

# The Story of Joseph

## *In the Meanwhile*

Part 9 – March 18, 2012

We begin with the *last verse* in the first chapter of our story.

Meanwhile, the Midianites [a.k.a. Ishmaelites] sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard. – *Genesis 37:36 NIV*

In chapter 37 we read about Jacob and Joseph, the brothers and sisters and mothers, the Shechemites and Midianite-Ishmaelites, and finally even Potiphar and Pharaoh. But have you noticed who hasn’t been mentioned ... even once? God. He isn’t just *not mentioned*, He’s *conspicuously absent!* It’s not an oversight; it’s the artistry of the inspired author.

Let’s go back to the dreams that *God Himself* gives to Joseph, and watch how the writer goes out of his way to leave God out.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” – *Genesis 37:5-10 NIV*



From his lofty dreams to his imposing robe, to his journey to Shechem and the directions of a stranger, to the murderous plot in Dothan, the empty cistern, Reuben’s failed rescue, the sale to spice traders, and all the way up to the “meanwhile” in Egypt ... God doesn’t speak. God isn’t even referred to. God *seems* to be utterly, absolutely, completely absent. It’s difficult to find a chapter in Genesis like it.

The next chapter follows Judah and then chapter 39 jumps back to Joseph. And it repeats this last verse, but *then* adds five little words: “The Lord was with Joseph”. In fact, God is seen at work *seven times* in that chapter. He’s doing *all kinds of stuff!*

For the original audience, this comes as a big relief, because all the way to the “meanwhile” the writer causes them to question God in the *same exact way* that Jacob and Joseph would have.

Is God’s hand not on Joseph? Has it been *removed* from Joseph? Were those just pipe dreams? Does God even care at this point? See, the inspired writer causes them to question God in the *same exact way* that you and I might when *we’re* in the “meanwhile”.

And though God seems so utterly absent at this point, we’ve been shown how He arranged every detail, so that free-willed wickedness would accomplish His sovereign plan of salvation (physically when the famine comes and spiritually when the Lion of Judah comes).



Hebron



Shechem



Dothan



Joseph *had* to be sent from Hebron *exactly* when he was, so he could arrive in Shechem *precisely* when he did, so he could *happen* to encounter the stranger who had *happened* to overhear that his brothers had *happened* to decide to go to Dothan, which *happened* to be a *perfectly* remote place to inspire a murder. And Reuben *had* to persuade his brothers to postpone the kill, and his rescue plan *had* to fail, and those traders *had* to be Ishmaelites who *happened* to have a grudge against Jacob, and they *had* to be on the Midian-to-Gilead-to-Egypt spice-route that *happened* to go through Dothan, and they *had* to arrive at that *precise moment*, and they *had* to have a motive for refusing a larger reward for returning him, because they *had* to take him to a *specific* city in Egypt, and they *had* to sell him on a *specific* day, and it *had* to be to a *specific* man, who would *happen* to be in the market, and *happen* to be in need of a servant, and *happen* to be Pharaoh’s captain of the guard!



Midian to Gilead to Egypt



Cairo, Egypt

God is often most at work when He seems most hidden. That’s a major theme of chapter 37; and the author reveals it by hiding God within it. So, what are we supposed to do when we find ourselves in the “meanwhile” where God seems to be so distant?

Draw closer. That’s the main reason *for* the “meanwhile”. Any of you guys remember the fear of putting your arm around the girl of your dreams that first time? Or the thrill of the first time she slid over and sat next to you in your car? There’s little in life that’s more devastating and discouraging than looking over and seeing her clutch that door handle! The first time I took Shar on a date I drove my Camaro; and all I could think about was her sliding over and sitting next to me, which is a foolish thought for a first date ... and bucket seats.

Do you ever think the Lord might feel that way about you? He’s right here and you’re way over there holding onto something that’s preventing you from sliding over and getting close.

1. Jacob wouldn’t let go of control.

Remember how mad he was when God allowed him to be tricked into marrying Leah and her “weak eyes”?



Sure she was forced into it, and she was God’s choice, but Jacob refused to love her.

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. – *Genesis 29:31 NIV*

Nonetheless, Jacob treated Leah as inferior and her sons as second-rate.

We all can intensely desire control, but a standoff with God is *never* a good idea. We need to let go and draw close.

## 2. Joseph wouldn’t let go of his self-importance.

As if being pampered and protected and honored over his brothers *all* his life isn’t enough, he flaunts these dreams of prominence in a self-serving manner that incites jealousy and hatred.

We’re all intensely self-focused. If I took a picture of you-all and put it on the screen, *who* would you look at? I rest my case. Self-focused dreams are destructive things, even if the dream is from God. Before He can work *through* Joseph, He has to work *in* Joseph ... that’s how it works. So, let go and draw close.

## 3. The brothers wouldn’t let go of resentment.

There are two ways we can deal with hurt in a relationship: resentment or forgiveness. One shackles us, the other releases. We’ve all been intensely resentful at one time or another. And it chains us to that door handle *even* when we *want* to slide over.

You have to find a way to deal with your hurts other than resentment because, as long as you’re relating with people, you’ll be hurt by people ... wouldn’t matter if they were *perfect*. You know how I know? God is perfect, and you’ve been hurt in your relationship with *Him*. Not because of Him, but because of *you*. The problem is our expectations. Let go and draw close.

One of the incredible characteristics of God’s grace is that He’ll do everything He can to close that gap. And pitfalls and enslavements are like potholes to jar us loose. Look at the end of chapter 37 and the beginning of chapter 38.

**[Jacob loses control]** All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. “No,” he said, “in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son.” So his father wept for him. **[And Joseph loses self-importance]** Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard. **[And the brothers’ resentment begins to shackle them with guilt]** At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. – *Genesis 37:35-38:1 NIV*

Judah is later called a *courageous* lion. But stunned by his father's reaction, and unwilling to confess that he convinced his brothers to sell Joseph, this cowardly lion goes on the lamb.

However, it's amazing what a 22-year "meanwhile" can do. Flash-forward 22 years to when Joseph tells his brothers (who have no idea it's Joseph) that he's going to keep their youngest brother, Benjamin in Egypt. And now look at the lion ...



"Your servant [Judah] guaranteed the boy's safety to my father. I said, 'If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life!' Now then, please let your servant [Judah] remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father." [He slid over!] – Genesis 44:32-34 NIV

God has been breaking and healing the deep-seated generational sin that was destroying Jacob's bond with his "second-rate" sons. The "meanwhile" is a powerful place of transformation ... whether you're confused by it (like Jacob), a victim of it (like Joseph), or the very cause (like Judah and his brothers).

Four verses later, when Joseph reveals himself, self-importance is nonexistent, even though he's now the second most powerful man in the world's most powerful nation!

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." [He slid over and they're coming with!] When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." – Genesis 45:4-5 NIV

God is so glorified when we trust Him in the *meanwhile*. And we are so fortified when we know that His silence is not His absence.

And what about Jacob; how was *he* transformed? Well, several ways, but let's flash-forward another 17 years to his deathbed, where he makes an amazing, startling, and terribly romantic request. He instructs his sons to ...

"Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron ... There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah." – Genesis 49:29b-31 NIV condensed

He doesn't ask to be buried in the custom tomb he built for his once-favorite wife, Rachel. Nor does he ask to have Rachel moved to the tomb of his fathers. For whatever reason and however it came about, his final gesture is to honor his *once-unloved* wife with his deepest affection.

He asks that he be slid in next to her forever.