

NOTES



Chapter VI

Bringing Good Out of Evil

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Page 121 - 121

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Page 122 - 129

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The most well-known sibling rivalry in the Book of Genesis comes in the story of Joseph, the first-born son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. Just as Jacob's favoritism toward Rachel caused turmoil in his marriages, his preference for her son, Joseph, causes tension among his many children.

Jacob not only favors Joseph, he dotes on his son in front of Joseph's brothers, inflating their envy to almost murderous levels. "Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age; and he made a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him" (Gn 37:3-4).

To make matters worse, Joseph claims to be a visionary who experiences prophetic dreams. When he tells his brothers of dreams he had of them bowing down before him in reverence, the fraternal animosity reaches a fever pitch. This is the straw that breaks the camel's back; the brothers now take Joseph by force and sell him into slavery. To cover up their treacherous deed, they take Joseph's tunic and dip it in blood and show the blood-stained cloak to their father, tricking Jacob into thinking that his beloved son has been devoured by a wild beast. Notice again how Jacob reaps what he has sown: In

his youth, Jacob deceived his own father when he stole the blessing from Esau. Now, in his old age, Jacob is deceived by his own children about what happened to Joseph.

Joseph's Purity

Joseph is a man who, in many ways, is the complete opposite of his father. We saw earlier that Jacob was a schemer who aggressively pursued his own self-interest and grasped at things that were not meant to be his. Instead of trusting in God and His plan for his life, Jacob tended to trust more in his own plans, which usually brought more harm than good to him and his family.

Joseph, on the other hand, is a simple, honest man who still rises to great prominence. It's clear that his life is truly guided by the Lord's hand, not his own. Despite suffering many betrayals and persecutions, Joseph remains a man of integrity. God protects him and elevates him to positions far beyond anything his father Jacob could have ever imagined.

After his brothers sell Joseph into slavery, he ends up in the house of a high-ranking Egyptian named Potipher. There, the Bible tells us, "the Lord was with Joseph" and everything he did prospered (Gen 39:2). Potipher noticed this and made Joseph the head of his entire household (Gn 39: 6).

Things were looking good for Joseph, until Potipher's wife begins to lust after him. Joseph refuses to give in to her desires, saying, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gn 39:9). Not taking "no" for an answer, Potipher's wife continues her relentless pursuit, as day after day she asks Joseph to lie with her. Her lust finally turns to aggression when she seizes his garments and pulls him close

to herself. Joseph is forced to choose between giving in to her desires or fleeing, leaving only his garment in her grasp. A man of virtue, Joseph chooses to flee, and to this day he is hailed as a model of chastity in the Jewish tradition.

His act of virtue, however, is not appreciated by Potipher's wife. Humiliated and spurned, she realizes that she will never have her way with him. Her lust turns to anger, and she sets out to destroy Joseph. Using the garment that she stole from him, she accuses Joseph of attempting to rape her. In the face of his wife's accusation, Potipher throws his faithful servant into prison (Gn 39:7-18).

Falling Upward

Yet the Bible tells us again that "the Lord was with Joseph" even in the midst of this second ordeal (Gn 39:21). Just as Joseph the slave was elevated to head of Potipher's household, now, as an inmate, he wins the favor of the jailer and becomes the overseer of the entire prison.

And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison...and the keeper of the prison paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper. (Gn 39:22-23)

God's blessing continues to favor Joseph. While in jail, Joseph employs his gift of interpreting dreams for a fellow prisoner who had been the chief butler for Pharaoh's court. When the butler is restored to Pharaoh's good graces and the king starts having strange dreams of his own, the butler informs Pharaoh of Joseph, who is called up from prison to appear before Pharaoh and interpret his dream (Gn 39-41).

Pharaoh's dream foretells dramatic events about to take place in the Middle East. He dreams of seven fat cows coming out of the Nile River, followed by seven gaunt cows that come up and eat the seven fat cows. Joseph explains that the seven fat cows represent seven years of superabundant harvest in the land, while the seven gaunt cows represent seven years of devastating famine that will follow the years of plenty. Joseph goes on to offer Pharaoh wise counsel: Store the grain from the years of plenty, so that Egypt will have enough food during the years of famine.

Just as Potipher and the chief jailer recognized that the Lord was with Joseph and gave him special authority, Pharaoh too sees the Spirit of God in Joseph (Gn 41:39) and vests him with authority over all of Egypt, making him a prime minister, or "master of the palace," to rule the people on Pharaoh's behalf. Pharaoh says to him, "You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only as regards the throne will I be greater than you" (Gn 41:40). To mark his elevation, Pharaoh bestows upon Joseph his signet ring, makes him ride in his second chariot, and instructs all the people to kneel before him. Pharaoh tells him, "I am Pharaoh and without your consent no man shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt" (Gn 41:44).

What an amazing day this must have been for Joseph! He wakes up as prisoner in a dungeon and goes to bed that night in a palace, dressed in royal attire and reigning as second in command over all of Egypt. And all this happens without any scheming or vying for power on Joseph's part.

Because of God's blessing, every trouble that befalls Joseph leads to an even *greater* blessing. His brothers sell him into slavery, and he finds himself entrusted with the oversight of Potipher's house.

Potipher's wife falsely accuses him and he is thrown into prison, but this becomes the opportunity to meet Pharaoh and become Pharaoh's right-hand man—and eventually, as we will now see, the savior of a great multitude.

Family Reunion

Just as Joseph had predicted, the time of abundant harvest ends after seven years and famine strikes Egypt and all the land. People from all over come to Egypt to buy grain (Gn 41:57)—including Joseph's own brothers. Providentially, this leads them right back to the same younger brother whom they betrayed so many years before.

To purchase the grain, the brothers have to go through Joseph, but they do not recognize him. They bow down before him, fulfilling the prophetic dreams of his youth about how he one day would reign over his older brothers and they would bow down before him (Gn 37:5-11, 42:6-9). Joseph, on the other hand, immediately recognizes his brothers but waits to reveal his identity. His love for his family is greater than his anger over having been sent away in slavery, but he uses the occasion to test their character. Joseph accuses the youngest brother, Benjamin, of stealing and threatens to imprison him as a test of the other brothers' loyalty. Years before, they had turned on a younger brother—Joseph himself—but now they demonstrate family allegiance, coming to the defense of Benjamin.

Overwhelmed by their devotion, particularly Judah's willingness to take the place of his younger brother and to be thrown into prison himself, Joseph finally reveals his identity. Reconciled, Joseph and his brothers send for their father and the rest of the family to rejoin them in Egypt (Gn 43-45).

Good from Evil

In Joseph's saga, the Bible highlights how God's providential care is more powerful than our human schemes. And this is a challenge to us: In what will we put our trust? Will we be more like Jacob the schemer and rely on our own plans and efforts? Or will we be more like Joseph, who simply seeks to do what is right and trusts in God to provide for him? We each may have certain plans and dreams for our own life, but Scripture teaches us that God has a plan for us as well. The drama of life is about choosing which plan to trust.

The story of Joseph also addresses one of the most perplexing problems that confronts humanity: the problem of suffering. How can an all-powerful, loving God allow bad things to happen to good people? Though not providing an exhaustive answer to this perennial question, the end of the Book of Genesis sheds some light on how God responds to the suffering of the righteous. The story of Joseph reveals that God is so powerful that He can use the evils of this world to bring about even greater good. As Joseph explains to his own brothers, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive" (Gn 50:20). God took the many evils inflicted upon Joseph and used them to bring about a greater good—to bring Joseph to power in Egypt so that he could save his family and all the earth from starvation (see Catechism, no. 312). In this sense, Joseph prefigures Jesus Christ: God took the greatest evil in history—the unjust crucifixion of His innocent Son—and used it to bring about the greatest good: the salvation of the human family.

The Blessing of Judah

The Book of Genesis concludes with Jacob gathering his twelve sons around him for a final blessing before he dies. These sons are the patriarchal fathers of the twelve tribes that will make up the nation of Israel. But one particular son, Judah, is given a unique blessing that elevates him above his brothers and foretells how God will bring a great king to Israel from Judah's descendants. This promised king in this prophetic blessing is symbolized by a lion and a royal scepter.

Consider Jacob's words to Judah:

"Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
Your father's sons shall bow down before you.
Judah is a lion's whelp;
From the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He stooped down, he couched as a lion
And as a lioness; who dares rouse him up?
The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
Until he comes to whom it belongs
And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." (Gn 49:8-10)

Here we see the emergence of a royal line from the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's promise to Abraham that kings would arise from his family will be carried out through this particular tribe of Judah. Jacob speaks of Judah's leadership role in the family when he tells how Judah's brothers "shall bow down before you." But Jacob goes on to prophesy something even more amazing: A future royal leader from the tribe of Judah will rule not only over all twelve

tribes of Israel, but also over the whole world—"to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gn 49:8-12).

And who is this king to whom belongs the royal scepter and the obedience of the peoples? Some may see a partial fulfillment of this prophecy in King David, but ultimately, it points to Jesus Christ Himself. He is the lion from the tribe of Judah, as the New Testament reveals (Rv 5:5-6). He is the one to whom belongs the royal scepter and the obedience of all the nations. And so, at the close of the Book of Genesis, we have another foreshadowing of the great king who will establish a worldwide kingdom and gather all humanity back into covenant with God.

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DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 37:3-36, 39:1-23, 41:1-57

Please read aloud: The most well-known sibling rivalry in the Book of Genesis (even more than Jacob and Esau) comes in the story of Joseph, the first-born son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. Just as Jacob's favoritism toward Rachel caused turmoil in his marriages, his preference for her son, Joseph, causes tension among his many children.

Read Genesis 37:3-11

1. Why are Joseph's brothers so upset with him? What reasons does his passage name?

Answer: Jacob not only favors Joseph, he dotes on his son in front of Joseph's brothers, inflating their envy to almost murderous levels. To make matters worse, Joseph claims to be a visionary who experiences prophetic dreams. When he tells his brothers of dreams he had of them bowing down before him in reverence, the fraternal animosity reaches a fever pitch.

Read Genesis 37:12-36

2. What do Joseph's brothers do to him because of their jealousy?

Answer: The brothers now take Joseph by force and sell him into slavery. To cover up their treacherous deed, they take Joseph's tunic

and dip it in blood and show the blood-stained cloak to their father, tricking Jacob into thinking that his beloved son has been devoured by a wild beast.

3. In his old age, Jacob is deceived by his own children about what happened to Joseph. How might this be, in a certain sense, fitting, considering what we know about Jacob from previous chapters?
Answer: Notice again how Jacob reaps what he has sown: In his youth, Jacob deceived his own father when he stole the blessing from Esau. Now he is tricked by his own children as well.

Please read aloud: We saw earlier that Jacob was a schemer who aggressively pursued his own self-interest and grasped at things that were not meant to be his. Instead of trusting in God and His plan for his life, Jacob tended to trust more in his own plans, which usually brought more harm than good to him and his family.

Let's observe how Joseph is different than his father in this story.

Read Genesis 39:1-23

4. This passage begins to reveal Joseph's character. What virtues does Joseph exemplify in this story?

Answer: Joseph is responsible and wise in his business dealings. Additionally, he demonstrates the virtue of chastity.

5. What reasons does Joseph cite for his refusal to commit adultery with Potiphar's wife? And what steps does he take to ensure that he does not fall into unchastity?

Answer: Joseph refuses to give in to her desires, saying, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gn 39:9). Additionally, Joseph always refused her advances, even to the point of striving to avoid her (see Gn 39:10).

Please read aloud: Not taking “no” for an answer, Potipher’s wife continues her relentless pursuit, as day after day she asks Joseph to lie with her. Her lust finally turns to aggression when she seizes his garments and pulls him close to herself. Joseph is forced to choose between giving in to her desires or fleeing, leaving only his garment in her grasp. A man of virtue, Joseph chooses to flee, and to this day he is hailed as a model of chastity in the Jewish tradition.

6. What can we learn from Joseph about practicing the virtue of chastity?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Joseph’s act of virtue, however, is not appreciated by Potipher’s wife. Humiliated and spurned, she realizes that she will never have her way with him. Her lust turns to anger, and she sets out to destroy Joseph. Using the garment that she stole from him, she accuses Joseph of attempting to rape her. In the face of his wife’s accusation, Potipher throws his faithful servant into prison (Gn 39:7-18).

7. Sometimes doing the right thing, doesn’t always make our lives easier. Why is it still important to do what is right, even if others don’t respond positively? How have you experienced this in your own life?

Allow the group to discuss.

Despite the difficulties, the Bible tells us again that “the Lord was with Joseph” even in the midst of this second ordeal (Gn 39:21). God continues to be faithful to Joseph even in these difficult circumstances.

Read Genesis 41:1-46

What an amazing day this must have been for Joseph! He wakes up as prisoner in a dungeon and goes to bed that night in a palace, dressed in royal attire and reigning as second in command over all of Egypt. And all this happens without any scheming or vying for power on Joseph’s part.

Because of God’s blessing, every trouble that befalls Joseph leads to an even *greater* blessing. His brothers sell him into slavery, and he finds himself entrusted with the oversight of Potipher’s house. Potipher’s wife falsely accuses him and he is thrown into prison, but this becomes the opportunity to meet Pharaoh and become Pharaoh’s right-hand man—and eventually, as we will now see, the savior of a great multitude.

8. What does Joseph’s story teach us about God’s faithfulness and how we should respond in times of adversity?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The story of Joseph continues in the next several chapters of Genesis. It’s a longer narrative, so for the sake of time, here is a summary of what happens:

Just as Joseph had predicted, the time of abundant harvest ends after seven years and famine strikes Egypt and all the land. People from all over come to Egypt to buy grain (Gn 41:57)—including Joseph’s own brothers. Providentially, this leads them right back to the same younger brother whom they betrayed so many years before.

To purchase the grain, the brothers have to go through Joseph, but they do not recognize him. They bow down before him, fulfilling the prophetic dreams of his youth about how he one day would reign over his older brothers and they would bow down before him (Gn

37:5-11, 42:6-9). Joseph, on the other hand, immediately recognizes his brothers but waits to reveal his identity. His love for his family is greater than his anger over having been sent away in slavery, but he uses the occasion to test their character. Joseph accuses the youngest brother, Benjamin, of stealing and threatens to imprison him as a test of the other brothers' loyalty. Years before, they had turned on a younger brother—Joseph himself—but now they demonstrate family allegiance, coming to the defense of Benjamin.

Overwhelmed by their devotion, particularly Judah's willingness to take the place of his younger brother and to be thrown into prison himself, Joseph finally reveals his identity. Reconciled, Joseph and his brothers send for their father and the rest of the family to rejoin them in Egypt (Gn 43-45).

9. In Joseph's saga, the Bible highlights how God's providential care is more powerful than our human schemes. And this is a challenge to us: In what will we put our trust? Will we be more like Jacob the schemer and rely on our own plans and efforts? Or will we be more like Joseph, who simply seeks to do what is right and trusts in God to provide for him? We each may have certain plans and dreams for our own life, but Scripture teaches us that God has a plan for us as well. The drama of life is about choosing which plan to trust. How has the story of Joseph inspired you to put your trust in God, instead of your own plans?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The story of Joseph also addresses one of the most perplexing problems that confronts humanity: the problem of suffering. How can an all-powerful, loving God allow bad things to happen to good people? Though not providing an exhaustive answer to this perennial question, the end of the Book of Genesis sheds some

light on how God responds to the suffering of the righteous. The story of Joseph reveals that God is so powerful that He can use the evils of this world to bring about even greater good. As Joseph explains to his own brothers, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive" (Gn 50:20).

10. How have you seen the principle of God bringing good out of evil in your own life? And what does Joseph story teach us about the problem of suffering?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The Book of Genesis concludes with Jacob gathering his twelve sons around him for a final blessing before he dies. These sons are the patriarchal fathers of the twelve tribes that will make up the nation of Israel. But one particular son, Judah, is given a unique blessing that elevates him above his brothers and foretells how God will bring a great king to Israel from Judah's descendants. This promised king in this prophetic blessing is symbolized by a lion and a royal scepter.

Consider Jacob's words to Judah:

Read Genesis 49:8-10

Here we see the emergence of a royal line from the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's promise to Abraham that kings would arise from his family will be carried out through this particular tribe of Judah. Jacob speaks of Judah's leadership role in the family when he tells how Judah's brothers "shall bow down before you." But Jacob goes on to prophesy something even more amazing: A future royal leader from the tribe of Judah will rule not only over all twelve tribes of Israel, but also over the whole world—"to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gn 49:8-12).

11. Looking ahead to the rest of this study, who might this king be to whom belongs the royal scepter and the obedience of the peoples? How is this a fitting end to the book of Genesis?

Answer: Some may see a partial fulfillment of this prophecy in King David, but ultimately, it points to Jesus Christ Himself. He is the lion from the tribe of Judah, as the New Testament reveals (Rv 5:5-6). He is the one to whom belongs the royal scepter and the obedience of all the nations. And so, at the close of the Book of Genesis, we have another foreshadowing of the great king who will establish a worldwide kingdom and gather all humanity back into covenant with God.

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