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## Redeeming Love: Spiritual Disciplines Evident in the Narrative of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)

Week One: Joseph's Background & Family Dynamics

Scripture: Genesis 37:1-36; 39:1-4

Spiritual Discipline: Practicing Meditation, including Imagination

### A few notes for better understanding:

- This study revolves around the life of Joseph in Genesis 37 – 50, as well as the spiritual disciplines discussed in Jim Wilder's book *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard & the Church That Transforms* and Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Our goal is to witness how some of the spiritual disciplines referenced in each book play out in the life of Joseph, as well as how they can become part of our own lives. Foster explains, "God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us."<sup>1</sup> Both books are recommended for further study.
- Covering the life of Joseph requires reading significant portions of scripture. We will read some portions as we meet together, but we will be unable to cover it all. Even though these passages are generally summarized in each lesson, please take the time to read the full chapters; you will benefit from an awareness of the entire narrative and the nuances contained therein.
- All scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV); comparing various versions can be helpful in discerning the robust content of the scriptures.
- Follow the advice of Richard Foster as you work through this study:

Jesus Christ has promised to be our ever-present Teacher and Guide. His voice is not hard to hear. His direction is not hard to understand. If we are beginning to calcify what should always remain alive and growing, he will tell us. We can trust his teaching. If we are wandering off toward some wrong idea or unprofitable practice, he will guide us back. If we are willing to listen to the Heavenly Monitor, we will receive the instruction we need.<sup>2</sup>

Various spiritual disciplines addressed in *Celebration of Discipline* and *Renovated* (the items with asterisks are specifically addressed in this study):

Meditation (including Imagination)\*

Prayer

Fasting

Study

Simplicity

Solitude\*

Silence\*

Submission\*

Service\*

Confession

Worship

Guidance

Celebration

*Hesed* (and Attachment Love)\*

Mutual Mind with God\*

Spiritual Maturity (including Emotional Maturity)\*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (San Francisco, HarperOne, 2018) 7.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, *Celebration*, 10-11.

## **Week One: Joseph's Background & Family Dynamics**

### **Spiritual Discipline: Practicing Meditation, including Imagination**

**Read: Genesis 37:1-36; 39:1-4**

**Consider:** Joseph's background is critical to his entire narrative; we must take time to consider it. In doing so, we will practice the spiritual discipline of meditation, including imagination, as explained in *Celebration of Discipline*.<sup>3</sup>

In Genesis 37, we are introduced to seventeen-year-old Joseph, who could initially be characterized as tattling on his disobedient brothers (37:2). The entire family appears dysfunctional; we are told at the outset, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him" (37:3-4).

Joseph has two dreams, both of which he freely shares with his family. Both are interpreted by his father and brothers as Joseph elevating himself to a point that his entire family is subservient to him. For his brothers, the dreams are further evidence of his self-perceived superiority: "So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words" (37:8). His father speaks of the dreams with contempt (37:10), but the scripture also notes, "And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind" (37:11).

At the outset, Joseph appears naïve, honest to a fault, and oblivious to his preeminent status in the eyes of his father. Or perhaps he is simply confident in the abilities God has given him. We find later in Joseph's narrative that he is an excellent manager (look ahead to 39:4-6, 22-23; 41:39-44); perhaps his father entrusted him with the task of reporting on his brothers' activities because his managerial skills were already evident at an early age. There is nothing in the scripture to indicate that he is apologetic of his father's doting or understanding of his brothers' enmity.

When Joseph goes to check on his brothers, who are at Dothan tending to Jacob's herd, they plot to exact revenge. They plan to murder him, hide his body, and tell their father that a wild animal killed him (37:20). However, Reuben, the oldest brother, convinces them to simply throw him in a pit instead; Reuben plans to come back for him later and take him home (37:21-22). Apparently Reuben leaves at some point because the scripture indicates that the brothers are still considering killing Joseph: "Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.' And his brothers listened to him" (37:26-27). They follow through with Judah's suggestion, and Joseph finds himself a captive, on his way to Egypt (37:28).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Foster, *Celebration*, 15-32.

<sup>4</sup> The scripture refers to those who purchased Joseph as alternately Midianites and Ishmaelites (37:25, 27-28, 36; 39:1). These two terms are used to designate one group of people. Eric Lyons, "Ishmaelites or Midianites?" Apologetics Press, Inc., Accessed April 17, 2021, <https://apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=6&article=748>.

The brothers then put goat blood on Joseph's coat, bring it to their father, put him through the agony of confirming that the coat belongs to Joseph, and leave him to assume that his favorite son has been killed by an animal (37:31-33). Jacob spends a long time in mourning: "All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father wept for him" (37:35). The final verse of this chapter tells us that Joseph is now a slave to Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh, in Egypt.

Chapter 37 appears to be doom and gloom for Joseph. However, his amazing life story is just beginning. In the first few verses of chapter 39, we are given a glimpse of hope. The Bible assures us, "The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man...." (39:2). We'll study chapter 39 in depth in the next lesson. For now, let's reflect on today's reading.

**Meditation & Imagination:** While we are exploring Joseph's background and the events leading up to his amazing adventure, we are also going to take the opportunity to practice the spiritual discipline of meditation, using our imaginations.

Richard Foster explains meditation as follows: "...the meditation of Scripture centers on internalizing and personalizing the passage. The written Word becomes a living word addressed to you. This is not a time for technical studies, or analysis, or even the gathering of material to share with others."<sup>5</sup> He expounds, "Seek to live the experience. ... Smell the sea. Hear the lap of water along the shore. See the crowd. Feel the sun on your head and the hunger in your stomach. Taste the salt in the air. Touch the hem of his garment."<sup>6</sup>

In order to manage a look at Joseph's reality, we will need to use our imaginations. Foster recommends this approach, stating, "We can descend with the mind into the heart most easily through the imagination."<sup>7</sup> While acknowledging the pros and cons of imagination, Foster encourages us: "We must not despise this simpler, more humble route into God's presence. Jesus himself taught in this manner, making constant appeal to the imagination...."<sup>8</sup> Understanding that imagination can often steer us in the wrong direction, however, he counsels, "That is why it is so vitally important for us to be thrown in utter dependence upon God in these matters. We are seeking to think God's thoughts after him, to delight in his presence, to desire his truth and his way. And the more we live in this way, the more God utilizes our imagination for his good purposes."<sup>9</sup>

Remember, Joseph has been through a tremendous trauma. He has been double crossed by his brothers, torn from his beloved father, reduced to the status of a slave, and shipped off to a foreign country. Take a few moments and put yourself in his shoes. Pray that God will help you better understand his experiences.

**Application:** Pick a few of the following questions and discuss the answers with your group. Feel free to pose your own questions within your group.

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<sup>5</sup> Foster, *Celebration*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Foster, *Celebration*, 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> Foster, *Celebration*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, *Celebration*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Foster, *Celebration*, 26.

- Have you – or someone close to you – ever experienced any family drama similar to Joseph's? Would you be willing to share your experience?
- How do you think Joseph might have reacted to his brothers' and father's comments about his dreams?
- What kinds of things might Joseph's brothers have said to him?
- What might Joseph have said to his brothers? (See Genesis 42:21 for a hint.)
- What did it feel like to be thrown into that pit?
- Do you think that Joseph could hear his brothers arguing over what to do with him?
- Do you think Joseph was afraid of his brothers? Angry at them? Disgusted with them? Could he have felt sorry for them?
- How might Joseph have felt when money exchanged hands?
- Where do you see God in this narrative?

**Notes:**

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For all who are longing for a new start, allow me to provide you with a spiritual exercise . . . that can begin to free you from the crippling grip of multiple distractions. It comes in a little three-part rhythm:

**Day One:** For thirty minutes, turn off *all* technology . . . your smartphone does have an off button. Make a good strong cup of coffee or tea. Find a good place to sit. Begin by speaking aloud these words of the Psalmist: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (139:23-24). Then, be still. No writing. No talking. Nothing. The objective here is to clear away all "creaturely activity," to use a phrase from the old writers.

**Day Two:** Again, for thirty minutes, become free of *all* technology. Today, take a walk, allowing your footsteps to fall into the rhythm of your whispering of the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

**Day Three:** Again, *all* technology is off for thirty minutes. A good cup of coffee or tea and a comfortable chair are in order. Begin with the simple prayer I composed for coffee time: "O Spirit of God, blow across my little life and let me drink in your great Life. Amen." Next, ever so slowly, pray the words of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). With each phrase of the prayer add your own thoughts or concerns a little like you are decorating a Christmas tree with your own ornaments. See if your extended prayerful meditation will bring you to the end of the Lord's Prayer at about the thirty-minute mark.

**Days Four, Five, and Six:** Repeat the same rhythm of days one, two, and three.

**Day Seven:** Use your technology to your heart's content.

Follow this three-part rhythm for several months, maybe a year. After some practice, you may want to extend your time to one hour rather than thirty minutes. Then, when you feel you are ready, you can take the next step: a twenty-four-hour retreat with no technology whatever. No radio. No smartphone. No laptop. No iPad. No MP3 player. Take a print Bible for reading and a pen and pad for writing – no more than that. See what happens. Who knows, you just may be enabled to "listen to God's speech in his wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all-embracing silence," to use the moving words of Catherine de Hueck Doherty. I recommend that you consider using this twenty-four-hour retreat pattern four times a year: winter, spring, summer, and fall.

Reprinted from the "Preface to the Special Anniversary Edition" of *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard J. Foster, xi-xii.