

Origin Stories | Joseph's Suffering | Genesis 37-40

June 2, 2024 | Matthew McNutt

[Title slide] We are continuing our journey through the book of Genesis today. I'm covering chapters 37-40 ... but I won't be diving into chapter 38 today, a fascinating journey into the story of Judah and Tamar. Why not? I preached on that passage the other year in a message called the Tale of Tamar; you can find it on our website. It's an incredible story about a woman sexually mistreated and wronged who was able to redeem her story and ended up one of only four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus because of the power of her story. Today, our focus is on Joseph.

[Book cover] Do you remember the classic book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, by Judith Viorst and Ray Cruz? Check it out:

"I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day."

It just goes downhill from there. A literary masterpiece.

Today, we are looking at **Joseph and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Eleven Years**.

Joseph's life was hard. He didn't have the benefit of knowing the end of the story like we do, and yet, Joseph clung to God's faithful love in an incredible way.

Genesis 37:2-4 (NLT) ² This is the account of Jacob and his family. When Joseph was seventeen years old, he often tended his father's flocks. He worked for his half brothers, the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. But Joseph reported to his father some of the bad things his brothers were doing.

Joseph started life as an annoying, tattling, younger brother. Nice.

³ Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age. So one day Jacob had a special gift made for Joseph—a beautiful robe. ⁴ But his brothers hated Joseph because their father loved him more than the rest of them. They couldn't say a kind word to him.

Jacob gave Joseph a beautiful robe. It was most likely a long-sleeved coat, perhaps with various pieces of colored cloth sown together or beautiful embroidery.¹ The problem was what the robe symbolized.

¹ John H. Walton, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 662-663.

It was a blatant marker of Joseph's status as favorite. These kinds of robes indicated the wearer was management, not labor – labor like all his older, adult brothers. And we see that; Joseph didn't work the herds like his brothers did, instead, his dad used him to check and report on them. Which went over GREAT.

Then, showing a complete inability to read the room, Joseph shared the following:

Genesis 37:6-8 (NLT) ⁶ "Listen to this dream," he said. ⁷ "We were out in the field, tying up bundles of grain. Suddenly my bundle stood up, and your bundles all gathered around and bowed low before mine!" ⁸ His brothers responded, "So you think you will be our king, do you? Do you actually think you will reign over us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dreams and the way he talked about them.

He shared another dream, at which point even his dad was like, you need to shut up.

Not long after, Jacob sent Joseph out to check on his brothers. They had taken the herds about 65 miles away, so it was four to five days journey for Joseph to get there.²

The animosity the brothers felt was so strong that when they saw him off in the distance they decided to kill him. They jumped him, stripped him of his robe, and threw him in a dried out cistern, a large hole lined with plaster to collect rain during the few months of the year it rained. And then they sat down to eat.

Feeling a little less hangry now that they had eaten, they decided to instead sell him to some passing merchants as a slave instead of killing him.

Then they enacted their coverup plan: they killed a goat, ripped Joseph's coat and covered it with blood, and then brought it home letting Jacob believe that a wild animal had killed Joseph. Jacob was devastated.

Genesis 39:1-3 (NLT) ¹ When Joseph was taken to Egypt by the Ishmaelite traders, he was purchased by Potiphar, an Egyptian officer. Potiphar was captain of the guard for Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. ² The Lord was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master. ³ Potiphar noticed this and realized that the Lord was with Joseph, giving him success in everything he did.

Joseph was 17 years old, and God was with him, but did it feel like it to him as he was stripped of all he had and knew and reduced to slavery?

Potiphar made Joseph his personal attendant and put him in charge of his household, but then things took another turn:

Potiphar's wife started pressuring him to sleep with her day after day, and even though he kept refusing, she ultimately arranged to have the house empty and forced herself on him – sexual assault. He managed to run, leaving her holding his cloak, which left

² Ibid, 664.

her furious. She screamed for help and accused him of trying to rape her. So, Potiphar had him locked away in prison.

Here's the catch: Potiphar knew Joseph didn't do it. A man of his position and authority would have executed someone on the spot for trying to rape his wife. The fact he didn't revealed he knew she was lying, but it would have been too humiliating, too much of a breach of cultural expectations to take the side of slave against his wife, so, it turns out it was easier for Potiphar to throw Joseph away in prison and destroy what was left of his life rather than tell the truth.

Genesis 39:21-23 (NLT) ²¹ But the Lord was with Joseph in the prison and showed him his faithful love. And the Lord made Joseph a favorite with the prison warden. ²² Before long, the warden put Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners and over everything that happened in the prison. ²³ The warden had no more worries, because Joseph took care of everything. The Lord was with him and caused everything he did to succeed.

Joseph may have been succeeding, but he was succeeding in prison. I don't think any of us are lining up for jobs they give to prisoners – and prisons, as hard as they are today, are far nicer than they were thousands of years ago.

In Genesis 40, Pharaoh's chief cup-bearer joined Joseph in prison. Joseph helped him, and he promised if he ever got out he would help him in return. In a ray of hope for Joseph, the cup-bearer was restored to his position with Pharaoh! Instead, the chapter closes with this:

Genesis 40:23 (NLT) Pharaoh's chief cup-bearer, however, forgot all about Joseph, never giving him another thought.

Joseph was 28 years old.³ At this point he had been a slave and a prisoner for eleven years. Let that sink in. Year after year, his life of promise has just gotten more and more difficult. From his perspective, this is how it will end, life in prison.

And yet, throughout it all, Joseph grew closer to God. To me, there is one line in particular that stands out:

Genesis 39:21a (NLT) But the Lord was with Joseph in the prison and showed him his faithful love.

“Faithful love.” That's a powerful phrase, but what does it mean?

1. Even in hard times, God is with us

Faithful love means that even in hard times, God is with us. Joseph was an incredible young man. Instead of giving up or focusing on the wrongness of how he ended up in prison, he continued to do the best he could. And God was with him, guiding and

³ Ibid, 672.

supporting him. As forgotten as Joseph may have felt, God never left him, never left his side. God's love was steadfast, consistent, committed, it was faithful. This theme is throughout scripture:

Romans 8:38-39 (NLT) ³⁸ I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We see Joseph's confidence in God's faithful love in his response to each of his environments; as a slave, he did the best he could do and stood out, as a prisoner, he did the best he could do and stood out. Why? Because he was serving God, not man. His best was for God, not Potiphar, not the prison warden. The arrogant teenager had grown into someone with better priorities, better perspective.

2. God's good

Romans 8:28 (NLT) And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

The apostle Paul writes that God causes everything to work together for our good, for His purposes. Which is such a beautiful and important passage, and we cling to it rightly, but the Paul was also beheaded for his faith, which doesn't seem great, right? I think we sometimes confuse what we think is our good for what God considers our good. Our second point needs a few more words:

2. God's good may not feel good

Sometimes we aren't healed, we don't recover. We don't get the verdict we hope for. The relationship fractures. Those who wrong us seem to get away with it. The difficulties keep piling on. Sometimes God gives visions of incredible things ... and the next eleven years are spent suffering, sick, struggling, slavery and prison.

God doesn't promise us an easy life, in fact, He promises us difficulties, challenges, heartbreak. We're promised suffering.

Why? Because God's focus is our eternity, not this temporary life. Paul, the guy who was covered in scars from the beatings, the imprisonments, the near-death experiences, and was ultimately beheaded for his faith, writes about just this:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NLT) ¹⁶ That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. ¹⁷ For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! ¹⁸ So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix

our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.

Don't let the pursuit of God be distracted by the hardships of this temporal life, the evil of others, the frenzied outrage of our culture. Our focus needs to be on God's good, the things of eternity, the things that truly matter.

3. God's faithful love

The Lord was with Joseph in the prison and showed him his faithful love.

In 586 BC, centuries after the time of Joseph, Babylon conquered the Israelites, left Jerusalem in rubble, destroyed the temple, and took the best and brightest of their young people back to Babylon as slaves. And yet, even in the midst of this devastation, these words were written:

Lamentations 3:22 (NLT) The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease.

1 Chronicles records a phrase that is repeated word for word throughout scripture:

1 Chronicles 16:34 (NLT) Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever.

God's faithful love is at work in your life right now. You may be going through something awful in your life right now or you may be easy breezing through life. Wherever you find yourself today, and then tomorrow, and then the day after that, and most definitely when you face difficulties and challenges, some of which you may not understand, put your trust in God's faithful love and believe that He will always walk alongside you and bring good out of each circumstance in your life. Joseph was isolated, he didn't have the advantage you have today: fellow believers. If you're in a time of suffering, a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad season, tell someone. Let your small group demonstrate God's faithful love to you, let your fellow believers support you, put it on your connection card. Send a text to someone now. Together we can pursue God's good, experience His faithful love.

Let's close in prayer.