three days before Laban, busy with shearing, gets to hear about it. The wives say they will do what Jacob's God has required, but Rachel steals her father gods. Clearly, she still thinks her welfare depends on these idols and not on the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!

It is a week before Laban can catch the fugitives, but God comes to him too—no harm must come to Jacob! Laban complains to Jacob that he would have loved a proper send off. He tells Jacob he has power to harm him but has been prohibited by God from doing so. Jacob, of course, has already told his wives what is obvious to them—God has never allowed Laban to harm Jacob.

JACOB WORKS FOR LABAN / JACOB RUNS AWAY con't

Laban still wants his gods. It seems he has not bowed to the God who has been intervening in his affairs for 20 years. Jacob vows that if the idols are found the culprit will die, and Rachel avoids detection by demurely sitting on her camel (even though the tents are still standing and being searched).

All this brings from Jacob another burst of anger, like the anger he had against Rachel when she complained about Jacob not 'giving' her children (30:2). He has been treated like a common criminal having his goods searched, but for 20 years, has been a faithful steward and earned the wages paid to him. He has endured the difficulties of hard labour in the fields but Laban has changed the agreed wages 10 times. It is the Lord alone who has protected him and prospered him, the one who was Abraham's God and Isaac's fear.

He may be speaking in anger, but the majestic truth of what has been going on over these years is there for all to see. It is this Lord who had seen Jacob's distress and who rebuked Laban the night before.

Laban seems to be totally unaffected. He still sees all that Jacob has as his own, and Jacob as no more than his servant. In a last attempt at taking the initiative, he proposes as covenant, not of sharing but of separation. 'May the Lord keep us from trespassing on each other's territory.' Laban's God is the God of his father Nahor, and Abraham. The uniqueness of what has been revealed to Abraham seems not to have reached him. Jacob swears by the God, or fear, of his father Isaac. And so, they separate.

From Laban come the Arameans or Syrians. There would never be cooperation between the people of Jacob or Israel and the people of Syria, only an agreement to have a boundary.

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GENESIS 32:1 — 33:16

JACOB FIGHTS WITH GOD

Story Notes

File no. 19

32:1-32

Jacob nears his homeland and is met by angels, which may remind him of the angels he saw as he left the land (28:12). He will be guarded in all his ways (Ps. 91:11) and will have no need to defend himself. He calls the place 'God's camp!'

Jacob sends ahead with news of his arrival, and of his prosperity, perhaps, in case Esau thinks he is coming for help. He wants his brother addressed as 'my lord Esau' and himself, his servant (32:4-5, 18), even though his father's blessing has made Jacob lord and Esau his servant (27:29, 37). Return news comes that his brother is arriving with 400 men and Jacob prepares for a possible attack and divides his party into two.

Now he prays, urgently. For the first time, he tells us something about his own moral state: he is unworthy of what God has done for him—the steadfast love and faithfulness that God has shown to him (cf. Exod. 34:6). He is not bargaining now but entreating God on the basis of the promises made to his grandfather and father and to himself, that God would be good to him and make his family numerous. His options for self-protection are running out, but God's promise remains.

Jacob sends extravagant 'presents', and stages them, to soften up his brother—to 'appease' him. He wants to see his brother's face and be accepted. We suppose that he is acknowledging his earlier deception and wants reconciliation. With these preparations in place, he sends his family across the River Jabbok and remains alone.

Nothing now lies between Jacob and his brother, except an angel who comes to wrestle with him. This will be the struggle in which he will lose his self-reliance. In effect, the Lord comes to him. Nothing of the riches he already has, or the gifts he has sent on ahead of him, can assure him of God's blessing and all that has been promised to him. He knows it is this angel who holds the key to the blessing he craves and refuses to let him go until he hears the words of blessing. At this, the angel changes his name from Jacob—'grasper', to Israel—'God prevails' and blesses him. Jacob does not need to fight with man for what God will give.

So, the nation of Israel gain their name. They continue to be called Jacob however, and to act like Jacob ('each man Jacob's his brother'—Jer. 9:4), but God continues to call the nation to trust in him. 'Fear not O Jacob...not be dismayed O Israel (46:27-28).

The angel will not give a name but Jacob names the place Peniel—'face of God'. He knows that his opponent has been God, and face-to-face at that. He comes away with a limp, unable to run, shut up to God's favour. The nation that arises from this man recalls this story, and their identity, by refusing to eat the sciatic nerve of any animal.

33:1-16

Esau and his 400 men appear, and Jacob arranges his family with his least favoured in front, but with himself leading the whole company. He adopts the servile greeting appropriate to a vassal approaching his lord, as if to press the point that he will not exercise any of the powers granted by their father's blessing (27:29). Esau, who seems to have forgotten the blessing, acts more nobly and greets his brother as one may expect of a long lost brother.

Jacob, or Israel, introduces his God given family, but Esau can't understand all the gifts! Jacob has one thing in mind, the favour of his brother (vv. 8, 10, 15). He even says that seeing the face of his brother is like seeing the face of God. Perhaps he means that the encounter with God at Peniel

JACOB FIGHTS WITH GOD con't

finds its outworking in this reunion, and he seems unable to digest the fact that it is really happening.

Esau is persuaded to accept Jacob's gifts, and to let him follow behind, ostensibly to allow time for recuperation after the travel. Even Esau's offer of assistance is declined.

33:17-20

But Jacob does not return home to Esau as he indicated he would (v. 14), a trip that would take him southwards, to Edom. He moves westwards and builds a home and some sheds for stock, calling it Succoth. His pilgrimage is over. Later, he crosses the Jordan and arrives safely in Shechem where the Lord had first appeared to his grandfather (12:6-7). He pitches his tents, and buys land from the local people to settle there. Then he makes an altar in honour of God, the God of Israel—his God.

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GENESIS 37:1–35

Acts 7:9

JOSEPH SOLD BY HIS BROTHERS

Story Notes

File no. 20

The story of Jacob, beginning in this chapter and running until the end of Genesis, focuses on his favoured son, Joseph, and is the longest single story in the Bible. It shows, in a practical way, how the blessing of Abraham begins to be fulfilled in the immediate history of the patriarchs. Even though this family is deeply faulted, the Lord is preserving his own people and causing them to be a blessing to the nations in a time of famine.

Joseph, at 17 years of age, assists his brothers with care of their father's flocks. He sees that their dealings are unfaithful and reports the matter to their father. Jacob has already favoured this son, born in his old age, and, of course, to his beloved Rachel. The harmful aspects of his father's favouritism are being repeated in another generation. The special coat (the language doesn't make it clear what was special about it) may be a sign of regarding him as his heir (cf. 2 Sam. 13:18). It is certainly a clear statement of love for Joseph, and it arouses his brothers' hate—against Joseph rather than against their father.

Joseph has a dream, and the events that follow will make it clear that both this, and his other dream, are from God and that they will come true. Joseph probably considers it as such, and may know that God has guided his father and grandfather through dreams (26:24; 28:13). The brothers don't just hate Joseph, they are jealous of him, for his favoured position. When Joseph's second dream includes his parents, Jacob rebukes Joseph but keeps his son's dreams in mind. Joseph's seeming impertinence does not invalidate his dreams.

Joseph's brothers have opportunity to express their hate when he is sent out to see how the brothers and the flocks are faring. They call him 'this dreamer'. Clearly, it is the anticipated authority that he claims he will have that angers them most. Most want to kill him. Reuben, mindful of their father, plans to rescue him. Then Judah sees opportunity for some profit when Midianite traders pass, and Joseph is sold to them. Reuben's distress suggests he did have some consideration for his father. The whole scene suggests a total unravelling of the dreams given to Joseph.

This story is used in the New Testament, by Stephen, as an example of the resentment of those whom the Lord raises up as saviours of his people (Acts 7:9-14).

So the plan is carried out. The special coat is soiled with blood. Jacob grieves a son thought to be torn apart by animals. The brothers live with their callous murder. But in the midst of all this, Joseph is sent to the place where his dreams will be fulfilled. As the psalmist says, 'His feet were hurt with fetters, his neck was put in a collar of iron; until what he has said came to pass, the word of the Lord tested him' (Ps. 105:18-19). The following story will show that Joseph never doubts that the purpose of God for him will be fulfilled. Soon, he will say to a fellow prisoner, 'Do not interpretations belong to God?' (40:8).

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GENESIS 39:1 – 40:23

Genesis 37:36; Psalm 105:16–19; Acts 7:9–10

JOSEPH IN POTIPHAR'S HOUSE / JOSEPH IN PRISON

Story Notes

File no. 21

39:1-23

Joseph begins his time of suffering, first as a slave, then as a prisoner, and finally, as one forgotten. We hear more of his sufferings than of his forefathers, but he shows remarkable trust in the promises made to him.

Joseph, dishonoured by his brothers, becomes a slave to Potiphar, in Egypt. But the Lord is with Joseph, as he has been with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (21:22; 26:24, 28; 28:15). The Lord's blessing makes all that he does prosper so that he is placed in charge of his master's entire household, a blessing that extends to this foreigner and all that he has. God's promise to Abraham (12:3) still determines the life of this descendent.

Joseph is again dishonoured; this time, by his master's wife. She fancies him, attempts to seduce him, and fails. Joseph knows he is privileged and powerful, but will not offend his master, and will not sin against God. As she persists in her flightiness, so does Joseph in his faithfulness. It is this faithfulness, his fleeing from her clutches, that provides Potiphar's wife with his coat, and this becomes the alleged evidence of a dire crime, a crime she vigorously asserts she sought to avoid. So Joseph is thrown into jail. But the covenant has not been revoked, the Lord is with him, he finds favour with his captor and is given charge of everything in the prison, and, just as before, everything he does succeeds!

40:1-23

Joseph's dreams of leadership are being fulfilled in this hidden place, and now, he has opportunity to interpret the dreams of others. The king's cupbearer and baker are also thrown into prison because of the king's anger, and remain there for some time. One day, they are troubled by the dream that each has had, and Joseph notices their perplexity. 'Interpretations belong to God' he says. 'Tell me your dreams!' He still believes these can come from God, and that the interpretation of them comes from God. He also knows he can interpret them!

Joseph shows these two men the meaning of their dreams, and, while speaking to the cupbearer who will be restored to his office, asks to be remembered before the King. He recalls the injustice of his being sold as a slave, and his innocence of the charge that landed him in jail. He hopes that the jailer's steadfast love may be repeated by the steadfast love of the King.

The baker loses his head, as in the interpretation given by Joseph, and the cupbearer is restored to his place of honour. But Joseph is forgotten. The fulfilment of his dreams awaits another day and another interpretation.

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GENESIS 41:1–52

Psalm 105:20–22; Acts 7:9–10

JOSEPH BECOMES A RULER

Story Notes

File no. 22

Cows and corn are key produce in Egypt and Pharaoh must have often had opportunity to think about them, but the weird and parallel dreams of the seven thin and withered cows and seven thin and scorched corn stalks devouring the plump ones, disturb him. The dreams have robbed him of his initiative. The fact that the cows, good and bad, come up from the Nile, may also trouble him because Egypt's economy is kept remarkably constant by its reliability. No magician or wise man can interpret what these dreams may indicate. Now, the cupbearer acknowledges his sin against Joseph. He recounts his earlier time in jail and the successful interpretation of his dream, and Joseph is quickly summoned.

Joseph has waited two years for this day, for justice. If his plea had been entered earlier, it may well have been ignored, but now he is needed. His confidence that God interprets dreams remains intact (v. 16). He has learned what Israel was later told: 'The vision awaits its appointed time ... the righteous shall live by faith' (Hab. 2:3-4; Rom. 1:17). He is Israel's example of Habakkuk's prophecy: his spirit has not become haughty but humbled. He is ready to be God's servant, to show Egypt that their welfare is not because of their religion or their river, but is under the sovereignty of Israel's God.

In this deeply idolatrous court, Joseph explains that it is God, not him, who understands dreams (v. 16). He says three times that they indicate what God will do (vv. 25, 28, 32), and proceeds to explain. The seven cows and stalks represent years; the plump stock and grain represent years of plenty; the awful stock and grain represent severe famine; the seven years of plenty will be devoured by the years of famine; the repeated dream means God has fixed the time, and that it will not be long in coming.

Joseph's dreams were also doubled, and they happened 'soon'—though not in the way he expected. His reversals were also doubled—slavery and prison. He knows the certainty of what God does and has been prepared by his experience of fulfilled dreams to help Pharaoh through what he now knows will happen. 'Choose a wise and discerning man ...'. Pharaoh needs a good leader to be in charge of his economy in the coming 14 years.

Does Joseph think of himself? We cannot know, but he has learned how to exercise the authority promised to him as a boy; learned it as a slave, and as a prisoner. He suggests the appointment of overseers throughout the land and a 20% levy on all produce for the seven years to cover the bad years.

Pharaoh approves the interpretation and Joseph's proposal, and recognises that Joseph is remarkably suited to such a task. He is impressed by his access to divine wisdom—the Spirit of God is in him. Joseph has also demonstrated considerable practical wisdom and strength of character. He is the wise and understanding man needed to supervise this project. Unlike the Pharaoh in the days of Moses, this leader recognises the sovereignty of Israel's Lord.

The authority entrusted to Joseph is comprehensive, as will be needed for such a massive intervention in the life of the whole country. His new name possibly means 'God speaks and lives'. He wears Pharaoh's signet ring—the sign of his authority, is dressed royally, is bowed to and rides in the nation's second chariot. He is given a priest's daughter as wife. The only power not entrusted to him is the power of Pharaoh himself.

JOSEPH BECOMES A RULER con't

So, the produce is collected. This must have been difficult when returns were good, year after year. Everything relied on the dream God gave to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh's belief that the interpretation was valid, and, of course, on Joseph's leadership.

Joseph is now 30 years old. He was 17 when still in Canaan (37:2) and has spent 12 years waiting for this time, and is deeply aware of God's hand to fulfill the dreams he had as a boy. His boys are named to express his thanks: God has made him forget all his hardship and the family he has left behind; God has made him fruitful in the land where he has suffered. He interprets his life in terms of the promises made to his family: that they would be fruitful and be a blessing among the nations. Like Daniel in later years, Joseph is used to show that the Lord controls the destiny of nations, that he gives wisdom to deal with life, and that he cares for and prepares the way for his people.

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GENESIS 41:46 – 46:7; 46:28–34; 50:1–14

Acts 7:11–15; Hebrews 11:21

JOSEPH'S BROTHERS GO TO EGYPT / JOSEPH FORGIVES HIS BROTHERS

Story Notes

File no. 23

41:46 (53)—46:7

Joseph is now 30 years old, 12 years older than when he dreamed his dreams (see 37:2) but still deeply aware that God will fulfill these prophecies. His boys are named to express his thanks: God has made him forget his hardship and the family he has left behind; God has made him fruitful in the land where he has suffered. He interprets his life in terms of the promises made to his family: that they would be fruitful and be a blessing among the nations.

The predicted seven years of famine begin, and only Egypt has grain. When the Egyptians farmers have nothing left, they must go to Joseph. Then, 'all the earth' feels the famine and 'all the earth' must come to Egypt, and to Joseph. God is fulfilling his promise that his people will be a blessing in 'all the earth'.

Jacob's family, living under God's covenant, is not exempt and must also come to Joseph. They come, and they bow—and Joseph recalls his dreams. Like the other dreams he has encountered, God enables him to understand them, and God fulfills them.

Joseph tests his brothers by accusing them of being spies and hears their protests that they are honest men. He makes them talk about their younger brother, and says they must send for him before they are released, and then holds them in custody for three days. The order is changed to one of the brothers remaining while the others return with their younger brother to buy more grain. Now, in their distress, they realise the guilt of ignoring the plea of Joseph when they held his life in their hands. Reuben tries to justify himself. Joseph hears all this, undetected, and turns away to weep. Their bowing to him has not made him haughty; rather, the goodness of God to him has made him tender. Simeon is kept and the others return to Canaan.

Their problems multiply. The money they took as payment has not been received and they wonder, now, what God is doing to them. When they arrive home, their father will not let Benjamin out of his sight for a return visit. Reuben makes an extreme offer, the life of his sons as surety, to persuade his father to let them return with Benjamin.

When food begins to run out, Judah persuades Jacob to let them return. They go with double money and with Jacob asking God Almighty to give them mercy before Joseph.

This time, the brothers must attend Joseph at his own home. They explain their problem with the money to a steward and are told this must have come from their God (as, indeed it has, from the kindness of God reflected in Joseph). Simeon is restored to them and they find they have come to a feast.

For a second time, the brothers bow, and prostrate themselves before Joseph. He hears that his father is well, but sight of his brother overtakes him and he retires to weep. Then, the meal begins, and they find themselves placed in order of their age, and Benjamin is given five times more than the others. What does this mean?

Another test is in store. Joseph sends them off, again with their money returned and with his own cup in Benjamin's sack. Joseph seems not to have changed activity before he sends after them, charging Benjamin with theft. This is Joseph's cup, and as he claims, his means of divining. So they all return, distraught, and fall to the ground before Joseph, for a third time. He accuses Benjamin

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directly of a heinous crime. The brothers see they cannot clear themselves of guilt. Are they indeed honest men? Judah says, 'God has found out the guilt of your servants'. He pleads with Joseph, explaining his father's distress over Benjamin and his previous distress over the loss of Joseph to a wild animal. The father will not survive another grief says Judah and he offers to be a substitute.

Joseph can hold out no longer, dismisses all Egyptians and weeps for a third time. But this time, it is aloud, and he says, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold'. His words are very much like those of Jesus to Saul, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting' (Acts. 9:5). Joseph interprets all that has happened in terms of the covenant made with his fathers: 'God sent me here, (he doesn't mention his suffering), to preserve life; don't be distressed or angry with yourselves; this has all been 'for you' to keep a remnant alive, and many other survivors as well; with this in mind, I have been given full authority over all Egypt.'

As always, Joseph is intensely practical. There are five years of famine remaining and he would like his family close so he can care for them. Again, he kisses and weeps over his brothers. Pharaoh welcomes the plan to bring the family to Egypt and offers them the best of the land and abundant provisions for the journey. So highly does he honour and value Joseph. Joseph sends his brothers away with the command to not quarrel! In effect, they are to talk with one another as he has talked with them.

Jacob cannot believe his beloved son is alive until he sees the wagons sent to bring him to Egypt. He and his family leave the land promised to Abraham and his seed. As he departs, the Lord speaks to 'Israel', calling him 'Jacob' (the names are used interchangeably after he is renamed by the Lord): he should not fear leaving because the Lord will go with him, and make him into a great nation.

46:28-34

Judah is trusted with leading the way to Egypt, and he seeks out Joseph who leads them to Goshen. Joseph chooses this location because it is well out of the way of the Egyptians. The brothers are to affirm that they are shepherds so Pharaoh, recognising that shepherds are despised by Egyptians, will not be tempted to bring them any closer and integrate them into the idolatrous life of Egypt.

50:1-14

Jacob dies, and all Egypt is in mourning for 70 days. Joseph's position demands that the funeral of his father be a state occasion, but, at Jacob's request, this will be back in Canaan, the land God has promised to his family. Many Egyptian officials accompany the family and share in the mourning, and the local Canaanites notice how affected the Egyptians are for this previous resident of their land.

50:15-21

Even now, Joseph's brothers cannot believe the grace of God's covenant that has guided his actions. They do not understand that God elevated Joseph above them to save them, and not because he was more highly favoured. Again, he weeps, and disclaims the godlike honour they bestow on him; 'Am I in the place of God... God meant it for good'.

To the end, it seems that we are slow to realise the ascendancy of those God sends to save us is not to be resented but welcomed (Acts 3:26; cf. 7:9). It is in this way that Jesus Christ our Lord lives to save and serve his Father's people.

We cannot know but could guess that Joseph understands the foibles of his father, knows he has been chosen because of God's sovereignty (Rom. 9:10-16), knows too, that his own elevation has

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not been because of merit but so that he may serve the purpose of God among his chosen people, again, so that blessing will reach the ends of the earth.

In the process of his trials, Joseph has become a wise man, as in the book of Proverbs. He fears the Lord (1:7; 2:5-9), gives counsel (16:13, 21), avoids adulterers (6:24-29), is diligent in time of plenty (21:5; 24:7) and doesn't take revenge (20:22; 24:29).

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