

The Story of Joseph

Into the Pit

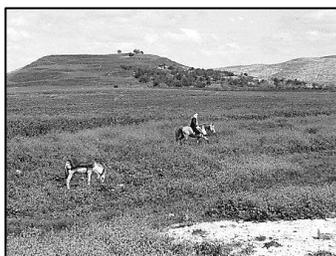
Part 5 – February 12, 2012

I'm using the oldest photos of the locations I can find (e.g. Shechem in the 1890s); so little had changed (clothing, housing, transportation, etc.) that it's just like looking back in time. Here's Shechem today, it's now called Nablus; just not the same.



Reuben, #1 son, sinned against his dad and lost his birthright to #11, Joseph, and it was sealed with that coat of authority. This didn't sit well with the other #s, especially #2, the cold, cruel, and homicidal Simeon who murdered the men of Shechem with #3. 17-year-old Joseph inadvertently threw gas on the fire when he carelessly shared two dreams, wherein #s 1-12 all *bowed* to him. Last week, dad sent Joseph on a dangerous 55 mile trek, to make sure everything is *shalom* in Shechem with the brothers. And now, as he walks into certain doom, his #1 hope is the #1 son, Reuben. And I said that Reuben will indeed get there in time to save him.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?" He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?" "They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" ["Oh. Okay. Um, how'd you know *those* were my brothers?" "Huh?" "And how exactly did you *hear* 'em? I mean, they're not ones to share their itinerary with a sworn enemy!" "Huh?" "Were you spying?" I imagine the whole village was on edge when word got out that the brothers were back. Maybe the brothers could feel the pressure mounting and moved on. The people were probably paranoid by the time Joseph showed up. "Who's *that* guy?! Why's he just ... walkin' around? *What* is he wearing?! Is he a *prince*? Rufus, go check him out.!" "Huh?!" "It'll be okay, just play it cool."] So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. – *Genesis 37:14b-17 NIV*



Dothan is another 15 miles away. It's got great grazing land and it's dotted with low-lying hills. In fact, the brothers are probably sitting on top of one of these hills as that coat approaches. We've talked about their father's favoritism, and how, when they were young boys, he had used them as human shields to protect Joseph, and how he passed over them to give Joseph the birthright, and how they hated that coat. And now the volcano erupts!



But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. “Here comes that dreamer!” they said to each other. “Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him.” – *Genesis 37:18-20a NIV*

Do you know the difference between a cistern and a well? A well taps into ground water. A cistern is a big holding tank.

Cisterns are usually carved in rock (and often plastered) at the base of a hill, to catch and store rainwater. They’re usually pretty big with a small opening and a cover.

“Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.” [Understand, this sinful reaction is coming out of *legitimate* woundedness. I said we’re *all* wounded, that’s true. But we’re also all selfish. And we’ll respond to our wounds in Godly ways or selfish ways. How we respond is *more* significant than how we’ve been wounded.] When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. “Let’s not take his life,” he said. “Don’t shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, [Why do you suppose he’s so specific? “Throw him into this cistern here ...” hold that thought] but don’t lay a hand on him.” Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. [Joseph isn’t around to hear any of this. Hold *that* thought too.] So when Joseph came to his brothers, they *stripped* him [A violent form of the term] of his robe — the richly ornamented robe he was wearing — and they *took* him [Another violent term] and *threw* him [Literally, not figuratively!] into the cistern. – *Genesis 37:20b-24a NIV*

Who do you think did most of the stripping and taking and throwing? It’s certainly Simeon’s M.O., and he’s got the motive: he’s next in line for Reuben’s birthright and double portion. 22 years later, a 39-year-old Joseph chooses one of the brothers to remain in prison until the others return ... flash-forward 22 years (before the brothers are aware who they’re bowing to).



[Joseph said] “If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households.” [“Let’s see ... one to stay ... who should it be? Hmm, eeny-meeny-miny-moe, catch a, *that one!*” ... And so,] He had *Simeon* taken [A violent term] from them and bound [Another violent term] before their eyes. – *Genesis 42:19, 24b NIV*

Careful Joseph. Now that you have the upper hand, how will you respond to *your* woundedness? Don’t be like your brothers. How you react to those who wound you is *far* more important than how you’ve been wounded, because our response reveals where our trust really is.

Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it. – *Genesis 37:24b NIV* [And *that’s* why Reuben was so specific! He didn’t want Joseph to drown before he could rescue him]

An empty cistern probably means that summer is almost over (the rainy season begins in October, so it’s probably around September), which would explain why the brothers are grazing their flocks so far from home; water is getting scarce.

The story here doesn't say how Joseph reacted. Do you picture him calm and collected, trusting in God's goodness? Or, do you think he was freaking out, distressed, pleading for his life?! Well, 22 years later his brothers reminisce. Flash-forward!

"We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen ..." – *Genesis 42:21b NIV*

Now we know. He's not a storybook character; he's human! If you're Joseph, in the pit, how do you reconcile your situation with your belief in God's goodness, love, power, and sovereignty? What goes through your mind? He's bleeding, he's pleading, he's crying, he's begging, there's snot running out his nose. And he's praying like he's never prayed before. And where's God?!



The prophet Elisha found himself in a very similar situation, in this very same location, but with very different results.

An enemy king discovered that God was revealing all his battle secrets *through* Elisha to Israel! So he sent his men to find Elisha so they could kill him.

Let's Flash-forward 1000 years!

The report came back: "He is in *Dothan*." [Same Dothan] Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city. When the servant of the man of God [Elisha] got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked. "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills *full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha*. As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the Lord, "Strike these people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked. [Yes! Now *that's* how you answer prayer! *That's* the kind of God that I want!] – *2 Kings 6:13b-18 NIV*

If I'm Joseph, and I'm in that pit, I'm asking where *my* chariots of fire are. And I'm asking where God is! It doesn't say how long he was in the pit (it jumps to some-time-later when they're sitting down to eat), was it an hour, a day, more? Reuben needs time to make a legitimate sounding excuse to leave the brothers so he can sneak back in a roundabout route.

Well, we're still with Elisha, so let's flashback the 1000 years, and then forward 22 to Egypt, and we can see how long Joseph kept his *brothers* imprisoned.

Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Then he remembered his dreams about them [You know what triggered his memory? They were bowing down to him at the time! And he recognizes them, and it all comes flooding back: the dreams, Shechem, Roofus – he had to be a spy, Dothan, the beating, the pit, the PIT, the PIT!] and said to them, "You are spies!" [A little nod to Rufus] ... And he put them all in custody for three days. [Interesting] – *Genesis 42:8-9a, 17 NIV*

Something caused them to associate their current predicament (accused of spying) with something completely unrelated that took place 22 years earlier and 300 miles away. I think it was the *three days*. They don't make the connection to Joseph while they're sitting in prison because they don't know how long they'll be there. But when they're released on the third day, after pleading for *their* lives for three days (because spies were kind of put to death), the light bulb comes on!

They said to one another, "*Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us.*" [And this is the "chariot of fire" moment!] – Genesis 42:21 NIV

In God's realm, where you don't touch free will, it's a much greater miracle to open a man's eyes to his own sin than to blind him!

So where was God during all that distress, when He seemed nowhere to be found? He was in the pit. He promises to never leave you nor forsake you. So, if *you're* in the pit, *He's* in the pit. Christianity is the only faith that dares to claim that God has gone into the pit and suffered; that's how we know we're not alone. He allowed himself to be stripped of his glory, taken by force, and thrown into a tomb for three days, to show His love to *you*.

He seldom sends chariots of fire; that's what you call an *atypical* response. Just ask John the Baptist, or Peter, or Paul. What he does promise is to come into the pit and be with you in the darkness. And reassure you that His wise, redeeming love is perfectly compatible with the horrific things that can happen in this life. We won't understand everything, but we can trust that He's working them out to our eternal best.

Do you believe that God was caring and working just as much for Joseph in that pit as He was for Elisha with those chariots? Look at this story and see that you can trust that.

Joseph's brothers were so selfish in their woundedness that they could calmly eat their lunch while he pleaded for his life.

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of *Ishmaelites* coming from Gilead [GIL-ih-uhd]. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. [If His Place is Hebron (Joseph's home), Vancouver (Canada) would be Dothan, and Egypt would be the Washington-Oregon border] Judah [#4] said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the *Ishmaelites* and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." [Someone's conscience is beginning to bother him. It's gonna get a lot worse; more on *that* in a couple weeks! Hint: chapter 38] His brothers agreed. So when the *Midianite merchants* came by [I could'a swore they said *Ishmaelites*.], his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the *Ishmaelites*, [I could'a swore they said "*Midianites*"] who took him to Egypt [I could'a swore they said Vancouver!]. – Genesis 37:25-28 NIV



Midian is a *place*, whereas Ishmaelites are a *people* (who lived in *various* locations). *These* Ishmaelites are from Midian. *These* are *Midianite-Ishmaelites*.

Moses (who's transcribing this story) records (Ex. 21:32) that the price of a slave is 30 shekels of silver. 20 shekels is likely the cost of a *crippled* slave, which would speak volumes about the level of violence that must have greeted Joseph in Dothan.

Wait! "The Ishmaelites took him to Egypt." So, Reuben *didn't* get there in time to save him! I wouldn't be so sure about that ...

When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, **[Imagine the shockwave, the dread, the panic]** he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?" – *Genesis 37:29-30 NIV*

At that moment, the brothers know that Reuben has betrayed them. He lied about leaving and tried to return Joseph. Now, here he is, clothes ripped apart in anguish, he's wild with adrenalin. And he's ready to do whatever it takes to get Joseph back. He's no longer afraid to stand up to, and take on, all nine of his brothers! "Where can I turn?! Where is he?!"

So ... do you think they told him? "He's in that slow-moving caravan right over there. Look we got shekels!" Or does Simeon step forward and say, "I killed him and buried the body. It's done. Get over it. Let's move on." Ten brothers, 20 shekels, two shekels each; unless Simeon decides to keep Reuben's for himself ... as a down payment on his "rightful" double portion.

Reuben got there in time to rescue Joseph, but something prevented him. And ultimately what prevented him, was God; true, it was the brothers' sin, but God is the ultimate chess player. Do you know why God stopped him? It's a difficult truth, but ... Joseph didn't need to be rescued just then. God was doing something much greater in Joseph and through Joseph.

22 years later, after three days in prison, when the light bulb came on ...

Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood." **[Reuben assumes Joseph is dead. Either he'd been told that; or he had reason enough to believe it]** They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. **[You still holding that thought about Joseph not hearing Reuben when he was pleading for Joseph? He didn't know about Reuben's rescue attempt. He didn't see Reuben rip his clothes in anguish. And now, just as Joseph is deciding the very fate of his brothers, just as he's deciding how to respond to his woundedness and to those who wounded him, Reuben's little rant comes as quite a game-changing shock!]** He turned away from them and began to weep ... – *Genesis 42:22-24a NIV*

God is touching Joseph's heart. And THIS is the moment that Joseph needed rescue, and without know it, Reuben was exactly on time!

We don't know what Reuben was told when he ran to his brothers.

When Reuben showed up saying "Where can I turn now?" They could've said, "We sold him to Ishmaelites from Median; look, you can still see their caravan." That might've been worse. If they had, a chill would've rushed up his spine, his neck-hair would've stood in alarm, and his ruddy face would've gone pale.

There's a line in the story that I *didn't* read as intended ...

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of **"Ishmaelites!"** coming from Gilead. – *Genesis 37:25a NIV*

That *one word* would've sent Reuben's heart racing and his blood would've run cold, and he would've known then and there that all was lost!

And this is where we have to close God's story for today.