

Gleaners Bible Studies B 11

THE FOUNDATIONS OF A CHOSEN RACE (CONTINUED)

Study 1

Joseph the Son



Genesis chapter 37

We close our studies in this section of the Old Testament History by considering the life of Joseph. It is important at the beginning to grasp the true relationship between Joseph and Jacob, his father. To understand this we need to go back and remind ourselves of Jacob's life.

Brought up in an atmosphere of cheating and lying, first under Rebekah and then under Laban, Jacob learnt how to out-cheat even the cheats! The most bitter and crushing blow dealt him was undoubtedly when he was tricked into marrying plain, squint-eyed Leah instead of the beautiful Rachel he had fallen so deeply in love with. Years of toil had sorted that out, and Jacob's burning desire then was for sons – sons by Rachel. But what does he get? Sons? Yes! TEN of them! But they are sons by Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah and no sons by Rachel! Imagine all through those years how bitterness, despair and frustration ate into his soul.

But then Joseph is born, Rachel's first-born. And onto Joseph is lavished and poured all Jacob's pent-up emotions, all the love and adoration, the aspirations and hopes of so many by-gone years. No wonder **verse 3** of our chapter says, "**Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than all his children**". In Jacob's eyes, Joseph was his ONLY son, and he proclaims him his heir by presenting to him the long-sleeved cloak of the eldest son. I think we could say that Jacob loved Joseph almost to the exclusion of all the others. And this was further intensified when Rachel died.

Jacob treated his ten eldest sons more like hired servants, sending them to look after the flocks and herds while Joseph had the 'cushy' job of overseer at home. Can you wonder why such deep resentment, jealousy and bitterness surged up in the hearts of these young men? They could only see the injustice and unfairness of the situation. To them, Joseph was the spoilt, pampered, Daddy's pet. No wonder they hated him so much!

The historian has recorded three events which give us a true perspective on the family set-up. Joseph had reached young manhood now, he is seventeen. One day he is out in the fields with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah and whatever it is that happens, he comes home and tells tales to his father about them. Jacob laps it up – and the brothers hate Joseph. (**verse 2**)

The other two incidents are concerned with Joseph's dreams. Smug, full of his own importance as he occupies the position of heir, Joseph recounts over the breakfast table, these dreams of his own supremacy, while the brothers sit there tense and fuming. Deep, burning, jealous hatred is scorching them through and through. (**verses 5-11**)

Yet this is Joseph, the man we have come to study. We have to include in our understanding all this background of trickery and intrigue; this home bitterness and jealousy, because God Himself has included it all in His own official record. It is all there for us to see. This then is Joseph, one of God's men. God is very fair and honest in what He tells us in His textbook. If Joseph is one of God's men, it is not because he is nice,

for Joseph is certainly not nice. How could he be? Petted and pampered and spoilt as perhaps no child has ever been before or since, his brothers find him absolutely insufferable!

But Joseph will teach us, as perhaps no other story could ever teach us, that God accepts, as raw material, men who in OUR social judgment would be very unacceptable! Dour, impatient Abraham; blind Isaac; twisted Jacob; insufferable Joseph! But we shall be learning that God has never even hinted that His idea for men (or women) is that they should be chosen just because they are socially acceptable; because they are nice, polished men and women with good manners and a stable home life. And let us be quite frank and honest about this. It is just as well for US that, that is NOT God's idea for us, or none of us would ever make the grade. Maybe we didn't have a Jacob for a father, or a Rachel for a mother. Perhaps we were spared a big, serious, dominant father like Abraham. After all, we are just normal people, aren't we?

But just a minute! If we are absolutely honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we have many of the same conflicts and repressions and insecurities and over-compensations, and all the rest of it that Joseph had, but not just so marked. Yes, Joseph teaches us this lesson, and for all time. If he is one of God's men, it is not because he is nice, any more than it is because he is NOT nice. For this man God was to accept as one of His own, had only one thing about him that God was looking for. He was a man of FAITH. God accepted this young man, Joseph, not because complexes and insecurities and human failures are attractive to God, but because FAITH, that rare precious thing called faith, is the ONLY thing that God seeks in a man or woman. "**Without faith it is impossible to please Him.**" (**Hebrews 11: 6**) In our later studies we will see how God set about doing just this. How God took Joseph, hated, priggish, conceited, spoilt Joseph and began remaking him, recreating him, making him 'new-born' as Jesus once described this process.

This then is the origin and setting of Joseph, one of God's men. This is the raw material of a life in which God is now going to work. Joseph will teach you, as clearly as any case ever recorded, just what is likely to happen if you really set out to put YOUR life in God's hands.

In closing this first study, we should mention that many Christian teachers see in the various aspects of the life of Joseph pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ. Anything that leads us into a deeper appreciation of our Lord Jesus is good, but we must always remember that these human pictures are, at the best, imperfect.

When thinking of the deep love of Jacob for Joseph, as a picture of God's love for, and delight in, His Son, (**see John 3: 35 and Matthew 3: 17**) we must bear in mind that Jacob's love for Joseph was distorted, whereas God's love is pure. Jacob loved Joseph almost to the exclusion of all others. Happy for us that, "**God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son**". (**John 3: 16**) The fact that Joseph was hated and despised by his brothers, reminds us of the fact that the Lord Jesus was hated and despised by His own people too. Compare **John 1: 11** and **Isaiah 53**. But we must remember that Joseph gave his brothers every reason to do so, whereas of the Lord Jesus it was said prophetically, "**Those who hate me without a cause**". (**Psalms 69: 4**). We will see later in our studies how Joseph's prophetic dreams came true, and his brothers and father had to bow before him. **Philippians 2: 10**

-11 remind us that one day every knee shall bow in worship to the Lord Jesus Christ and acknowledge Him as "Lord of all".

Study 2

Joseph the Slave



Genesis chapters 37 & 39

God's first move in the process of 'recreating' Joseph was very simple. It consisted in getting Joseph away from the stifling atmosphere of home to a place where God could work in him. It is a thrilling thing to notice and realise that God is not bound or thwarted by the schemes of men. The Psalmist reminds us that God can use even the wrath of men to Praise Him (**Psalm 76: 10**) and this is certainly true in the life of Joseph.

Jacob had sent the elder brothers away to a distant part to pasture his flocks. Joseph of course was kept at home. Then Jacob began to wonder how they were getting on over in Shechem. He sends Joseph to check on the brothers, take them fresh supplies of food, and report back on everything. Joseph eventually tracks down the brothers at Dothan.

As he approaches them over the hills, they have no difficulty in recognising him, dressed in his long-sleeved cloak. It is easy to imagine that at least one major topic of conversation during their past days of vigil, was their own brother. Bitter, disgruntled grievances that could not be aired in front of their father, tumbled out in the freedom of the open fields. Now, as he appears on the skyline, the idea of how to be rid of him forever flashes into several minds at once. **"Look this dreamer is coming! Come therefore, let us now kill him!" (37: 19-20)**

It is interesting to notice the quarter from which the word of restraint comes – Reuben. Reuben, the eldest, the rightful heir, and the one who should be wearing that coat. **"Let us not kill him"** is his verdict **"Shed no blood but cast him into this pit." (37: 21-22)** For Joseph, that smug, pampered stripling, there is the unspeakable terror of his secure, sheltered world crashing around him in the space of one shattering minute. Well, Joseph, has God forgotten you? You are one of God's men. You are a man of faith. What about God's plan now?

No, Joseph! God has not forgotten you! This is no oversight on His part. This is just God's measureless skill and endless love beginning the process of remaking you. His next move for you is already on the way. You can't see them from down there, but there are a group of Arab traders coming over the hill and they are God's next move for you.

How true this is of our own spiritual experiences! Sometimes we find ourselves plunged into a pit of despair as the trials of life seem to overwhelm us. We can see no light ahead; blank walls seem to press in on all sides, there appears to be no way out of the situation; no friend to help! Down in the pit the only light for Joseph came from above. And so it is with us! We are men and women of faith-God's men, God's women. Let us look up in faith to our Lord above, who sees and knows what is coming 'over the hill!' The next move is His!

Joseph, you are on your way to Egypt now. Your brothers are well pleased with their bargain. Twenty silver shekels in their pocket, and they have got rid of you without having to kill you. What will happen to you now...? Joseph, you are up for sale! You have been sold as a slave. Captain Potiphar has bought you. How does it feel, Joseph, to be a slave? That rough shapeless garment you are wearing must feel very different to the soft, long-sleeved cloak you used to wear! Joseph, you are one of God's men of faith. Has God forgotten you now? Is He still with you? (**39: 1-2**)

When our English Bible was first translated, one of the loveliest statements was made at this very point in the story. In the 'Great' Bible and in the 'Breeches' Bible, the translators translated the answer to this question like this: "The Lord was

with Joseph, and he was a fortunate fellow" Yes, that is the only thing that can ever make a man say he is truly fortunate – that God is with him. And here is Joseph, this fellow who has just lost his father, his home, his family and his fortune – he is the lucky one! Yes God is with him and God is looking after him in the way He always looks after His men. His care of Joseph has just shown itself by getting sold into slavery! It's hard for us to understand isn't it?

For all his insufferable smugness at home, Joseph was nevertheless efficient, capable and reliable. Jacob would have taught him all about business management. So Potiphar soon found that he could leave all in Joseph's charge, and be concerned with nothing except the food which he ate. There is a lesson here for us to learn. Even in the most adverse circumstances, Joseph gave his best. The world, today, is full of people clamouring for more pay for less work, and whose working standards are frequently shoddy. As God's men and women, we do well to follow Joseph's example. **"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might," says Ecclesiastes 9: 10.** Read also **Colossians 3: 22 - 24** carefully in this connection.

No doubt Potiphar was pleased to have found a slave like Joseph. It left him free to follow his leisure pursuits to his heart's content, and he probably spent less and less time at home. Thus bored, lonely and frustrated, Potiphar's wife turns her eyes towards the handsome young Hebrew slave. The record in **chapter 39: 6 - 20** tells us clearly of her relentless pursuit of Joseph **"day by day" (verse 10)** appealing, calling and entreating. Each day it becomes more and more difficult for Joseph to avoid her, as her entreaties become more urgent. **"How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (39: 9)** he answers her. Then comes the day when all the other men are outside and the two of them are alone in the house. (**verse 11**) Madame Potiphar in her desperate, emotionally frustrated state, seizes Joseph in an effort to detain him. Joseph wrenches himself from her grasp and runs, but his slave's garment has been dragged from him by her wild clutching fingers.

Humiliated that a mere slave should so steadfastly resist her attentions, her fury is vented against Joseph as she lays the charge against him of attempted rape. Poor, bewildered Potiphar can't see what is behind it all, and his temper flares. Joseph is cast into prison.

Well Joseph, you're in prison now. God must have forgotten you! This must be some slip-up on His part. Twice now you've been plunged from the highest social position to the lowest pit of despair. What do you think God is doing? I'm sure Joseph didn't know! Yet there, penetrating the darkness of the king's dungeon comes a shaft of pure gold. **"The Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy." (Genesis 39: 21)** Yes, God knows all about Joseph today, and yesterday and all the days before. He knows all about Madame Potiphar too. His mind is great enough to know every complicated, neurotic, behaviour pattern and to weave them, each one, into His recreating process. **"The Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy."**

As Christians, our lives should be absolutely pure too. **Ephesians 5: 1 - 12** speaks very strongly on this subject. And in a world where sexual immorality is rife, we do well to remind ourselves that our bodies are the very temple of the Holy Spirit. (**See 1 Corinthians 6: 18 - 20**) We are God's men and women of faith, to whom He wants to show His steadfast love.

Study 3

Joseph the Prisoner



Genesis chapters 40 & 41

Joseph is in prison. He is just the age when he should be thinking about marriage; about setting up his own home, raising

his children, securing his career, etc. etc. He is in his twenties now ... middle twenties... later twenties... His old mistress about losing his father and home are now fading away into the past, as time, the great healer, takes over. But prison is so deadly in its endless getting nowhere. Day after day, month after month, year after year; nothing but this deadly; crushing dullness all the time. Those shocks of his brothers' hatred, of being whisked away into slavery, of the attempted seduction by Potiphar's wife, of being pitched into prison; they were hard to stand. But where the iron really eats into the soul is in this deadly grinding at the timeless mill. Those years are between Joseph and God. We are not told how they affected Joseph, but we can be sure that they DID affect him. But, **"the Lord was with Joseph, and showed him mercy (or steadfast love)." (39: 21)**

Of course, Joseph has the thing all organised. He is just a born organiser. **"The Lord... gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison." (39: 21)** Joseph is put in charge of all the prisoners. The gaolers do what Potiphar did – leave it to Joseph! So year after year rolls by. Occasionally the monotony of prison life is lifted, as when two newcomers land down in the cells – Pharaoh's own personal butler and baker. They too came under Joseph's charge. Here we have another beautiful picture in miniature of the Lord Jesus. **40: 4** simply states, **"and he served them."** This little jewel sparkles out in the darkness, as we think of the Man of the Gospels, who could say, **"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." (Mark 10: 45)** This One who, though so rich, became the poorest bond-slave, and was willing even to wash the feet of His followers. So Joseph has a care for his charges, and this concern leads them to share with him their dreams.

Dreams!? What a score of memories that must have stirred up! Joseph knew all about dreams! So he is able to tell them the interpretation, and sure enough everything happened just as Joseph predicted.

We can perhaps catch some of the hope, excitement, even pathos in Joseph's voice as he pleads with the butler, **"Remember me, when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me." (40: 14)** But as the minutes, the hours, and then the days pass by, the terrible truth dawns on Joseph. 'Surely not! He couldn't have forgotten me! Not just forgotten... Oh no!' And we ask, 'Couldn't God have made the butler remember Joseph?' Of course He could! Then why didn't He? The answer is God was planning all things in His great love. The truth of the matter is that God is the only One who does remember Joseph. Yes, God remembers him, all the day, every day. **"God was with him, showing him mercy." (39: 21)** Let us watch His love still at work.

Pharaoh now enters the scene, for Pharaoh has had a dream. The dream worried him because he couldn't understand it. Neither could any of his court magicians understand it, and the whole palace was agog.

Then it happened! The butler remembered! After two long, dreadful, hopeless years, the butler remembered Joseph! And we feel like shouting "Hurray!" Out poured the story of his faults, the story of the Hebrew slave in gaol with him who could interpret dreams. Send for Joseph! And Joseph is bathed and scrubbed and clothed and whisked up to Pharaoh. Pharaoh eyes him doubtfully. **"I have dreamed a dream, and there is no-one who can interpret it. I have heard it said that you can understand a dream, to interpret it." "It is not me: God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace." (41: 15-16)** What? Is this really Joseph answering here, we ask? What has happened to the brash, smug youth at the breakfast table, pouring out his dreams to his enraged brothers? Ah! God has been with Joseph, in the timeless monotony of the prison, showing him steadfast love, 'recreating' him. This is God's man of faith, brought to the place of God's choice, in God's time.

Pharaoh's dreams are revealed to him; and Joseph's organising skills simply ooze out of him as he maps out for Pharaoh the strategy and planning needed in preparation for the famine

years. Pharaoh is thoroughly impressed, as are his courtiers. **"Can we find such a man as this, a man in whom is the spirit of God."** He looks at Joseph for further help. And then the penny drops! **"Why, of course, if God can tell you all this, then you must be just the man! You must be the wisest and most astute man there is!" (41: 38-40)** And Joseph's years of experience have taught him what is the right expression of grateful pleasure, the right touch of servility; but still the proper air of confidence and strength to show. What a story! What a man! What a God!

Only an hour ago Joseph was languishing in prison. Now he's in charge of all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. Now he is clothed in fine linen, a gold chain round his neck, Pharaoh's royal signet on his finger, a splendid chariot at his disposal and a pretty wife from a very good family. Joseph has at last arrived! **(41: 41-43)** **"And Joseph was thirty years old"**, we're told. Thirteen years in the steadfast love of God. What has God been doing? Perhaps we can discover from the story what has been in God's mind.

Joseph's organisational genius is evident. Never before has he had such a challenging job, and he's putting all his heart and soul into it. Every storehouse in the city is packed to the rafters with food and grain, and still it's pouring in. Bounty immeasurable!

During these years he himself has two sons. What do their names mean, Joseph? **"The elder, Manasseh, means 'making to forget'. For God has made me to forget all my toil, and (he adds wistfully) all my father's house" (41: 51)** And the younger? **"His name is Ephraim. That means, 'To be fruitful' For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction." (41: 52)**

Yes there's been a lot of balm poured over those wounds, but will they ever heal? What a blessing then to be so busy, as he tries to forget. Busy, yes! But still in the steadfast love of God.

Study 4

Joseph the Saviour



Genesis chapters 42 - 50
Note especially 50: 14 - 26

Now, the years of famine have arrived in Egypt and Joseph is totally immersed in his job. Everyone's food ran out, so they went to Joseph. He sold the stored grain, and collected all their cash. When they had no more money he exchanged grain FOR livestock, then for the title deeds of all their properties, then he signed them all up as slaves. And this is where Joseph's real genius showed itself. If you own people as slaves you have to feed them and look after them. Joseph was far too astute for that! Having bought the people and all their land for Pharaoh, he gave them back some seed and made them work their farms. Then he placed a 20% levy on all their crops, so that one-fifth of all their produce came back to Pharaoh. So, the people had food and work, and the money rolled in to Pharaoh's coffers. How very shrewd of Joseph!

But, wait a moment! Is this the goal God had in mind during all those thirteen years of misery? Just cash and cattle and produce being stacked in Pharaoh's vaults?

No, of course not! This is not what God is aiming at. He is not interested in money. God is love! And He is doing something for Joseph, and something IN Joseph that all the money and power and greatness of all the kings of the earth put together couldn't even start to do for Joseph. God is working out in Joseph something only heaven can achieve. But we need to go to the very end of the story recorded in Genesis before the truth shows clearly.

Read if you can, the chapters in between. They are very interesting and give us a fascinating account of how Joseph met up with his brothers again. It tells of how the ten, who were so glad to be rid of him that they sold him into slavery, came down

to Egypt in the great famine. It tells how they didn't recognise him, but how he couldn't possibly mistake them! And as he recognised them, bowing themselves to the ground, seeking to buy their very food from him, there flashes into his memory the thought of the dreams he had told them, away back as a seventeen year old. Ah! Those fateful dreams! We see the tremendous, emotional conflict going on in Joseph as he faced his ten half-brothers; and his deep longing to meet his young full-brother, Benjamin.

You cannot fail to be moved either as you read of Simeon, the hostage; the money in the sacks, and Benjamin; of the cup in Benjamin's sack, and the hot tears of the final reunion. The messages sent back to old Jacob. **"God has made me lord of all Egypt: come down to me, do not tarry." (45: 9) "I provide for you." (45: 11)** And the instructions, **"So you shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt... and you shall hasten and bring my father down here." (45: 13)**

Yes, the degradation of the pit, and the shame of the prison have given place to the glory of the throne. Old white-headed Jacob is re-united with his favourite son. Jacob blesses Pharaoh and they all settle down comfortably around the fertile grazing lands of Goshen.

Oh yes, God has used you to great purpose, Joseph. **"You have saved our lives,"** the people cry. **(47: 25) "God meant it for good..., to save many people alive,"** admits Joseph. **(50: 20)** Yes, and the prophecy given to Abraham in **Genesis 15: 13 – 14** is beginning to be fulfilled. These are all tremendous things, Lord! But what have You been doing IN Joseph all these years? What kind of 'new creation' have You been making?

Jacob is 147 years old now and before he dies, he blesses the sons of Joseph. (Notice the twist in his character is still there!) On his death, Pharaoh provides a state procession to accompany his embalmed remains back to Canaan for burial. All twelve brothers make the trip and after the burial, all return to Egypt.

And it is here, at this point of the narrative, when you would think the whole story is told, that the great truth is made clear in one of those sparkling little pieces of narrative with which the Bible abounds. It is told in a tiny incident spanning just three verses, and concerns the ten older brothers. **(Read 50: 15-17)** They thought that now that their father was dead, Joseph would get his own back for what they did to him all those years ago. So they concoct a tale about a special dying request to Joseph from father Jacob. They plan and pick the time and occasion, and Joseph is given the trumped-up message.

And then, in just one short sentence, the secret is out! We read, **"And Joseph wept when they spoke to him."** If you can understand Joseph weeping, when he heard this so obviously cooked-up story, then you are well on the way to understanding all the wonder of the "steadfast love of God" working in the life of Joseph. Joseph wept because he was so upset to see his brothers so fearful, when they had no need to be afraid. He realised in a flash, the years of fear and uncertainty he had caused them, all because they were so completely mistaken in him. His gracious manner and generous attitude to them wasn't a front, a mask, at all. He wasn't satisfying and building up his own ego, as he made his brothers literally eat out of his hand. These are not tears of self-pity. No! All that is gone, gone entirely! Rooted out forever! That is what God has been doing! We have seen God take one of His men; a young, insufferable, conceited, spoilt prig of a young man, and in steadfast love turn him into a genuinely humble and gracious fifty year old. This is the breath-taking wonder of 'new-birth', 'recreation', 'being made perfect', of which the New Testament tells so constantly.

This case-history of Joseph is there for us to learn from, to help us understand what the Master means when He tells us **"Who will transform our lowly body that it may be confirmed to his glorious body." (Philippians 3: 21)** This is the story

which should certainly strengthen us in our determination to follow **"Him who is able to keep us from stumbling and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy." Jude 24** This then is Joseph, one of the great Founders of God's chosen race.

Questions

Study 1 Joseph the Son

1. What was the main reason why Jacob loved Joseph so much?
2. What was the basic reason behind the hatred of Joseph's brothers for him?
3. Comment on the statement: 'God's men and women are not chosen because they are socially acceptable'
4. Give two ways (in this chapter) in which Joseph is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ.
5. What must we always remember when comparing men to the Lord Jesus?

Study 2 Joseph the Slave

1. In this lesson, how did God use **"the wrath of men"** to fulfil His purposes in Joseph?
2. What lesson does Joseph teach us about our attitude to our daily work?
3. What does Joseph's answer to Potiphar's wife tell us about ALL acts of sin?
4. What 'shaft of sunlight' pierces the darkness of Joseph's dungeon?
5. Say in your own words what lesson is contained in **1 Corinthians 6: 18-20**.

Study 3 Joseph the Prisoner

1. Name two other Bible characters who spent years in obscurity before God used them.
2. What picture of the Lord Jesus do we see in Joseph in this lesson?
3. Why did God allow the butler to forget Joseph?
4. What effect of God's 'recreating' process can already be seen in Joseph's answer to Pharaoh?
5. What do the names of Joseph's two sons tell us about what God has been doing in his life?

Study 4 Joseph the Saviour

1. From the natural viewpoint, what was God's purpose in bringing Joseph to Egypt?
2. What prophecy was beginning to be fulfilled as Jacob and his family settled in Egypt?
3. a) What had God really been doing in the life of Joseph?
b) What incident illustrates this?
4. What is God trying to do in the life of every Christian? Give references to support your answer.
5. What have you learnt from these studies of Joseph, about the way in which God works in the lives of His men and women?