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The Story: Finding the Scarlet Thread

Joseph

Genesis 37-50

I want to start with a question for our younger worshipers. Let's say you have eleven siblings and your dad gives one of them a brand new iPhone. What would you say? "That's not fair!" Parents, how often have you heard those words? And what is the standard response? "Life's not fair!" True, and every one of us is going to have to deal with disappointment. Well, Joseph could have written a book called, "Life's Not Fair."

We are using this, *The Story*, to read through the Bible in a year. So, how many of you read chapter 2? We started with Creation... God made everything out of nothing for his pleasure, and it was good. Then came the Fall... Adam and Eve believed the lie that God didn't love them and did the one thing they had been forbidden. Their relationship with God is broken. Then Redemption... God begins his plan to restore the broken relationship with humanity. And he starts by calling Abram to be the Father of a new nation through whom God will bless the entire world. Abraham has a son, Isaac. Isaac has two sons, Esau and Jacob. And Jacob has 12 sons... from whom would come the twelve tribes of Israel. One of those sons was Joseph.

Jacob loved Joseph best. Every brother knew it. He even gave Joseph a special fancy coat. Not fair! And to make things worse, Joseph had dreams about his brothers bowing down to him. Guess what? He told them! A note to you kids: if God gives you dreams about your siblings bowing down to you, you might want to keep that to yourself!

But Joseph didn't, and how did it make his brothers feel? "When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him." Gen. 37:4. I have a younger sister. She bugged me a lot, but this goes beyond being bugged. Joseph's brothers despised him. And now we come to the episode that sets up the rest of Joseph's story. His brothers are off grazing their sheep, and dad sends Joseph to check up on them... which the brothers also hated. Listen:

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. ¹⁸But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. ¹⁹"Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. ²⁰"Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal

devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." ²¹When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. ²²"Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—²⁴and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. ²⁶Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?" ²⁷Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed. ²⁸So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

Can you imagine hating your brother that much? Sitting down to your picnic lunch while he wails at the bottom of the pit you just dropped him in? Heartless, right? What would you cry out to God in that moment? Unfair!

In Egypt, Joseph is purchased by Potiphar—a very powerful man. It isn't long before Joseph's leadership gifts become apparent. Potiphar promotes him from the bottom of the heap to the top rung. Everything he touched flourished. The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did... Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned." Gen. 39.2 ff.

Things were looking up for Joseph until Potiphar's trophy wife set her sights on him. He was good looking and she made it clear that she wanted to bed him. Joseph was appalled, "My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" Genesis 39.9

But the cougar didn't give up. One day, she caught him alone while the servants were out. Joseph ran away, but she grabbed his robe as he escaped. In her humiliation, she used that robe as "proof" that Joseph had attacked her. Potiphar threw him into a pit in the dungeon and left him there to rot... for no reason other than remaining faithful to his master and to his God. What would you cry out to God in that case? Unfair!

But again, Joseph's talents were recognized. "...while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in

the eyes of the prison warden... he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did." Genesis 39.20 ff.

During that time, two former servants who had displeased Pharaoh were thrown into prison. They shared some dreams with Joseph who interpreted them. He told the wine-taster he would be returned to Pharaoh's court (good for him)... but the baker would have his head cut off and his body hung on a tree. (You gotta wonder what he did to the Pharaoh's croissants!) Obviously, the wine-taster was relieved and grateful. All Joseph asked was: "Please appeal to Pharaoh on my behalf."

It all happened as Joseph said. The baker was executed and the wine-taster, restored, but he forgot his promise to Joseph. What would you cry out to God? Unfair! But ten years later, Pharaoh had nightmares no one could interpret. Finally, the wine-taster remembered Joseph. He was hauled out of the pit, cleaned up and marched into the palace. With God's help, Joseph interpreted the dreams. Egypt was going to have seven years of bounty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh ought to appoint someone to store away food during the seven good years so they could ride out the famine.

Guess what? Pharaoh appoints Joseph! He goes from pit to throne. And everything happened as Joseph said. After seven good years, the entire region was struck by a famine—including Canaan where Joseph's family lived. Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy food and, of course, when they came before Joseph, they did not recognize the brother they had sold into slavery. Joseph put them through several tests and only after he was sure that they were changed men, did he reveal himself to them. This reconciliation is one of the most moving stories in the Bible; Joseph weeps so loudly, the whole household of Pharaoh hears him. He forgives his brothers, welcomes them, sets them up in a fertile region of Egypt and covers them with Pharaoh's protection. And Genesis ends with Joseph's death and his descendants flourishing in Egypt.

That's a very long story in a very small nutshell. So here's a question for you: Why did the Holy Spirit think Joseph deserved 14 chapters in God's Story? Here's my idea: I think Joseph is the finest man in the Bible. Joseph never fails! Every other major Bible character fails spectacularly. Adam falls. Abraham lies and doubts. Moses murders. David commits adultery and murders. Peter betrays. Paul murders. Every major Bible character fails spectacularly. Joseph never does. I suppose you could accuse him of being a showoff as a teenager. But after that, every opportunity he has to deny God to fall into sin, or to misuse power, he remains faithful to God. And of all the Bible characters, except for Job, no one had more cause to doubt and deny God than Joseph—because Joseph's life really wasn't fair.

Have any of you been there? Been cheated and lost everything financially? Been cheated on and lost your spouse and kids? Been cheated out of your good health? A woman wrote me this week of a son who had tried to take his life. "I have to tell

you, when we had our family I was not saying, 'Gee, I hope one of them has cancer and the other one has mental problems.' Can I say it doesn't seem fair?" No, it does not, and you can't find a better mentor for dealing with unfairness than Joseph. I want to look at two things that will prepare you to read through his entire story this week. How do you deal with unfairness in life? You outwork it and you outlast it.

First, Joseph teaches us to outwork unfairness. In Potiphar's house, Joseph said to himself, "If I'm going to be a slave, I'll be the best slave I can be." He made himself so valuable to Potiphar that soon, he was second in command in the house. And when he was unfairly imprisoned, Joseph said to himself, "If I'm going to be a prisoner, I will be the best prisoner I can be." He made himself so valuable to the warden that soon, he was second in command in the prison. If anyone had the right to call himself a victim, it was Joseph, but he refused to do so. He was bounced from pit to slave quarters to pit again. It was unfair, but Joseph refused to feel sorry for himself. He surveyed his situation, figured out what he could do, and outworked the unfairness.

We were served at a restaurant the other day by a remarkable guy. He knew everything about everything on that menu. When I commented on it, he proudly told us he had been working in that restaurant for 30 years! About how much he loved the owners, how much he loved what he did; how he hoped to retire in that job. Others might view waiting tables as a dead end job, but this guy threw himself into his work with passion.

It may not be fair that you were never able to finish your college degree because kids came along, not fair that others have received the promotion you deserved, not fair that the person you married is not the person you thought you married, not fair that _____ (fill in the blank). So, you have two choices: you can mope and play the victim and remind yourself—and everyone around you—how unfair life has been to you, or you can throw yourself into making the very best of your crummy situation.

At the end of every worship service, we say these words from Colossians 3: "... and whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Life may not be fair. You might find yourself in the pits. But you can decide that you are going to make the very best of that unfair situation, and when you do, you bring honor to Christ and elevate yourself!

Joseph outworked unfairness, and he outlasted it. He never gave up. He never stopped believing that God had something better in store for him. Not when his brothers betrayed him, not when Potiphar's wife entrapped him, not when the wine-taster forgot him. Joseph kept believing in God and, in the end, outlasted the unfairness. The greatest verse in the Joseph story comes in chapter 50. His brothers are standing before him as he is seated on the second most powerful throne in the world. Listen to his words: "You intended to harm me, but God

intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." Genesis 50:20.

Joseph lived thousands of years before Paul but what Paul wrote to the Romans might have been Joseph's life verse: "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28

It is so important to understand what this verse does not say. It does not say that everything is good. Everything in this broken world is not good. It was when God created it, but not now. But the promise of God is that if we love him, if we trust him, if we persevere in him, he will weave everything—both the glorious times and the terrible, unfair times—together for his good purpose. We may not yet see it. We may never see it, this side of heaven, but we hang in there. We wait and work and trust and pray and cry and cry out... and we outlast the unfairness of this life.

Anita Baldwin could easily cry "Unfair." Since 1997, she has had 14 hospitalizations: a broken leg, a bike accident that knocked out her teeth, broke both jaws, and crushed her chin; a blown out knee; a broken wrist. Then breast cancer; then a botched hysterectomy. And a few weeks ago, a stroke. Anita told me, "I feel like I lost my 40s, but I think of Lot's wife. God told her not to look back. Sometimes when we do, it just brings up bitterness and anger. Who wants to be around that?" Anita no longer asks "Why?" She says, "I started asking, 'What now? What do you want me to do now, Lord?' I just keep looking forward, keep listening. The only thing to say is, 'Lord, I choose to follow you.'"

I asked her, "Have you reached a point where you can say, 'God intended this for good?'" She said, "Absolutely. The year I had cancer, Tyson's room was right below ours and he heard me throwing up every night; heard the worship tapes we played when I couldn't sleep. The next year, I was talking to him about my life. I said, 'I've heard how these kinds of circumstances change people, but I don't know if I'm any different.' And Tyson stopped me, 'It's not about you. If I hadn't seen what you went through, I wouldn't have the walk I have with the Lord.' That right there made all of it worth it."

Anita would be the first to tell you that she has made it, not by her own strength; not by grit or determination—that ran out long ago. She hangs in there because of the Spirit of Christ who lives in her. And if ever it could be said of the way someone was treated, "That's unfair!" it was Jesus. The most remarkable part of Joseph's story is this: nowhere in the Old Testament do we discover the Scarlet Thread—the whispers that point to Jesus—like we do in the life of Joseph.

Both had a name that means "savior;" both were prophesied to rule over all; both were separated from their beloved Fathers; both went into and returned from Egypt; both were despised by their brothers; both resisted temptation and sin; both were falsely accused and arrested; both were sold for the price of a slave; both showed great love and forgiveness; both were discovered alive, surprisingly; both

were the sole source of life for all; both were unrecognized by their brothers; both were reunited to their brothers; both ended up seated in the place of highest power, and before both, every knee bowed in honor and glory and worship. Perhaps most importantly, both had horrible, evil things done to them—things that they did not deserve, things unfair—but in the end, God turned what was intended for evil into incredible, eternal good. “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Genesis 50:20.

If you are in a season when life is kicking you in the butt, you need to read every chapter of Joseph’s story. And as you do, listen for the whispers, look for the glimpses of the one who promised his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!”