

Jacob and Joseph

The Lord was with Joseph?

Scripture:

Read Genesis 39 as a group.

Introduction:

When God called Abraham in Genesis 12, the call was accompanied by a clear and compelling promise: *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”* Jumping ahead to Genesis 39, we read of the promise, at least in part, coming true within the life of Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph: *“The Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.”* It would be all too easy to assume that the original promise made to Abraham and his family meant that God was paving the way for a life of familial success. Abraham and his descendants were singled out as God’s chosen instrument to bless every other nation of the world. *But could that promise include being thrown into a pit and later into prison? Could God’s plan for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and now Joseph include both promise and pain? How do we reconcile the tension?*

As we read through Joseph’s story, we’re immediately struck by familial dysfunction and the ensuing tragedy of brotherly betrayal. Then as we begin Genesis 39, we’re likewise reminded of the painful position Joseph finds himself in as a slave. However, as the story unfolds we read of Joseph’s meteoric rise within Potiphar’s household and we may be tempted to think to ourselves, *“Ahh, yes, this is how the story should go. Good guys always rise to the top. Blessing comes to those who wait.”* But that isn’t the way this story goes. A successful and favored slave quickly becomes a falsely accused prisoner. As Duguid and Harmon write, *“This twist of fortunes did not come because of moral failure on Joseph’s part. Rather, it was his faithful obedience to God, the very thing which had apparently caused his rise, which now also caused his fall.”*

We should stop to ask the question, *“Where was God in all of this?”* As we do, we’ll find that the resounding answer provided no less than five times by the narrator in Genesis 39 is simply, *“The Lord was with Joseph.”* This is the profound reality of Joseph’s story and ours. God never promises to make our plans prosper. He doesn’t guarantee that blessing looks like worldly success. What he does say is that he’ll be with us through it all – in the pit of betrayal, in the face of sin and temptation, on the despairing side of failure, on the dirt floor of an ancient prison – through it all, God’s promise stands firm: *“I’ll be with you.”* Certainly Joseph wondered if God had abandoned him. It would take years for him to realize that the dreams of Genesis 37 would only be fulfilled through the path of suffering and hardship. Yet God never abandoned Joseph. He was with him in the pain, darkness, and tears. Likewise, Jesus, the ultimate Innocent Sufferer is the reason we can truly believe that God hasn’t abandoned us, even in the dark night of the soul. The cross proves that God is with us in the pain, darkness, and tears – *and because God suffered too* – we can confidently believe our suffering has an end and isn’t in vain.

Reflection: Take personal inventory of your life, heart, and spiritual journey. Use these prompts as a way to prepare for group discussions or for personal times of prayer.

1. What are things / circumstances in your life (or the world) that cause you to doubt God’s promises?
2. Answer as honestly as you can: Is trusting God worth it if there’s not an immediate / visible / substantial benefit to following him?

Discuss:

1. What about the sermon stood out or impacted you the most? Do you have any follow-up questions about the sermon?
2. Re-read verses 11-21. Notice that Joseph’s decision to honor the Lord instead of serving himself and giving in to Potiphar’s wife resulted in his imprisonment. He suffered for doing the right thing. Ultimately this suffering and trial was part of God’s plan. How does this principle fit within your understanding of faith and Christianity?
3. Ian Duguid and Matt Harmon write, *“Joseph’s only defense against sin was a heart that wanted to please God more than to experience pleasure or avoid pain.”* They go on to say *“that’s our real problem,”* our hearts want something more than they want to please God. Discuss this idea together – exploring best practices for developing a heart that truly wants to please God.
4. **Missional Living:** Grace is a significant element within Christianity that sets it apart from every other worldview. Grace is the consistent reminder that no matter what you do or how far you fall, God is ready and waiting to extend his love and forgiveness. As Christians we are invited (indeed commanded) to be agents of grace in this world. Who might God be inviting / challenging you to connect with this week? Pray for those people by name and ask the Lord to give you courage!

Apply:

As an exercise, write down all the reasons or circumstances that might cause you to doubt God’s character and his promise to be with you. Why do these things / people / circumstances seem to speak louder than God’s promises? Why do these circumstances seem more influential than the love of God? As you slow down to identify the things that might serve as barriers to belief in your life, prepare to confront any lie with the reality of the gospel and God’s great love for you in Christ. Pair up for prayer as this is best accomplished with friends.