

Series: BETWEEN THE TREES - April 25, 2010

**HOW DID I GET HERE...FROM THERE?
Genesis 37-50**

1. Does anyone here have a **dream**? Joseph, the person we're going to study today, is probably the one person in the Bible most associated with dreams. There have been **lots** of popular accounts of his life, like **Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat**. People say **lots** of stuff about dreams. What most of them never tell you is that there is often this space between dreams and reality that could be called, **How did I get here...from there?**

-For example, I had this sense at a very young age that God was asking me to do what I'm doing now. But the first time I was ever on a stage like this was **far** from glorious. I was about 10 years old—and right in the middle of this service at camp, I was shocked to see my counselor—who happened to be sitting up on the stage during the service motioning for me to come and sit up there with him! In front of **everyone**. He apparently thought I had been entertaining my friends by pretending to pull stuff out of my nose. **Me? Goofing off? Moi?** I'm quite a serious guy! So I slinked, slunked...slunk up to the stage, sat there and hung my head. **How did I get here... from there?**

-I've had that feeling a number of times in life. I will never forget the numbness and pain I felt as I was raking leaves in front of the church I served—having just read a 9 page letter from the Senior Pastor telling me that, after one year, he didn't think I had gifts for ministry and ought to just do something else—maybe music. **How did I get here... from there?**

- a. Any ever had a dream—and wound up in some dark, confusing, humiliating place? We **never** saw it coming—whatever **it** is—and ask, **How did I get here...from there?** And, by the way, **where's God?**
 - b. The story of God's mission—the Bible—has some **unbelievable** highs—where God seems active, engaged, huge—and you have hope that the mission will end well. But other places? Not so much!
2. Last week, we left off in the story of Jacob with this amazing moment of personal transformation—from a cheat—to this man forever touched by God. He's one of the few people in this world who goes back and personally makes things right with a brother he ripped off. And the last scene is this incredible high—where Jacob brings his family to this place of devotion to God; where **He—this Almighty God—**will be **their** God. And **then** we hit the story of Joseph and his brothers—the next generation. It's not a pretty sight.

-Reuben, the oldest, gets sexually involved with one of his Dad's wives.

-Jacob's daughter, Dinah, gets raped—and her two brothers, Levi and Simeon, go into revenge mode and slaughter a whole community.

-The next oldest, Judah, intermarries with the Canaanites—the very thing Abraham was so afraid of.

-And the only glimmer of hope is Joseph. He's 17, got the world by the tail—and seems obsessed with his own status and dreams as the favorite son; proven, of course, by the beautiful special coat his Dad, Jacob, had made for him. He's got it all; looks, leadership, talent—and power! But egotism is so blatant, his brothers can't **stand** him!

-Joseph is seemingly a little slow to pick up on how much they hate him. To the point where he brags about his dreams—“Hey, guys! I had this dream where my sheaf of grain stood up tall—and all of yours bowed down to mine! Isn't that so cool?”

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. (Genesis 37:8 TNIV)

You want to say, “Joseph, if you have any social intelligence at all—**don't do that again!**” But, unfortunately, he does.

- a. At this juncture, Jacob makes a move that proves how clueless he is as to what's going on. He sends Joseph out to check on his brothers who are caring for sheep out in the middle of nowhere.

-Well, **this** was their moment! They grab him, stuff him in an empty cistern, and sit on top of it eating supper. “Hmmm. **How** do we kill him? Cut his throat—or leave him in this hole to die of thirst? As the reader, you're thinking, “And **these** are the people who are going to carry the torch? **Bless the nations!** Like, God has bet the whole enchilada on **them** in his mission to fix the mess in the world?” As a band of Ishmaelite traders—distant relatives--come jangling through, Judah, the leading brother, suggests they make some money from the deal—and sell him as a slave! So they rip off his special coat, sell him—and then dip the coat in blood and take it to their Dad.

-How many of you would like to claim **these** guys as your spiritual ancestors—perfect candidates for God's mission to bless the nations? God has his work cut out for him!

- b. Overnight, Joseph has lost **everything**. His status, his home, his financial security, his parents, his family, his friends, his entire future—**everything**. He gets auctioned off like a steer at the fair—to a guy named Potiphar. And I'll bet he asked the question, in some form, How **did I get here...from there?** There's one distinguishing characteristic in this:

The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. (Genesis 39:2 TNIV)

Potiphar **notices** that He's smart—capable—and works hard. He keeps promoting him until Joseph is the manager of his entire household.

-Unfortunately—Potiphar's **wife** notices him too—and puts the moves on him. Even though he could've just given in—seeing where he found himself—He didn't! And her advances eventually get more aggressive—to the point that when he runs, she grabs his coat and uses it as evidence of attempted rape. Those **darn coats** keep getting him in trouble!

-And Joseph, once again, loses everything—and gets demoted to prison—even though he's honored God. Well—you can't keep a good man down. The text puts it like this:

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warden. (Genesis 39:20b-21 TNIV)

- c. After a total of 11 years—as a slave, then a prisoner, it appears like Joseph might **finally** get a break. Two of Pharaoh's officials get put under Joseph's care. One night they both have dreams—and are **very** troubled by them.

When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. (Genesis 40:6 TNIV)

-Just a note here—when Joseph was 17 and on top of the world, his brothers were in anguish because of the favoritism his Dad showed—and he never noticed once! When you experience pain, it has a way of opening your eyes to the pain of others.

-Well, with God's help, Joseph tells the cupbearer and the baker exactly what's going to happen to them. The cupbearer will be restored—and the baker executed. And Jacob begs the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh. But he totally **forgets!** And Joseph stays there **two more years**.

- d. Then one night Pharaoh has two nasty dreams—and none of his usual magicians or advisers have a clue what they mean. **Then** the cup-bearer remembers Joseph. Joseph is cleaned up and ushered into Pharaoh's presence—and lets him know that **only God** can give the meaning to dreams. So, with God's help—Joseph tells Pharaoh what they mean; that there will be seven years of prosperity in Egypt—followed by seven years of famine. -But Joseph takes it a step further and lays out a brilliant plan for how to keep Egypt from being destroyed—and how to store and manage in the seven years of prosperity. Pharaoh has a brilliant idea.

The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you." (Genesis 37-40 TNIV)

-Anyone remember God's promise to Abraham—restated several different times?

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:2-3 TNIV)

-You see this blessing following Abraham and his descendents—including Joseph. And now for the first time we're seeing the glimmers of how God will bless the nations through them. And God's man for preserving Egypt is Joseph. And **other** nations affected by the famine start lining up for help, too. Joseph's story is this amazing rags to riches, misfortune to fortune story. Joseph marries the priest's daughter—and then they **all** live happily ever after!! Well, that's not **quite** how it ends.

3. It's interesting that even though Joseph has been thoroughly **Egyptized**—right down to marrying the Priest of On's daughter, he gives his sons Hebrew names.

Manasseh ... **God has caused me to forget all my troubles and everyone in my father's family**

Ephraim... **God has made me fruitful in this LAND OF MY GRIEF.**
(Genesis 41:51-52 NLT)

-As far as **he** was concerned, all the bridges to his past were gone. That is until one day 10 of his brothers showed up wanting to buy grain. Hmmm. What an **interesting** turn of events! And then Joseph remembered the two dreams he'd had—22 years before!

-What we find is that God's blessing—God's mission--goes **way, WAY** deeper—and is way more thorough--than we'd ever imagine.

- a. Can anyone remember what Joseph's last memory of his brother's faces was? They were filled with hatred and a kind of evil sense of delight in seeing him suffer. As he saw them, I'm sure the memories came back of him crying for mercy while they snickered. And **all** the memories since then—getting auctioned off; having to learn a new language; being **owned** by someone; and then years in prison. Twenty years of his life—**gone!**

-And the **question** is—what will Joseph do now that **he** has the upper hand? At first you think he's maybe just getting revenge:

Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected."
(Genesis 42:8-9 TNIV)

-Joseph sends them to prison for 3 days. Then he tells them that they can go back—but one brother has to stay in prison until they bring their younger brother, Benjamin, back. Listen to their conversation—not knowing that Joseph could understand them:

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 on us." (Genesis 42:21 TNIV)

-When Joseph heard this conversation he turned away—and began to weep. That's a good thing—because that simple fact says the Joseph still has a heart—and that he is moving toward the pain of forgiveness. But what **he** needs to do is find out if their hearts have been changed. Benjamin is probably the favorite now; do they hate him? And will his Dad set his favoritism aside for the sake of the family? **Do these people have consciences?** What happens next is a test to see if their hardened hearts have been changed; if they still, in fact, have consciences that are intact.

- b. Well, these guys go home, leaving Simeon in prison, and try to talk their Dad into sending Benjamin back with them—and it's no deal! But when they run out of grain and are facing starvation, Jacob is forced to make a decision. And this is where Judah, the brother who had come up with the scheme to sell Joseph, comes forward. Listen to what he says:

Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy along with me and we will go at once, so that we and you and our children may live and not die. I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life. (Genesis 43:8-9 TNIV)

-At this—Jacob relents—and sends Benjamin.

- c. Now, here's the question: Why this change in Judah? **He** was the one who suggested they sell Joseph into slavery—and now **this?** Funny you should ask. Genesis devotes a whole chapter to it.

-Up to this point, it seems that Judah has totally walked away from his heritage by marrying a Canaanite woman. We aren't given a lot of details, but the effect of his apostasy on his family is horrible—resulting in the death of his two oldest sons. Through a complicated set of circumstances Judah got his own daughter-in-law pregnant. He didn't realize he was the father until he demanded her execution—and she proved he had gotten her pregnant. Judah's words were, **She is more righteous than I.** He was publicly humiliated in front of the entire community.

-Does anyone have **any** idea why Judah's painful and humiliating story would be passed down orally all through the entire family? First, it shows how **close** Abraham's descendents came to getting sucked right into the surrounding

culture. But it **also** shows **why** Judah shows up a changed man after 22 years. Pain and humiliation is an **amazing** teacher!

- d. Well, the brothers finally get back to Egypt—this time with their brother, Benjamin. When Joseph sees Benjamin—more tears. He has to hurry from the room. Well, after he had mopped up they ate with Joseph. Another test. He seats them all in birth order—but gives Benjamin five times as much as the other brothers. Can anyone guess why? It's to see if their issues with jealousy and hatred still infect their hearts.

-And then there's one more test. When Joseph's brothers sacks are loaded with grain—not only is their money returned, his silver cup is put in the top of Benjamin's sack. Shortly after they leave, the palace manager is sent after them—looking for the cup. The brothers say,

“If you find his cup with any one of us, let that man die.” And the rest of us will be your slaves. “That’s fair,” the man replied, but only the one who stole my cup will be my slave. The rest of you may go free.”
(Genesis 44:9 NLT)

And, of course, he finds it in Benjamin's sack.

-Now, do you see what Joseph is doing? He's giving his brothers a **legitimate** reason to get rid of the son who is **now** their Dad's favorite. They could simply go back and say, “Dad, we tried—but Benjamin stole the dude's special cup! Sorry!”

- e. What happens next makes it very, **very** clear what God had been doing in the 22 years since Joseph had last seen these guys. Judah, especially, is a changed man. Listen to his words:

Your servant 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 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 on my father.' (Genesis 44:31-34 TNIV)

-For the very first time in the Bible there is this idea of someone giving his life on behalf of another. 1700 years later, one of Judah's descendents, Jesus—Messiah--would substitute His life that **all** nations on the earth would be blessed.

4. This story of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers is one of the most profound and moving moments in the Bible. I find tears in my eyes almost every time I read it—maybe because it's how we all want our stories of hurt and brokenness to end.

-At Judah's offer--**Let him go; I'll stay here as your slave**—it's like there's this dam in Joseph's heart that bursts:

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." 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. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. (Genesis 45:1-7 TNIV)

-This story has an amazing ending. Joseph sends his brothers back with wagons to move their families—and their Dad, Jacob, to the best land in Egypt. And there's this moment where, for the first time in 22 years, Jacob and Joseph embrace—and weep as all the sadness and pain drains from their lives. And the family is together once again.

-Jacob, before he dies, blesses each son—and gives an amazing prophecy over their future. Judah's, in particular, stands out:

The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations be his. (Genesis 49:10 TNIV)

-Can anyone just take a shot at **Who** this might be talking about?

-Jacob dies—in peace—in his son's arms. And when he does—they beg Joseph for forgiveness—afraid that maybe Joseph's kindness and grace has all been an act. Listen to how Joseph responds:

But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19-21 TNIV)

-Joseph's final act of faith in God's promise to create a people, give them a place and bless the nations through them is his request that they take his bones with them when God eventually releases them from Egypt.

5. This **amazing** story has God's fingerprints all over it, doesn't it? As far as God's mission is concerned—the beginning seems very dark. Joseph is bright, talented and good-looking—but stuck on himself. Judah is **far** from God and on the verge of

compromising everything by intermarrying with the Canaanites. But God **always, ALWAYS** has a plan—and works that plan in mysterious ways. To the point where two brothers are transformed, nations are saved, and the blessing of God for the future is laid out.

-Does anyone know what Judah and Joseph have in common? They are both purified through a combination of suffering, humiliation, and **waiting**. Neither one would've **ever** signed up for that—and neither one would **ever** trade the experience—because of what it did in them. There's nothing particularly spiritual about suffering—but God can use it...and does.

-I want you to imagine something. Put yourself in Jacob's shoes—and imagine that you were handed the script from Joseph's life. And you were given five minutes to erase anything you wanted from the list of things he went through—what would you take out?

*He'll lose his Mom when he's in his early teens

*Because he is the favorite, 10 of his brothers will hate him

*He will be kidnapped by his brothers and sold into slavery

*Just when it seems like he's rising above his circumstances, he will be falsely charged with attempted rape and end up in prison.

*Someone he's helped—who could help him—will totally forget him—and he'll spend 2 more years in prison.

-What do you think Jacob, the ultimate in doting fathers would've erased from that list? **All of it!** And in doing so, Joseph would've **never** become the person he became—and been in the position where he could save nations—and save his entire family. God didn't put the hatred in his brother's hearts—or the lust in Potiphar's wife's heart—but He worked despite it all.

a. Even the **timing** of what happens in this story is flawless. Joseph had to get to Egypt and know the customs there—slavery was the tool. He had to be in prison to meet the cupbearer and baker. What if the cupbearer **had** remembered him to Pharaoh? If he'd been released, he would've been **long** gone by the time Pharaoh had his dream. And the broken relationship with his brothers would've continued. And entire nations would've been destroyed. -Like us, sometimes, Joseph through his dreams were **all about Him**. And he had to go through a refining process where he realized that they were much, **much** bigger than him!

-Did Joseph suffer in the middle of it all? Yep! Horribly. Unfairly. But Joseph had the amazing insight to say, "You meant it for evil; God meant it for **good**." b. I'm part of a generation of parents who are called **helicopter parents**—because we hover over our kids and swoop into their lives to prevent them from ever being mistreated or disappointed. If we parents had our way, our children's lives would be one unobstructed victory lap after another.

-In fact, if we had a choice our **own** lives would be like that, wouldn't they? We'd **all** like to sign up for Joseph's dream—immense authority, the chance to

be a hero and save nations—make a difference. How many of you would like that? How many of you would like the **path** that Joseph took; Hauled off to a foreign land and auctioned off, make the best of it—and then end up in a filthy, stinking prison for 10 years-- **10 years**—and have some of the best years of your life just disappear?

-**No one** wants suffering—yet listen to what the Bible says about it:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4 TNIV)

- c. There's one more piece I need to mention. Notice that the **majority** of this story is about reconciliation. Right in the middle of his dream coming true—Joseph has to face the single most painful part of his life. His relationship with his brothers—and what they had done to him. And he has the courage to face that head on.

-But we don't always have the courage to do that, do we? We get sideways with people, and both our pride—and the bumpy chicken skin on the outside of our hearts keeps us from ever facing it. We will hold stuff against people for **years**—and we don't even know if we've got the story straight about what happened.

-And I'm telling you—one of the major keys to God's blessing—is, wherever possible, **cleaning this stuff up, facing it, dealing with it and resolving it**. It's what we **least want to do**—and yet what we **most need to do!** God is a **reconciling God** who humbled himself to make it possible. And we will have to humble ourselves to make it possible, too. .

6. Joseph, at 17, thought his dreams would just come true because, well—because he was **Joseph!** Number one son of the number one wife—handsome, well-built, smart—administratively brilliant! He had the **right stuff!** He had the gifts—the DNA—no doubt about it!

-But what he didn't have was the maturity and completeness—that **only** comes through tough times. To put it bluntly, **suffering**. Please don't get me wrong—suffering in and of itself is not part of God's original plan—but God **does in fact** use it to **accomplish** his original plan to create magnificent people, make all things right, and bless the nations.

-The real question—is what **we** will do with suffering. See, our culture sets us up for instant gratification. **Wait for a dream? Make it through lost, frustration, disappointment and personal hurt?** We can't even stand to wait for the microwave! Like Joseph, we have a dream—and we see ourselves as the star; that it's because of our gifts and foresight and talent—we should have it **now**—if not sooner! And yet, what God does **rarely** happens on our timetable. Add a little suffering to the mix, and

our pride kicks in, “I’m not gonna settle for this! My time is too important! I’m **outta** here!”

-Or. Sometimes suffering makes us resentful and bitter—because it feels **so** unfair. We ask, **Why ME, God?** Of course, He could ask us, “Why **not** you?”—but that never occurs to us. If you look at the stats, you find out that suffering and unfairness sometimes creates atheists—or people who, for all practical purposes **live** as atheists—drowning in their own disappointment.

-God’s call on us is to be smaller than we think we are. God’s call is to **hope** in the middle of suffering. Through the gift of suffering, I believe God says, “If you will persevere—if you will let me do the dream in **my** timing—**my** way—I have a much **bigger** plan, see, and it involves the **bringing shalom, healing, completeness, life—to the cosmos!** It’s not **about** you—but I can use you—if you’ll hold on to me. If you’ll believe that I’m with you—and can use you right in the place where you don’t **want** to be—right in the prison where you feel forgotten.”

-And that’s the question, isn’t it. Will we let God do things **His** way, in **His** time? Because, see, saving everything is **His** idea. And He works **through** our suffering.

Q&A

The most magnificent example of how God works through suffering—is how God used the unjust, unfair humiliation and suffering of his Son, Jesus, to make **all** things right. Will you **trust** Him? As you take the symbols today of Jesus suffering—symbols of His broken body and shed blood—will you place all your impatience, all your suffering in **His** hands and simply say, “I’m yours! Stay with me!”