

Joseph: A Saga Of Excellence (Part Three)

The Trials of Joseph

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This is going to be part three of the series that I have been giving on Joseph which I have titled, "Joseph: A Saga of Excellence." We are going to begin in Romans the eighth chapter.

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

I chose this verse because of some things that I said in last week's sermon because of things that occurred to Joseph. And, of course, the things that occurred to him certainly looked very dark at the time that he was going through them and experiencing them. But, in the overall lessons that we get from these things, we can understand that this verse is indeed true. We can understand where the apostle Paul was able to extract a verse like this, that is really a great and wonderful promise—that all things indeed do work for good.

And so the saga of Joseph and his brothers is an exceptionally clear example of this principle. If we are going to live by faith, this promise that is given to us here in Romans 8:28 **must** be a guiding principle in our lives. Otherwise, we are going to be continually fretful and fearful about what is happening, or what we fear is about to happen.

If God is involved in our lives, we can be assured that there is more to the situations that we are going through than meets the eye. We can be sure of that because God is what He is, and that He is working not only to create us in His image; but He is also using us for some purpose that is good for others as well. I am not saying that the second one of those two is absolutely true, but rather that it is highly likely that He is doing groundwork that will benefit others in terms of His purpose—and perhaps also physically, right here and now. It is comforting to know this, and it is also faith-building as well.

When He says "all things," He is not including within that that manufactured things are all good for us. He is not saying that automobiles are good for us, because that is a *thing*. He is not saying that revolvers, and rifles, and bullets, and dynamite, and atomic bombs are good for us; or telephones, telephone poles, or electrical wires, or whatever you might consider as a manufactured object. Seen within the context of the entire chapter, he is clearly talking about experiences—primarily in our relationship with Him.

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Another thing is that He is not saying that the evil that we go through is good. That is because He does not intend that mankind sin. It ought to be clear from the theme of the Bible itself that God does not intend that we suffer as the result of evil, but rather it is His desire to bless. Evil brings curses. I think a clear illustration of this are the prophecies about the Millennium. Do they not show that God's purpose for people who are going to live during the Millennium—experience life in the Millennium, when there will not be war for a thousand years, when we can anticipate the deserts blooming like a rose, when we can anticipate clear streams (clear rivers) and pure air, when we can anticipate getting along with our neighbors—does that not show you that His purpose can be worked out without the kind of evil that we have in this world? Does He intend that we have to go through these things? No. His purpose can be accomplished without living in the kind of world that we live in.

What we have got to realize is that sin is a fact of life because we have chosen to do so, and therefore suffering results. That is inevitable. That is the way law is—whether a law regulating material and physical things, or whether it is one of the spiritual laws regulating relationships.

We keep them, and they work in our behalf. We break them, and they begin to bring punishment upon us. So what God has promised—because of His love for us, and because of His purpose—is to cooperate with us during these trials and to bring them to a successful conclusion so that they will work for our good.

Now in I Corinthians 10 is another promise that He makes to us in line with this.

I Corinthians 10:13 No temptation [no trial, no test] has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it.

So, He is not promising that it will not be painful. He is not saying that it will not be anxiety-producing. He is not saying that it is good that we have to go through this. He is saying that if we do get involved in something like this—because He is faithful, because He is what He is, and because He has His purpose in mind for us—that somehow or other He is going to turn those lemons into lemonade, for our good. It is incredible the way that He is able to do this.

Now, this is great. It is wonderful. But it is also good to note "the qualifiers" that are given in Romans 8:28. It does not apply to everybody. It says, in verse 28, that "all things work together for good to those that *love God*." A big, big qualifier! "To those that

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love God and *to those who are the called according to His purpose*." Love is used here in the sense of "devoted to." Devoted means "given over to." It means "loyal." It means "faithful." It means "set apart for a higher end." (You can get that right out of *Webster's Dictionary*. That is where I got that.) And so, if we feed that right into Romans 8:28, it says that all things work together for good to those that are loyal, faithful, given over to, set apart for a higher end, devoted to.

In actual practice, those who are this way (those who love God) are people who will live their lives in the spirit of obedience. It does not mean that they are perfect. It does mean that they are devoted; that they are striving to live up to the way of God. Certainly they are going to do things wrong, make mistakes. They are going to sin, from time to time. So even though they are not doing things perfectly, they are pursuing after God—just like two people seeking marriage and striving to conform to each other. Now God does not have to conform to us; but we certainly have to conform to Him. And, if we are devoted to Him, we will do it because we love Him. So our lives, then, will be given over to Him.

It is also good to note this: it does not say that things "shall" work out for our good. The verbs in this verse (verse 28) are all in the present tense, not future. What it means is, they are working right now for our good. This is not something delayed. Even at this moment, they are working right now in our behalf.

Notice also that it does not say that sin works in our behalf, because the person who loves God is not now sinning—as a way of life. Just a couple chapters back, in Romans 6 and verse 1, it says:

Romans 6:1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

What Paul goes on to show there is that this is ridiculous to even think that. Why? Because sin kills; sin destroys; sin curses. Now, we may be unwittingly affected by other peoples' sins and God will extricate us, but we will not willfully tempt God and expect Him to pull our chestnuts out of the fire. So those who love God are devoted to Him. Things will work out for them. God will see to that. And I have no doubt that the great overwhelming majority of us qualify in that regard.

Now, the word "called" reinforces the word "love." It does not mean, in this verse, merely being invited; but, rather, "elected, chosen, an integral part of" (that is, an integral part of God's purpose). Notice the word "the" (the called). You see that makes it definite. It points to a specific person or group of people, not really general. Those who are "the

called." So this promise that He gives us here applies to a specific group of people. In fact, when we understand it, this is the very basis—the very reason—why all things work together for good. It actually precedes our love, our devotion, our being faithful to God. If it were not for the fact that we are "the called," we would not love God. So, if we were not called to participate in God's purpose, there would be no loving of God, because we love Him only because He first loved us. And our love back to Him is merely a reflection of what He has already done for us.

Now, another thing that I think needs to be put into this, and just to reinforce this, I want you to understand that the reason I am going through this is because it is a major lesson of the story of Joseph. I mean, things could hardly get worse for that young man than was already happening. And worse things are going to happen yet, in the story, as we go through it. But we know already that things work out well for him. Well, this is the reason why.

It was because God was involved in this young man's life. We are going to see that this young man, despite his age (whatever it might have been), was already well on his way to really loving God. And things worked out the way they did because God was calling him. God had elected him to be the one through whom a great prophecy and promise was going to be fulfilled. So it worked out for him in a way that it probably would not have worked out for most young people in this kind of situation. So, Paul applies that kind of situation to you and me.

Let us take this one step further. When we get into bad situations, it does not mean that God instigated it. The story of Joseph illustrated this clearly. God works with what we give Him. It does not mean that this is 100% the way it is—because, indeed, sometimes He does instigate the situation, because of His purpose. But, you know, He never takes away free moral agency. And so sometimes we get ourselves into things, or we fall the victim of other people instigating. But God, because He will not take away the free moral agency, begins—by His miraculous, and wonderful, and loving powers—to use that towards His end, and our ends as well.

But do not ever get it in our minds that He just instigates these kinds of situations. Because then, if that were the case, He becomes responsible, and He does not have really any basis for judging us. So the story of Joseph clearly illustrates then that He works with what we give Him as a result of our choices.

It also teaches us something else. That is, not a single one of us operates in a vacuum. One of the claims of people today is that there are victimless crimes. That people can do things somehow in which nobody else gets hurt. That is ridiculous. It sets up the

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sinner as operating in a vacuum, and that somehow or another they can do something that is not going to affect anybody else. But what we do impacts on others with an intensity that depends upon how closely related we are and how close one is to the scene of the action. That second point is important because, sometimes, innocent bystanders can be killed by what somebody else does.

Now, let us turn back to Genesis 50. Joseph is speaking and he says:

Genesis 50:20 But as for you [meaning, his brothers], you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in to order bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.

There you have it, in summary. One of the major, broad teachings of the events of Joseph's life is that God is able to work out His purposes even when people are unaware that it is working for their good. Joseph did not know right away that this was what he was going through.

There is another clear parallel with Christ here. (Now think of this in relation to Joseph again.) That He came to His own [and] we killed Him; but out of that came the means for the forgiveness of our sins. There is probably no clearer illustration of how God is able to turn lemons into lemonade than that.

Genesis 37:12-22 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." And 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. Now a certain man found him, and there he was, wandering in the field. And the man asked him, saying, "What are you seeking?" So he said, "I am seeking my brothers. Please tell me where they are feeding their flocks." And the man said, "They have departed from here, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan. Now when they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him. Then they said one to 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 hand on him"—that he might deliver him out of their hands, and bring him back to his father again.

Here we get into the very heart of a hideous story, of vulgar hatred and cruelty, right within the family. We might think of these things as happening to people with whom we are detached, so that there is no personal feelings (we might say) involved with doing a dastardly deed. But, on the other hand, the Bible shows that 'family' is a fertile area for showing the power of sin working its evil.

Think of what has proceeded this (in Genesis 37) already. Cain killed Abel—brothers. They may have even been twins. There is some kind of an indication of that there. That is getting pretty close, especially if they were identical—but right in the family. Ishmael and Isaac—that thing happened right within the family. The hatreds were so intense that even today that thing is being worked out. It has not dissipated at all. Esau and Jacob—a parallel of Ishmael and Isaac—that thing has not been worked out. The hatreds exist today as strongly as they ever have. Even though people may not be fully aware of who they are, whom they are descended from, yet there is an antipathy between these peoples.

Now where does the problem lie? Please turn to Matthew 15. Family relationships (close relationships) will sometimes act as a deterrent to some crime—but not always. Even today, the greatest percentages of murders take place right in the family. Nothing has changed. You would think that being blood-related or marriage-related would somehow prove to be a deterrent, because we love these people. But, no, our expectations for our relatives (those close to us) are much higher; and the passions are proportionately higher as well. And so they have a tendency to run wild. Well, Jesus put His finger right on the problem.

Matthew 15:17-20 Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.

The apostle John adds to that back in I John 3:15. He says, "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer."

Here we see, in Genesis 37, the poisonous fruit of the brothers' hatred begin to bud, showing that if sin is not stopped in the heart (as Jesus said) it will produce fruit because a person is defiled from within. There is where the problem lies. Even if it never produces an actual murder, or an actual adultery, it will still work to destroy the person in whom the evil thoughts dwell—through resentment and bitterness. Do you remember

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God's Word, where it says that many are defiled by bitterness? What He means is "lost." I mean, they lose their salvation through bitterness. It never breaks out into what we might consider to be an actual act of aggression against somebody else, but it burns away in the heart—in the mind—and it destroys that person's usefulness for the Kingdom of God. That appears in, incidentally, in Hebrews 12.

Hebrews 12:13 Make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.

Resentment, bitterness, is not a straight path. "Let it be healed," he says.

Hebrews 12:14-15 Pursue peace with all people [Is there peace where there is bitterness and resentment?], and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully [It means being careful, keeping your eye really peeled—if that was what we were doing, looking at something with our eyes—but what he means is to look inside ourselves and see what is there] lest anyone fall [lose salvation] of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.

The problem is in the heart. And so even if a person does not allow it to break out, unless that problem is taken care of and the resentment melts away, there is a very strong possibility that that hatred (which I have been calling "resentment") will destroy the person, because whoever hates his brother is a murderer and no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. [I John 3:15] These are serious things.

We can see what happened with Joseph and his brothers. The hatred (the envy) that was there finally broke out. In most cases, all sin that is held within needs is the right opportunity to break from *within* to *without*. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, it was when the brothers and Joseph were far enough away from Jacob's watchful care that they felt that they could do this secretly. Dothan was not just around the corner from Hebron. Actually, it was about sixty miles away. And so when Jacob sent Joseph away, he had to walk through a land that was still populated by lions (and those kinds of animals) for a time before he finally got there.

He was not killed by an animal. He was killed (that is, they were going to kill him) by his own brothers. And so the brothers compounded their sin by conspiring not only to kill Joseph but also to lie to their father. Another principle is here, that—just like leavening—the sin was beginning to reach out and affect others as well. You cannot operate in a vacuum. The leavening principle tells you that. That is one of the things that it teaches.

Genesis 37:23-28 So it came to pass, when Joseph had come to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, his 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 Midianites traders passed by; so the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

There is an interesting little phrase there in verse 25. "And they sat down to eat." Why did God tell us something like this seemingly mundane occurrence? I think it is because He wanted us to feel the effects of how cruel and how far from any normal family sensitivity towards loving its own members that these men were. They were coldly plotting the death of their teenage brother while they calmly filled themselves, making sure that they lived with a sense of well being. "Oh, I feel good,"—while their brother was in terror, down in the pit.

Now their crime turned even darker because, at this opportune time, along came the caravan headed for Egypt. This sent a new tact buzzing through Judah's fertile brain. Why not sell Joseph to these people and make money on this? Hated darkening into murder is bad enough. But hatred that also has an eye toward business profit becomes even worse. Murder usually indicates a raging passion. You know, like something that can be done in a moment—in the blink of an eye—because one's temper flares up. And so, in some cases, we might even think that something like that would be understandable. So, if a person like that was hailed before the court, because of the pressing situation the state might give a verdict that such-and-such was manslaughter, or second-degree murder, or third-degree murder, or something like that—rather than an outright, cold-blooded murder. But what God is doing here is showing that making money in the bargain shows cold-blood calculation and selfish advantage. Judah prefers the paltry gain of selling Joseph, his brother, into slavery rather than the totally unprofitable luxury of murder.

In verse 27 it says, again, "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." Now, tell me something. Can you see the perverse working of human nature, with its weak conscience—something that, in the case of these men, was unschooled and unbelieving in the standards of God? God—who says that even to hate is murder. Were these brothers sensitive to that? Did

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they believe it? Were they schooled in it? There is a possibility of that, but they certainly did not believe it. But notice what human nature did. Notice what their conscience did.

You might remember the series on Conscience that I gave before. What is one of the main problems with conscience? If we are not careful, it very quickly adjusts its standards. In order for a conscience to behave rightly it has to have the right standard, and believe in that standard, and practice that standard until it becomes seared as part of our very working ways. Then that conscience will be sensitive indeed.

But these brothers' minds were first resolved to do a dastardly deed of murder. A deed that is bad—considered to be immoral in any culture: to kill one of your own. And yet their conscience very comfortably adjusted to selling Joseph into slavery because compared to murder that looked even virtuous. "Hey, we're doing a good thing. This is our brother. This is our blood." (Vroom, vroom. It shifted from low to high, just like that.)

Now it is entirely possible that when the deed was done that they went back to their meal, even with a measure of cheerfulness, feeling kind and brotherly because they had gained their end without any bloodshed and had gotten money besides. There is no indication that they gave any thought to the terror that this kid was going through.

The timely arrival of the caravan reinforces a principle that I mentioned a bit earlier. That is, that the opportunity to do evil often makes an evil deed done. We will hold something within us, and then the opportunity arises to do it in a way that we think might be justified (or that no one will see us, or something like that), we jump right into it. By now, we feel justified in doing it. That is what happened to the brothers. And they probably felt good because they had accomplished getting rid of Joseph without actually doing murder. They were actually doing him a favor.

Matthew 7:13 Enter by the narrow gate [at the difficult one]: for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.

The way of sin is easy, and pleasurable, and is very easy for a weak conscience to justify.

So, an evil nature (human nature) with an evil bias—the evil bias being that it hates God's law—finds opportunities to do wrong virtually everywhere. It is good to remember Jeremiah 17:9, that the heart is desperately wicked.

Titus 1:15 To the pure all things are pure. . .

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That is, those who are pure at heart. They do not see evil in situations. And so the opportunity to take advantage of evil does not even come to their mind. It does not dawn on them. They are not looking for that. The problem is in the heart. It is the heart that has to be changed.

Titus 1:15 . . . but to those who are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.

Paul put it this way, in Romans 7. After his conversion, he said:

Romans 7:20 It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Human nature makes even innocent things into opportunities to sin. What it does to us—the knowledge of these things—is that it points out how we must always be on guard that human nature not be allowed to dominate our thinking and how badly we need to cry out to God to create in us a clean heart.

Genesis 37:29-30 Then Reuben returned to the pit; and indeed Joseph was not in the pit; and he tore his clothes. And he returned to his brothers and said, "The lad is no more; and I, where shall I go?"

You might have noticed, when we were reading earlier and I was expounding earlier, that I skipped over the section there on Reuben and what he did. But it was mentioned before. Here he is reintroduced into the events, and I want to spend a little bit of time on Reuben. There are three principle characters in this story (beginning in Genesis 37:1). There is Joseph. There is Judah. And there is Reuben.

Joseph dominates it, and as a personality he is certainly worthy of our emulation. Judah plays a somewhat smaller role, but he is very important before this whole thing is over. And, before the end of it, his role is poignant indeed. He shows that he, too, is a leader of quality—even though he did this thing and came up with the idea. But we begin to see, as the story unfolds, that he also is also a person of good quality.

I call Reuben "every man"—because I believe that most of us are like him. In verse 21, it says:

Genesis 37:21-22 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.

What that does is show us that Reuben's motive was good. He wished to save life. And he intended—as soon as he was done with whatever he felt was pressing that he had to do—to return to deliver Joseph safely in the hands of their father.

Genesis 42:22 And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not speak to you, saying, 'Do not sin against the boy;' and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us.

In the flow of the story, when Reuben said that, the brothers did not know who this powerful ruler was that they were before. They only knew that they were in deep trouble, and they were fearfully wondering why this was happening. In their minds, all they had done was come down to Egypt to make a simple purchase of food, so that they could survive the famine. But now that they were in trouble, they had put their finger on a possible cause. And Reuben had reminded them that he had counseled against killing Joseph, but they had rejected it. At that time, he had counseled them to put him in the pit—and that they had accepted.

Reuben actually made two efforts to save Joseph. But, while he was absent (doing his work), the brothers carried out the sale to the caravan. So what he did was well-meant and even included no small measure of self-sacrifice on his part. Because, by this time, it was very clear that he had a pretty good idea that this one whose life he was attempting to save was actually going to be the one to receive the birthright—replacing, guess who? Reuben! So, he was pretty sure that Joseph was going to be Jacob's successor as the head of the family, not Reuben.

So, the only one in the whole family of sons (besides Joseph) who appears to have some virtue in him—Reuben—and he was too timid to do what he should have done in his position as the eldest brother. Now, in retrospect, what should he have done? He should have grabbed Joseph by the hand and taken him with him wherever Reuben was going to go. That would have been decisive. That would have been something that would have been worthy of his leadership as the eldest brother and the recipient of the birthright. That way, he could have prevented this whole thing from happening.

But, what did he do? You see, what he did amounted to a compromise. And what God is showing is that to act like Reuben did is a dangerous experiment. It never quite cuts it. It never quite makes it. Reuben should have stood his guns. He should have stood up to his brothers. He should have condemned them for what they were doing. He should have taken Joseph away from them and with him wherever he was going to go. Instead, what did he do? He left him in the hands of the ones who were plotting to murder him.

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Genesis 49:3-4 Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed; then defiled you it—he went up to my couch.

The prophecy about Reuben shows that the potential for greatness is there: excellency, dignity—words that are positive about him. But he does not excel because he is, as it says here, "unstable as water." The going up to his father's bed (he committed fornication with Bilhah) is given as an illustration of Reuben's instability. I can see at least two possibilities as to what "unstable as water" means.

The first one is that water is unstable in that it seeks its own level. As a result, it always sinks to the lowest level—the lowest level that circumstance will allow. Now, water can be damned up, and the dam will hold the water to a higher level than it otherwise would be. But, if the dam breaks, the water takes advantage of that opportunity and its level is immediately lowered. Now, think of that in terms of Reuben. Think of that in terms of relationships that he had: with God, with Jacob, with his brothers, with others.

Even though the qualities that were in him were excellent, he was of a mind that the qualities were good when he was in good company. But, when the companions changed, he changed to conform to their level of behavior. And so he was opportunistic—when Jacob's wife would go to bed with him, he took advantage of it. The dam broke; and with it went his virtue. With it went his morality. He could reason, "Hey, why not? She's making herself available, so why not have a little bit of fun?" But you see (in this situation with Joseph and his brothers) he had the right impulse, but he could not quite get himself to do all that needed to be done to carry that impulse through to a good conclusion.

Ephesians 4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

This charge appears in a section of admonition to good works. How many times have you had a good impulse, but you stuffed it? (I will let you fill in the reason why you stuffed it.) It could have been the impulse to bite your tongue, but you did not. It could have been the impulse to keep your temper from flaring, but you did not. It could have been the impulse to do something kind, gentle, good, sacrificing for somebody else, but you did not.

That is the way Reuben was. He had good impulses. There was excellency contained within him. But, somehow or other, he was up, he was down. You could never depend

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upon him. So his personality took advantage of the opportunities—high or low—and he conformed to what was convenient for him at the time. And what happened? The rest of the prophecies in Genesis 49 and the history of the Israelite people show that Reuben and his tribe lost out. They sank into insignificance among the tribes, because of his reckless abandonment of what he could have been—because the potential was inherent within him but he never could quite control himself to do the right thing. Instead, he did the convenient thing. That reminds me of Galatians 6:7—a law of this universe: whatsoever we sow, that we also reap.

There is a second possibility, and that is, that "unstable as water" indicates restlessness. You know, the way the ocean is—it is always moving. In fact, the surface of any body of water of any size that has any kind of air (or something) moving across it, there is always a movement to it—because it is moved by external force.

Here in chapter one of the book of James, James admonishes us:

James 1:6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting. For he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.

It indicates a personality dominated by mercurial emotions and being guided almost completely by one's feelings. Now feelings are good gifts from God, but they must be subject to truth because feelings are so highly subjective. Poor Reuben. The excellence of dignity, wonderful qualities—he is every man. He is like so many of us.

Genesis 37:31-36 So they took Joseph's tunic, killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the tunic in the blood. Then they sent the tunic of many colors, and they brought it to their father and said, We have found this. Do you know whether it is your son's tunic or not?" And he recognized it and said, "It is my son's tunic; an evil beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him. And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, and captain of the guard.

And so they compound their sin by deceiving and lying. We find in Genesis 42:21 (the verse that just preceded the one that we just read about Reuben):

Genesis 42:21 Then they said one to another, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would

not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us."

Do you realize that this was twenty-two years later? They were still carrying the burden of what they did around with them everywhere they went. It was in their minds. It was eating away at their joy of living—knowing what they had done. And the vitality of their lives sunk to a very low ebb indeed. Even though the deed was hidden from others, it was not hidden from their memories and it haunted them. At the same time, it added even more misery to Jacob's life.

It is interesting that there is the possibility (given Reuben's reply here) that he still thought Joseph was dead. Maybe that was even hidden from him. If that is so, the others were carrying the added burden of deceiving him all the time, as well. "Oh what tangled webs we weave when first we practice to deceive," Shakespeare said.

Now one final thought about Joseph from this episode that is instructive, and that is in probably only about one hour's time—consider this—he went from walking about in the sunlight in his colorful coat with the greatest of freedom, having hardly a care in the world and needing nothing, to being friendless, put into terror, stripped of his coat, thrown into the darkness of a pit, sold into slavery, and needing everything. There is a lesson there—how quickly everything can change, even for the godly. Think about it. Or, we might say, even those well-favored by God.

We are going to jump over Genesis 38. That chapter is about Judah. It fits into the flow of these things about Joseph because, as I said to you, Judah becomes a very important part in the story a little bit later. I am sure that was injected there to show you what kind of a man Judah was. It is not a pretty picture, but there were excellent qualities there. Judah was pretty much behaving according to the tenor of his times. But he did not abandon the things that his father, undoubtedly, was teaching him—and Isaac, his grandfather, had taught them—in the way that Reuben did.

Genesis 39:7-12 And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, my master does not know [or, he is not concerned] what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. There is no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her. But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house was inside, that she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her

hand, and fled and ran outside.

Here begins the tale of the kind of stuff that Joseph was made of. He was a slave in a foreign land, having been stripped of his family and his rights. It could have very well been the disintegration of everything that he was. Instead, it was the discipline which—with the help of God—he turned evil into incalculable good.

It is a good thing that God was involved with Joseph because, had Jacob had his way, Jacob would have never chosen to allow Joseph to face the stern adversity, affliction, and hardship that the unseen hand of God ordained. God was working things here—not Jacob. And Jacob, because he loved Joseph, would have spoiled the daylights out of him. But God was not allowing that to happen. Because of God's intervention of things, Joseph became a great man. So, Joseph (with the help of God) had to work out his own salvation. Remember that? In Philippians 2:12—work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

The true dignity of Joseph is not merely that he faced hardship, accepted it, and made the most of it. A lot of people have done that. But, rather, that he allowed it to truly humble him and to change him to where the abilities that were with him could be used by God in developing a Christ-like character, in which God was well pleased. A major difference with others who had merely endured something.

The story of Joseph's purchase by Potiphar is well known. But not so well known is who Potiphar was. That he was an official of the Egyptian government is clear. One commentary said that "captain of the guard" literally means "the chief of executioners." It does not sound as though Joseph was in the hands of a particularly nice person. But, because of the way that Joseph worked (with wisdom and with zeal), Potiphar liked him and eventually gave him charge of the day to day operations of everything that he had.

But, evil was not just "at the door." Remember that God said that to Cain—that "sin lies at the door and you shall master it." [Genesis 4:7] Well, in this case, the evil was right inside the house.

I want you to notice the intensity of the seduction. If Joseph had been like Reuben, he would have quickly convinced himself (in youthful passions) that, "Hey, this is only natural."

It says that Joseph was very handsome. In the Hebrew, he was not *just* handsome. He was a real looker. So, imagine an exceptionally well-endowed young man and a powerfully-placed woman who is for some reason unsatisfied with her husband. There

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was the privacy of her room, perhaps a romantic setting, in which she whispered that she not only wanted him, she needed him. And thus Joseph is assailed by her flattery and the flattery of her affection.

In addition to that, there might have been the added power of his own self-pity. Finding himself as a slave in a foreign land, battered about by the hostility of his own family, and "Hey, I need to be comforted." And here was healing in the arms of a woman, and then the inner hurt would go away. Then, if he was really ambitious (which he was), here was a woman—someone of power—and, if he encouraged her in just the right way, she might carry his interests pretty far.

Have you ever heard stories about that? You certainly have. Lots of movies are made about those things.

Besides that, he could always justify it, saying, "Hey, I didn't provoke her. It's all her fault." And he could be just like Adam. "The woman that you gave me, she gave me the fruit." Joseph was a cut above that, though. And not only that, but it tells us that she kept this up day after day. Perhaps he might have been shocked at first by her bold proposition, and that repelled him. But the continued temptation has a way of wearing down the person's resistance, and by and by, the suggestion—the proposition—does not seem so bad after all.

Have any of you ever tried to break a piece of metal like a wire or a thin strip of steel or aluminum by bending it back and forth, and back and forth? You keep going back and forth on it, and the first thing you know, it breaks. You see, the resistance wears it down and the molecules can no longer hold together and you have a parting.

It is sort of like a bridge, a seemingly strong bridge. A ship, or a barge, can hit it from underneath and give it an awful whack; and the bridge stays there. Yet, on the other hand, the steady drumbeat of a number of soldiers marching across it, all in unison, and the rhythm (the constant, unending rhythm) breaks it down and it collapses. The same kind of principle is at work here.

What was Joseph's defense?

Genesis 39:10-11 So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her, or to be with her. [A pretty wise young man.] But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work. . .

He had to go in there. He could not ignore his job. What was he going to do? Pit her

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against her husband while she was in the act of trying to commit adultery against her husband? Is he going to say to his boss, "Well, I won't go into the house because your wife is trying to seduce me"?

No. There eventually came the time when she was playing her cards. She was watching things. Now is the time for the rattlesnake to strike. "Because nobody else is in the house, I've got him." The serpent was there—inside.

Genesis 39:12 . . . that she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside.

In II Timothy 2:22 (an interesting series of numbers here, all twos), Paul gives advice to the young Timothy, telling him:

II Timothy 2:22 Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

I just wonder if Paul was thinking about Joseph when he wrote that. All the verbs in this verse are in the present tense. It means, "keep on fleeing, keep on pursuing." It is a continuous action that is being required by God. Temptation is not going to come just one time. It will keep coming back, day after day—just like this woman, Potiphar's wife. So we have to keep on fleeing, keep on pursuing, keep on aiming for righteousness. That is exactly what Joseph did.

What was his defense? We know, ultimately, that he fled. But we also know that he saw—from the very beginning—what was happening for what it really was. In verse 9, he said:

Genesis 39:9 "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

First of all, young as he was. . . I do not know how old he was. Maybe by this time several years had passed and he was in his early twenties, mid-twenties? I do not know. But, whatever it was, he was in the bloom of his youth and very appealing to this lady. But he saw that it was sin. He knew that. He saw that what was happening was not love. It was lust. And he understood that sex is good. That it is sanctified by God, but only if it is used as God ordained it—within marriage.

He also saw, in verses 8 and 9, that this was going to be destructive to his master, and besides that, it was going to ruin his own employment as well. He says, "Look my master, your husband, doesn't have a concern about what's going on because he

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believes that it's in good hands. Am I going to be disloyal to that?"

Did you ever notice that when you have done something wrong (something that you knew was wrong) how many excuses we can come up with for doing what we did and to justify it, to rationalize what we did?

It reminds me of a story that I heard about just such a situation. A minister, who had spent much of his time ministering to sailors. They have a pretty wild reputation, do they not? Anyway, a sailor came to him because he had gotten himself into a very sticky situation, so he turned to the preacher. Well, the preacher rebuked him for being so stupid (and being so weak) to allow himself to get caught in such a thing. The sailor said, "But, sir, you don't know how much outside pressure there was on me." The preacher said, "Outside pressure? Where were your inner braces, to keep you from collapsing?"

Despite Joseph's young age, there was a maturity there and a greatness that was beginning to show. Human growth is growth in relationships. When a baby is born (think about this), they are assertive, demanding. They are conscious only of their own needs and wants. And so they cry right away, as soon as they feel something that they want. But as we grow, as we mature, we have to learn to adjust ourselves to others. If we do not, there is never going to be a stable and a tolerable society. Suppose that everybody acted like babies all their lives. You see what maturity is? It is when we stop acting like babies until we are acting like God—until we are like Him. Then we are really mature.

Now, Joseph was well on his way. In order to do this, one has to get rid of his self-assertion. (I mean, the kind of self-assertion that a baby has.) A person has to be responsible. He has to learn to exercise control of himself. In this situation, Joseph gives powerful evidence that, even at an early age, he was adjusting himself to the most important Personality in all of creation—God. This kind of adjustment and moral strength that he showed did not come quickly. It occurred little by little over his childhood, and his teen years, and on into young manhood. It fed on (grew strong on) the right kind of thinking and responsible actions—building strength for the great tests that he was now undergoing. And the lesson here is that when the test came, he was prepared. He was mature enough to make the right choices. But that integrity had been building right along.

Psalm 105:16-19 Moreover He called for a famine in the land; he destroyed all the provision of bread. He sent a man before them—Joseph—who was sold as a slave. They hurt his feet with fetters, he was laid in irons. Until the time that his word came to pass, the word of the Lord tested him.

Do you remember I said a little bit earlier that it is a good thing that God wrenched him away, or allowed him to be wrenched away from Jacob? Because Jacob never would have tested him the way God did, and proved that the maturity was there, and made him ever stronger. We would have never had that witness—somebody who is worthy of emulation.

And so we might say that, when the time for the big game came, Joseph was prepared. He was ready. How was he prepared? There is no evidence in God's Word anywhere that God spoke directly to him (as God had spoken to Abraham, for example). God never appeared to Joseph in the way that He appeared to Abraham. You see, Joseph was a great deal more like you and me in this regard. He had teachers, and they must have been Isaac and Jacob.

Now his brothers, no doubt, had access to the same teaching. But there was a difference. Joseph listened. Joseph believed. And Joseph trusted it. It is no wonder that he was his father's favorite, because I believe that Jacob saw in Joseph the beginnings of everything that he wished he himself was.

Joseph knew that he might be able to get this by Potiphar, but he could not get it by himself—or God. His conscience was on such a high level, now that he knew the course that he had to take, regardless of the cost.