
Joseph and Judah and their Salvation

In Genesis we read the story of Joseph and his coat of many colours. This coat was not just a fancy coat but, rather, a coat which was like the coats people of royalty wore. In giving Joseph his coat, Jacob his father was saying that he had chosen Joseph to take the position of firstborn and become the next head of the household. Joseph's brothers knew what their father was doing.

Jacob had reason for doing this. As we recall, he wanted to marry Rachel because he loved her, but he was tricked into marrying her older and less beautiful sister, Leah. He did marry Rachel a week or so later, and although the two of them deeply desired to have children, Leah was the first to bear children for Jacob so that his first four sons were sons of Leah and not Rachel. After much time, Rachel was finally blessed with a son, Joseph, and although he was younger by far than his half brothers, being the eldest son of the wife Jacob loved, Jacob wanted him to have the position of being the firstborn. Thus, Jacob gave Joseph a royal coat which signalled his choice of the one who would receive God's promises and become head of the household. Jacob, we should note, followed through on his intentions, adopting Joseph's two sons as his own, thus giving Joseph a double inheritance, the inheritance that the firstborn was meant to receive.

Jacob's brothers were unhappy with their father's choice, and they decided to eliminate Joseph, not by killing him but by selling him as a slave into Egypt. In this way they believed that they not only got rid of Jacob's choice of heir, but they also stood to benefit themselves. They did not conceive that Joseph would survive his slavery let alone become one of the most powerful men in the world. They would never have believed that Joseph would one day hold their lives in his hands. But, as we know, God blessed Joseph and he did become the eventual saviour of his family when they were forced to turn to Egypt for food because of a famine in their own land. As the brothers bowed down to Joseph, what Jacob had desired in giving Joseph his royal coat became reality. It seemed that it would be through Joseph that God would provide the salvation for the world, a salvation he had promised to humanity in the Garden of Eden, a salvation that would be offered to the world through Abraham's descendants. The book of Genesis ends with us believing that Joseph could be the means by which God would provide salvation, for it appeared that he was the heir to God's promises.

But things were not as they seemed. First, as soon as we turn to Exodus, we realize that the policies Joseph had created were turned against his people. Under Joseph's guidance, Pharaoh gave food to the people who came to him on the condition that they become his slaves. Joseph's policies institutionalized slavery so that it became possible for the Egyptians to enslave the Israelites and use them for their own benefit. Thus, the salvation Joseph provides turns out to be no salvation at all, at least not ultimately.

There is another curious passage in the Joseph narrative that should give us pause. Even as the narrator is recounting Joseph's story, he stops right in the middle of his account and tells us about Judah and his bad behaviour (Genesis 38). Judah, although the fourth son of Levi, had been given the position of firstborn above his three older brothers, for they had abdicated their position because of a variety of sins. In Genesis 38, Judah plays the role of unfaithfulness to the max as he unwittingly impregnates his

daughter-in-law Tamar after refusing to provide a husband for her after her first two had died. He then tries to punish Tamar for her adultery until he discovers that the child that she bears is his. She gives birth to twins, and one of them, Perez, becomes the ancestor of King David and, eventually of Jesus Christ. In other words, God's promises of salvation are not passed to Joseph, son of beloved Rachel, as Jacob wished but, rather, to sinful Judah, a son of Leah, the unloved wife.

What happened in Genesis plays out in later history. The nation of Israel survives for a while, intact, but after enjoying prosperity as a united nation under David and Solomon, it divides with the southern part being dominated by the tribe of Judah and the northern dominated by the tribe of Ephraim, Ephraim being Joseph's son who was adopted by his grandfather, Jacob. Animosity grows between these two sons of Jacob, now powerful kingdoms, and they are regularly at war with each other. Eventually both kingdoms are destroyed, but God allows the people to return from exile, but following this, there is never any question as to whom God will use to provide salvation. The returning Israelites receive a new name, Jews, derived from Judah, and there is never any doubt that God will provide a king from among Judah's descendants, a king who also descends from David. Following the destruction of the two kingdoms and their miraculous return to their homeland, the rivalry between the brothers has completely disappeared.

We don't often think about this big picture when we read the story of Joseph. Truly, Joseph is the hero of the story as God uses him to provide temporary reprieve for his people so they don't die from starvation. But it becomes clear that God does not provide salvation through a line of heroes but, rather, through a line of sinners. It would not be the way we do things. We are taught that the only way to survive is to elicit the help of someone powerful, someone who can make a difference, someone who is a lot like a superhero. The salvation that a superhero provides might look real, but that salvation, usually won by the destruction of others, often creates an environment of oppression and subjugation. God's salvation does not come through expected means, but, rather through the least expected, but it is a salvation that is real, and it is permanent. Jesus did not come from a line of heroes; he came from a line of sinners. And he did not come to dominate others, but, rather, to give his life for them. It was in his humiliation that he was victorious.

The story of Joseph and Judah foreshadows this perfectly. Jacob had his ideas of who should be the heir of God's promises, and he tried to manipulate history to make things work his way, but God had other ideas. It was through Judah the sinner and not Joseph the hero that salvation comes. And for that we can be thankful.

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