

Women's Bible Study – Fall 2008

Overcoming: A Life Well Lived

The Life of Joseph from the book of Genesis

October 29, 2008

Overcoming the Temptation to Misuse Power

Genesis 41-43

Michelle Harris



I grew up in a teacher's home and settled on a career in education even before I had graduated from high school. As a student, I observed my teachers with a critical eye, vowing to be just like them – or to do things differently—once I was behind the lectern! I couldn't wait to be the one planning the lesson, the one writing the test, the one evaluating the research paper, the one with the power! I will never forget the first day of my first student teaching assignment. I was barely older than my students. To top it off, my little brother was in my class! The bell rang. The room grew quiet. My heart was pounding, and my hands were sweaty and shaking. I had to literally force myself to get up from the desk and begin. If I had had any subconscious ideas that the fun part about teaching would be the chance to have all the power in the classroom, those ideas were squashed quickly and completely by the huge sense of responsibility I felt at that moment. Through that student teaching assignment I think I learned that there *is* power in being a classroom teacher, but when you love your students and your subject, you won't want to misuse that power.

Today we continue our study of the life of Joseph by looking at his promotion to a position of great power and influence. And as the saying goes, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." History is replete with examples of people who abused power. Think of Napoleon, Nero, Hitler, both sides in the French Revolution, Saddam Hussein . . . the list could go on. But Joseph wasn't corrupted. He didn't abuse that power. Joseph proves that he was not power hungry. Until now we've seen Joseph's trials. We've seen his suffering, his unfair treatment and his abandonment. But when he's promoted, we see that he had not been salivating for the chance to get even. This would have been the perfect opportunity for Joseph to retaliate against everyone who had done him wrong—from his brothers to Potiphar, Potiphar's wife, the king's cupbearer . . . He had a lot of scores to settle. But he didn't do that. Instead of abusing his power, he used his rule for the good of others and the glory of God.

Let's begin reading in Genesis 41:41. I want to highlight several **characteristics of Joseph's rule**. The first is that it was **unexpected in both scope and place**. Genesis 41:41-44: "And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.' Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, 'Bow the knee!' Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.'

Only a chapter ago, Joseph was hoping just to get out of prison! He'd have been thrilled to simply not have a criminal record! I don't believe his sights were set on high public office! By "unexpected in both scope and place" I mean that Joseph had dreamed that his family would bow down to him. His Hebrew family. He never dreamed that Egyptians--citizen of the world's reigning superpower--would bow down to him. But Joseph was faithful in the years of suffering and obscurity; he was faithful in Potiphar's house and in prison, and so God gave him greater responsibility and greater influence—exponentially greater! Isn't this so typical of the way God works? Paul says he is "able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us (Eph. 3:20). God uses *his* power to work great things in us.

Recently God has illustrated this truth of how He can move in ways beyond our wildest dreams to me. Last time I taught I told you about a childhood friend whose husband abandoned the family. The very next day I heard that this husband has repented and been reconciled to God and is seeking reconciliation with his family. They have begun the long road of forgiveness and healing in their marriage. I am full of hope for my friend, because God has the power to do the unexpected. You never know what God is going to do in your life or where he will put you. Be faithful and obedient.

The next characteristic of Joseph's rule is that **while it had the trappings of the culture, it was not defined by culture.** Let's begin reading in verse 45: "And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt." Skip to verse 50: "Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. 'For,' he said, 'God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.' The name of the second he called Ephraim, 'For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.'"

We've already seen that when Joseph was promoted he got a new life—new clothes, Pharaoh's signet ring, a gold chain for his neck. He got new transportation in the second chariot—the company car, as it were. And now we see that he was given a new name, Zaphenath-paneah. The meaning of this name isn't completely clear, but it is an Egyptian name that might mean something like "the god speaks and lives." I can imagine that for Joseph to be taken seriously in his new position, he had to be viewed by the people as Egyptian, not Hebrew. And so a new appearance and a new name would be essential. Remember that Daniel, too, was given a Babylonian name, though he did not embrace the Babylonian religion.

Joseph is also given an Egyptian wife, the daughter of a pagan priest. We are not told if Asenath turns from the pagan faith she surely learned in her father's house to become a follower of the true God, but I think it is likely that she did. Joseph and Asenath enjoyed at least a modicum of harmony in their relationship. We have no record of Joseph ever taking another wife (unlike his own father!) They had two sons together, and I attach great significance to the names chosen for Joseph and Asenath's sons. It's as if Joseph said, "I'll take the Egyptian name you've given me, but when I'm the one doing the naming, I'm going to testify about the true God with those names. "Manasseh" sounds like the Hebrew word for "making to forget," and it carries with it the idea that God has taken the sting out of the Joseph's bitter memories of his suffering. "Ephraim" sounds like the Hebrew word for "making fruitful." Both names show that Joseph

knew that children are a blessing that come from the hand of God, that over time God can lessen the pain of our bad memories, and that even in hard circumstances, God causes growth and fruitfulness.

If you've never attended a baby dedication here at Autumn Ridge, then you've missed out on something wonderful. Pastor Steer does such a good job at these important occasions. And he always focuses on the meaning of the baby's name. And while it's not wrong to pick a baby name just because you like the sound of it, if you're in this stage of life, I urge you to consider choosing a child's name because of its meaning. I think this passage shows us that your children's names can be powerful teaching tools for them as well as witnesses to the world. . Proverbs says "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches" (Prov. 22:1). Ephraim and Manasseh had good names indeed.

We all live in the world. The culture presses in on us from every side. But Romans 12 urges us to not be "conformed to the world" (2). We mustn't lose our distinctiveness as Christians. Even though Joseph in Egypt took a new job and a new name, there was never any doubt that he was different—that the Spirit of God was in him.

The next characteristic to notice about Joseph's rule is that it was **competent, sensible, and reflected biblical values**. Let's read beginning in verse 46: "Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured." Skip to verse 53: "The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, 'Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do.' So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth."

As Jann mentioned last week, this passage seems to be especially appropriate for us in light of our nation's current economic woes. The Bible has a lot to say about how we handle the resources—economic and otherwise—that we've been given. Think about this list of economic principles we glean from this story.

1. The character of a nation's leader is key. Joseph and Pharaoh both knew that the administrator of this food distribution program had to be "discerning and wise" (41:33), one "in whom is the Spirit of God" (38). Joseph had almost absolute power over the food supply. Had his character not been godly, he could've been a tyrant. Where there is starvation in the world today, it is almost always because leaders are corrupt, not because there is a real shortage of food. This idea that we can separate personal integrity and morality from performance in high office is nonsense.

2. Extra food (or money) is given to us for purposes other than merely increasing our standard of living. Without Joseph's plan, the Egyptians would surely have wasted or grown fat on the excess during the good years. I'm thankful my parents taught me to live within my means, that waste is sinful and that it's not wise to spend everything you earn. The book of Proverbs is full of instruction about money, work, and saving. Prov. 6:6-8, Prov. 31, Prov. 20:4.

3. Most of us can live on far less than we think we can. Notice that during the years of plenty, only 20% of the total food was saved (41:34). In the years of famine, that 20% was enough to feed Egypt as well as other starving nations. This attests to two things—first, to the incredible abundance of the harvest during those years. But it also attests to the fact that they were all getting on much less than they had during the years of plenty. During tough economic times, we usually think we need more money. But we often just need to be more careful with the money we have and be content in our financial situation. I Tim. 6:6, 8, Phil. 4:11.

4. People are more careful with resources they have to pay for. This is human nature. And so Joseph's plan provided for the nations, but the food had to be purchased. This doesn't make the plan any less compassionate. Rather, it ensured that the food would last through the entire famine.

The last characteristic of Joseph's rule is the most important. It **pointed people to God**. The rest of today's narrative, chapters 42 and 43, describes Joseph's brothers' journey to Egypt to obtain food for their families. Jacob won't allow his youngest son Benjamin to go, for fear of losing him. Benjamin is Joseph's only full brother, and their mother, Jacob's most-loved wife Rachel, has already died. Jacob has obviously continued to play favorites. Let's start reading in verse 6 of chapter 42: "Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he said. They said, 'From the land of Canaan, to buy food.' And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them. And he said to them, 'You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land.' They said to him, 'No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies.'"

"He said to them, 'No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see.' And they said, 'We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan, and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is no more.' But Joseph said to them, 'It is as I said to you. You are spies. By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of you, and let him bring your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. Or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.' And he put them all together in custody for three days."

Here is the final fulfillment of Joseph's dream—his brothers bowing down to him. I used to read this section and think Joseph **was** abusing his power—that he was being cruel to his brothers.

But really, if he wanted to be cruel, wouldn't it make more sense for him to reveal himself right away and then deny them the food they wanted? Joseph could have locked them up and tortured them; he could've done many things that would have been truly cruel. But the elaborate masquerade he sets up is designed to bring his brothers to repentance and reunite the family. And I mean *true* repentance. We all know what it means to be sorry we got *caught*. We all know the emptiness of an apology that's made only to salve someone's conscience or fulfill an obligation. Joseph's systematic and prolonged actions often reflect the way God deals with us when we are far from him and need to be brought back. We have a forgiving God who actively seeks sinners. Some of us respond to him quickly; some of us respond only after a lengthy rebellion, during which our conscience is pricked repeatedly and we are at last brought to the end of ourselves, acknowledging our need to be saved. It is a blessing to be brought to repentance before the final Judgment Day.

First, for repentance to occur, the conscience must be awakened. Joseph had no way of knowing how his brothers felt about him or about their horrible sin. He had no way of knowing how they felt about Benjamin or if Benjamin and his father were even alive. These brothers had lived with the knowledge of what they had done to Joseph for 20 years. They had all become middle-aged men with children of their own. Most of them probably thought they had gotten away with their sin. So the first step was to remind them of it, which I think happens almost immediately. Joseph speaks to them roughly. I wonder if his spy accusation is similar to the language his brothers used on him back when he was a boy and had given a "bad report" of them to their father. Remember that way back in chapter 37? Maybe when Joseph came looking for them at Shechem they accused **him** of spying on **them**. Do you ever find that sometimes circumstances will cause an unconfessed sin to pop into your mind? I do. And I know that that is the Holy Spirit beginning the process of bringing me to repentance.

Joseph's brothers' three days in custody also pricks their consciences. Some time alone, contemplating an uncomfortable situation often yields much fruit. Parents know this—giving a child time alone to "stew in his juices" often works wonders in the attitude department. God, the perfect parent, works this way, too. Look at verse 21: "Then they said to one another, 'In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.' And Reuben answered them, 'Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.'" With nothing to do but contemplate their predicament during those days of solitude, the reminder of their sin grew into an exploration of its possible cause for their uncomfortable situation!

There are two times when we are likely to feel the sting of a guilty conscience. One is when we've received unfair treatment that reminds us of unfair treatment we've given to others. This is the case with the brothers in prison. They are now on the receiving end of the treatment they gave Joseph so many years ago. They have been falsely accused of espionage. They are innocent, yet helpless to free themselves. Of course this reminds them of their innocent brother Joseph who was also helpless in their hands. Gal. 6:7 reminds us of the painful truth: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."

The second time we're likely to feel the sting of a guilty conscience is the opposite—when we've been shown grace—when we've been treated better than we deserve. This is what happens to the brothers next. They leave Simeon as surety for the return of Benjamin, and on their way home, they discover that they still have the money they were supposed to use to pay for the grain. But instead of seeing this as a blessing, it increases their guilt. And what's more, it causes them to acknowledge that God is at work. Look at verse 28: "He said to his brothers, 'My money has been put back; here it is in the mouth of my sack!' At this their hearts failed them, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, 'What is this that God has done to us?'" When they arrive home, they tell their father what happened to them—minus a few details, like their 3 days in prison. Look at verse 35: "As they emptied their sacks, behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack. And when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were afraid." The brothers deserve prison or worse for what they did to Joseph. But instead they get all their money back. But their reaction proves that you can't fully enjoy the good things in life if you're plagued by guilt.

Jacob, of course, is broken hearted. He feels terribly sorry for himself, and he sees the worst in everything. He is full of blame and pessimism when he says, "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me" (36). Reuben says, "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him [Benjamin] back to you," though I'm not sure what possible comfort Jacob could take in killing two of his own grandsons, should Benjamin not survive! Jacob refuses, but ultimately he ends up doing what he vows he never will. His family is on the verge of starvation, and after Reuben's offer was rejected, another son, Judah, had to come forward. He says, "Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever." Reuben and Judah were both sons of Leah, and they were the ones who acted back in chapter 37. Now they are the ones who prove by their words and actions that the seeds of repentance are growing.

The brothers, including Benjamin this time, take along double the money and return to Egypt. But Joseph directs his steward to bring them to his home and prepare a feast for them. How do they react? Look at 43:17: "And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph's house, and they said, 'It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may assault us and fall upon us to make us servants and seize our donkeys.'" Really, what would the prime minister of Egypt want with their donkeys? This would be humorous if it weren't so pathetic. The brothers explain their predicament to Joseph's steward, painstakingly recounting why they still have the money they were supposed to have paid last time. I love the steward's answer. It shows that Joseph had evidently been using his power to point Egyptians to God, too, not just his own brothers. The steward says (v. 23), "'Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money.' Then he brought Simeon out to them."

Joseph doesn't want their money. He wants to see Benjamin, and he wants the family relationships to be restored. Likewise, God says, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Is. 55:1). "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will

not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).

The final scene in this chapter is of the banquet Joseph gives for his brothers. They are given water for drinking and for washing, and their animals are cared for. In short, they are shown great hospitality. They give gifts to Joseph and prostrate themselves once again before him. But when Joseph sees Benjamin, he can barely contain his emotion. Look at verse 29: “And he lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, and said, “Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!” Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep.” Joseph composes himself and returns, only to confirm in his brothers’ minds, that God is truly at work here because they find themselves seated in their birth order. Do you know that there are over 39 million ways to arrange 11 brothers? And then I think Joseph tests the ten older men by giving Benjamin five times as much as anyone else. But they pass, unbothered by the favor shown to Benjamin. When my children apologize for something, I remind them that the best way to show sorrow for sin is not to do it again. The brothers show that they have changed since their jealousy over Jacob’s favoritism of Joseph.

When we have unconfessed sin, we sometimes don’t understand what God wants from us. We think he’s “out to get us,” and we fearfully avoid his presence. Isaiah 30 begins with a rebuke for those who are rebellious in their hearts toward God. But verse 18 describes God’s treatment of the repentant: “The Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.” God doesn’t want our paltry sums of money; he doesn’t want our donkeys. He wants us to confess and forsake our sin. He wants our hearts. He wants true repentance and devotion to him. Only then can we enjoy the banquet that he has for us. My parents often quoted Prov. 28:13 to me during times of discipline when I was little: “He that covers his sins will not prosper, but whoso confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.”

In what areas do you have power? Think about your job, your service in the church, your family. Think about ways you are tempted to abuse power. Do you manipulate office politics to your advantage? Are you less than ethical in your financial dealings, but you have the power to cover it up? Do you dress provocatively, thereby abusing your power over men? Do you make unreasonable demands of others or put people on “guilt trips?” Are you harsh or capricious with your children? All of these are ways we can abuse power.

How can we cultivate a character that resists the temptation to misuse power? It seems that the root of this temptation is pride. Satan was the first to misuse power when he tried to usurp God’s place. Nebuchadnezzar fell, too, when he took credit for all that God had given him. And remember Athaliah, whom we studied last year about this time? She killed her grandsons to become queen of Judah, and then used her power to spread idol worship throughout the land.

So it seems that humility is at least one of the antidotes for the temptation to abuse power. Joseph had his years in prison to develop humility; Moses had his years in the wilderness. We learn humility through suffering. And Christ is our ultimate model of humility. Listen to Philippians 2: Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself

nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . “ Sounds a lot like Joseph, doesn't it?

Over the years, one of the books I have found most helpful has been Shepherding Your Child's Heart by Tedd Tripp. It deals with the way I use my power as a mother by reminding me that my most basic task in discipline is not to berate my children for wrongdoing, but to point them to the cross—to freely acknowledge that *all* of us sin, and to place before them the hope that clinging to the cross of Jesus gives us in the midst of our fallenness.

We all have power in one sphere or another. Joseph's power came to him dramatically and unexpectedly. He didn't let his power make him forget God. He used it competently, serving others, operating from biblical principles, and ultimately saving thousands of lives. But most of all, he used his power to point other people to God. The Old Testament is really the gospel veiled—it is the gospel in pictures and shadows. Joseph is one of these pictures. He is a picture, or type, of Christ. The Bible is not merely a collection of stories about God; rather it is a masterful, unified narrative whose climax is the redemption of our race in the person of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection.

**WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDY IS A MINISTRY OF:
AUTUMN RIDGE CHURCH - ROCHESTER MN
www.autumnridgechurch.org**

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR Overcoming the Temptation to Misuse Power

Study Questions

Read Genesis 41:41 – Genesis 43.

1. Describe the changes that occur in Joseph's life in Gen. 41:41-57.
2. How much time has passed since the beginning of our study in chapter 37? How do you know?
3. What is the significance of Joseph's sons' names? Did your parents attach significance to the meaning of your name? (If you have children, did you choose their names because of their meanings?)
4. Why is prosperity often as great a test from God as adversity? Use Scripture to back up your reasons. Give an example from your own life of times of testing—both from suffering and from prosperity.
5. Fill in the blanks: When Joseph's brothers first come to Egypt, he accuses them of being _____. He puts them in _____ for 3 days. Then he makes this demand on them _____.

Why do the brothers think this has happened to them? (42:21-22). Why do you think they come to this conclusion? What does the Bible say about conscience? Find at least 2 verses.

6. Beginning with the demands Joseph places on his brothers and ending with the feast at the end of chapter 43, consider why Joseph did what he did. Was this cruel treatment? Why or why not? What was the purpose of this elaborate ruse? If Joseph is a type of Christ, is there any way that his behavior here foreshadows Christ?

Discussion Questions

1. Joseph was purposeful about the meanings of his sons' names. Did your parents do this with your name? If you have children, have you done this with their names?
2. Why does power often corrupt?
3. Why is prosperity often as great a test from God as adversity? Give an example from your own life of times of testing—both from suffering and from prosperity.
4. How can you tell if someone is truly repentant?