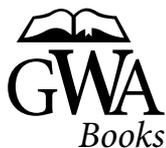


MY LIFE *for the*
Kingdom
The Story of Joseph

Robert J. Koester



MY LIFE FOR THE KINGDOM

THE STORY OF JOSEPH

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Introduction

God rules the world. He rules over you and me. In a perfect world, that would be a source of joy. But in a world corrupted by sin, it becomes a source of terror.

But that's not what God intended. He created people to experience the joy of his love. He created a perfect world. He made creatures in his own image and likeness to work alongside him in ruling over his perfect world.

But that was ruined when Adam and Eve gave in to Satan's temptation. The floodgates of evil opened. Sin entered the world. On account of sin's guilt, mankind no longer lived at peace with God.

But God, ever wanting to share his love with the people he created to be like him, promised to reestablish his relationship with mankind. His rule over all things no longer needed to be a source of fear. Mankind could once again live in peace under God's rule and be part of his kingdom.

How did God reestablish peace between himself and the world? By forgiving sin. That is how we most often define the Gospel—in terms of God's gracious forgiveness. But Scripture also defines the Gospel in another way. Because God forgave our sins, he can once again rule over people with love. Here's how the apostle Paul put it: "The Father rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of

sins” (Colossians 1:13,14).

God has established a new kingdom in which forgiveness is the order of the day, in which guilt is gone, and where there is peace between God and mankind. It is also a kingdom in which God rules over everything that happens in the world so that his people are found and led safely on their journey to a new heaven and earth.

That was John the Baptist’s message: “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” (Matthew 3:2). It was the good news Jesus preached. He began on the same note as John: “From that time, Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near’” (Matthew 4:17). The word “near” can also be translated “at hand.” Both John and Jesus were saying that God’s promise of grace and forgiveness was about to be accomplished through the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

Of course, God could have sent the Savior immediately after sin entered the world. But for his own reasons, he chose not to do that. He chose to send the Savior several thousand years after sin entered the world. That didn’t mean God was not ruling over all things before the Savior arrived. Based on the promise God gave Adam and Eve, God’s kingdom was in full operation throughout those many years.

The foundation for God’s kingdom of love was laid when God sent his Son to pay for the guilt of the world’s sin. The benefit of Jesus’ work reached back to Adam and Eve. From the day he first promised a Savior, God shaped every detail of world history so that his elect were called to faith and his promise was fulfilled.

King David, who lived in the years between the promise and its fulfillment, understood that well: “Your kingdom is a kingdom for all ages, and your dominion endures through all generations. The Lord is faithful to all his words and merciful toward all he has made” (Psalm 145:13). Every believer between Adam and Jesus made the same confession of faith. That included the early descendants of Abraham, one of whom was Joseph, the subject of this book.

That’s the context in which we will study the life of Joseph. Joseph believed God’s promise to Adam and Eve. He knew he was at peace with God. He also knew that he, like King David, was living in the years between the promise and its fulfillment. Joseph knew he had a major role to play in God’s kingdom work—in those in-between years before Christ was born. As we will soon see, Joseph was born at a major point in the history of God’s people; the work God gave Joseph was crucial for the success of his plan of salvation. In this book we will watch Joseph devote his entire life to service in God’s kingdom.

Promises Accepted and Rejected

Genesis 12:1-4; 15:1-21; 37:1,2

The children of Jacob and the kingdom of God

In reading the story of Joseph, one cannot escape the challenge of trying to determine the reasons and motives behind certain things done by Joseph, his brothers, or their father. Whenever I offer a reason or motive, I'll include clues from the text itself. Most important, everything Joseph did will be interpreted in the context we have outlined so far. Joseph loved God's promises and was willing to give his life for the sake of furthering God's rule of grace.

This book is not a novel inspired by Moses' account of Joseph. Nor will it embellish on that account. Our goal is to read Moses' account carefully and reflect on the words of Scripture.

However, to begin with, I will make an exception. I'll offer a little story that sets the stage for Joseph's life, which starts in Genesis 37. The story is not found in Scripture, but it will help us understand the faith of Joseph's father, the patriarch Jacob. Jacob knew the

promises God had given to his grandfather Abraham, and he treasured those promises. In this story we are assuming—and this is a very safe assumption—that Jacob worked to share God’s promises with his children.

Jacob’s family devotion: God’s promise to the world

Jacob and his family were still living in Haran, north of the Promised Land of Canaan. Jacob’s father, Isaac, had sent Jacob away from his home in the Promised Land to find a wife among Abraham’s relatives, who were still living there.

Jacob had stayed in Haran for some 20 years, much longer than he expected. Most of Jacob’s children were born in Haran. Jacob’s last son, Benjamin, was born after Jacob and his family returned to the Promised Land. At this point Jacob’s children were still young. In our story Jacob is preparing his children for their future in Canaan and the role God had given them as children of Abraham.

The table has been cleared. Jacob begins to question his children about the basics of their faith.

Jacob: “Reuben, this world is filled with idolatry and sin. How did that happen?”

Reuben: “God created the world very good, but Adam and Eve sinned. The world was filled with the bad things we see around us.”

Jacob: “Simeon, after sin and evil entered the world, what did God do for Adam and Eve and for us?”

Simeon: “God promised to send a Savior, who would crush Satan and make it so God could forgive us.”

Jacob: “That’s right, Simeon. Levi, did everyone

believe in God's promise and serve him?"

Levi: "No. Almost everybody became very wicked."

Jacob: "Judah, what did God do to the world? Think carefully. Tell us something bad he did to the world and something good he did for the world."

Judah: "The bad thing he did was to destroy the world with a flood. The good thing? Let me think. Oh yes, he kept his promise of a Savior alive by keeping Noah and his family alive in a boat that floated above the water."

Jacob: "Good. So, Dan, did the people learn their lesson and serve God?"

Dan: "No, Father. They built a big tower."

Jacob: "Naphtali, can you remember why they built the tower?"

Naphtali: "That's a hard one. Let me think. Oh, I remember. God told them to fill the earth with people, but they didn't want to do that. So they made a tower and a city where they could live together."

Jacob: "Excellent. Gad, the Lord wanted people to fill the world. How did he get them to do that? Think of the word babel."

Gad: "He made it so they couldn't understand each other. It seemed like they were all babbling."

Jacob: "So, Asher, the people finally learned not to sin against God. Is that right?"

Asher: "No Father. They became wicked and made more idols."

Jacob: "That brings the story down to us. I'm going to ask you, Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah—you three put your heads together and tell me how God started to

use our family in his plan to save the world. You know the story. You don't have to say a lot. Just say what you know."

Issachar: "God called Great-Grandfather Abraham to leave the town he grew up in. Was that Ur?"

Jacob: "Yes, that's right. Zebulun, what can you tell us about Abraham?"

Zebulun: "Abraham's family left Ur and started a town. I can't remember the name."

Dinah: "It's where we live, silly. It's Haran, named after Great-Grandfather's brother, Haran, who died."

Jacob: "You have a good memory for a little girl, Dinah! One last question for you, Joseph. God told Great-Grandfather Abraham to leave Haran and come here. Can you tell me—one word is enough—what God gave to Abraham to make him brave enough to leave his family and Haran and come here?"

Joseph: "Hmm . . . Blessings?"

Jacob: "Yes, Joseph. God wants our family to play an important role in his plan to save all people. God gave your Great-Grandfather wonderful blessings so he could do the work God wanted him to do. Tomorrow I'll talk to you about those blessings."

Jacob's family devotion: God's promise to Abraham

The next evening, dinner was over and a servant cleared the table. The family was waiting for the devotion to start. They sensed this would be a special one.

Jacob began: "Abraham and his family were living right here in Haran, where we are living now. Leah and Rachel and their servants, Bilhah and Zilpah—your

mothers, Gad and Dan and Asher and Naphali—descended from people in Abraham’s household. Abraham was quite happy here. But one day God appeared to him and told him to leave Haran and go to a foreign country. That’s where I was born.

“Abraham wrote down what God said to him. Let me read it to you:

Get out of your country and away from your relatives and from your father’s house and go to the land that I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

“That’s quite a command! *Get out* of the place you know so well. *Get away* from the people you love. *Go* to another country.

“Abraham had to leave everything he knew. But God did not send him away empty-handed. He gave him great blessings. Let me read them:

I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse anyone who dishonors you. All of the families of the earth will be blessed in you. (Genesis 12:2,3)

“Listen carefully, my children. And you, servants, this is for you too.

“Someday we will go back to my homeland. God promised. There will only be a few of us, and we will live alongside much larger nations. But we will become a nation much larger and far greater than those nations. I don’t know how God will do that. But God will bless us, and he will make us famous throughout the world.

“My children, never become proud. God is not doing this for our sake only but for the sake of peo-

Timeline of Joseph's Life

Genesis gives us enough information to build a basic timeline of Joseph's life. Joseph was 17 years old when we meet him in Genesis 37 (verse 2). He became ruler over Egypt when he was 30 (Genesis 41:46). If we assume that he was sold into slavery not long after the story begins (when he is 17 or 18), he spent 12 or 13 years as a slave. We know it was two years between the time he interpreted the official's dream in prison and when he becomes ruler. We have to guess how long Joseph was in prison before that. A year or two at the most seems likely, but we cannot be sure. So Joseph would have been in charge of Potiphar's household for around nine years and in prison for about four years. The years of plenty lasted for seven years. The brothers came to buy food in the second year of the famine (Genesis 45:11), so they would have lived in Canaan for 21 or 22 years between the time they sold Joseph into slavery and Joseph revealed to them that he was alive. Jacob lived in Egypt for 17 years (Genesis 47:28). Joseph died at 110 (Genesis 50:22).

Joseph's age at various times in his life:

We meet Joseph—17.

Joseph was sold to Potiphar—17 or 18.

Joseph was thrown into prison—26 or 27.

Joseph was elevated to ruler in Egypt—30.

Joseph's brothers came to buy food—37.

Joseph's brothers went to Egypt a second time to buy food, and Joseph was reunited with his father—39.

Joseph lived in Egypt for 17 years while his father was still alive.

Joseph lived with his family in Egypt for 54 years after his father died, for a total of 71 years.

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