

# **GENESIS**

## **A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

***THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB***

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## THE CHARACTER OF THE HEIR (*GENESIS 39*)

Joseph was now in Egypt, far from his family, with no hope (humanly speaking) of ever enjoying the life that he was entitled to as Jacob's son. For most of us, that would be pretty much the end of the story. We would give up in despair, fit in with the corrupt culture that surrounds us, throw off our family training and create a new life made out of the world we are forced to live in.

But God had chosen the right man for the job. Joseph stayed on focus because of two things: *first*, he understood the precious nature of the Covenant and the importance of developing and pursuing that Mission in Abraham's family. *Second*, God remained with Joseph – God's presence was what Joseph really needed and treasured. None of what happened in Joseph's life would have turned out for the better without resources from a faithful God in Heaven; the circumstances were too impossible to allow for any success short of this divine aid.

By staying on focus, Joseph put his feet on the Rock, never swerving from his ultimate goal, always finding what he needed in the midst of severely changing circumstances. At the end of this chapter, instead of finding a despairing soul as most of us would have expected, we find instead God's servant still on task. His character had been tested severely and he passed the test; he was ready to take the biggest step in his life.

**Joseph in Egypt** – Notice that the LORD is moving Joseph closer to the target area – he was bought as a slave by Potiphar, “an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.” He was soon going to be in the perfect position to step into power and do what God wanted done in Egypt. God has an amazing way of moving his people into critical areas in ways that man couldn't have done on his own (as we've seen already with Sarah in Pharaoh's household – Genesis 12). Joseph's being a slave was never an obstacle for God; he is a God of reversals, and in an instant can change a slave into a ruler. See Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2. All that God needs is a person who trusts him and follows him wherever he leads.

**Joseph and Potiphar** – Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, but he quickly

impressed his new master and was delegated as head of the household.

Every employer knows that there are two kinds of employees: the first type (by far the most numerous) are on the job only for their paychecks, they have little interest in the master's business, and they exert the minimum effort necessary to get by.

The second type is a stellar performer – and thus a rare find. This employee throws himself into his employer's business; he wants to learn everything about it, and master as much as possible. He is determined to make his master look good and prosper (which is the secret to a happy boss!). His master's interests become his own: when dealing with this servant, one feels that he is dealing with the master himself. When an employer finds a person like this, he naturally puts him in a critical

position in the business and he trusts this person to act as he himself would act – in the boss’s interests.

Believe it or not, these same two kinds of “employees” are in God’s church. The modern church is filled with “minimalist” employees, who are there for the paycheck (eternal life, sins forgiven, etc.) and have little interest in God’s Kingdom and its needs. They aren’t there to learn, or become skilled at anything; they are there for their own pleasure and purposes. It’s in times of trouble when you can tell where their hearts really are: they have great difficulty focusing on the primary issues, especially during hard times.

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:31-33)

Jesus showed his disdain for professing Christians who are immersed in self-interest instead of with the master’s business.

You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. (Matthew 25:26-27)

These passages from Jesus’ teaching show us the point of view of the Designated Heir. He is passionate about

God’s Kingdom; he doesn’t connect with people who aren’t. He feels just as strongly about furthering his Father’s Kingdom as Joseph did about his responsibilities toward his master Potiphar. Under him the whole household learned what it meant to become disciplined, profitable and pleasing to the Master. Joseph may have had to drag the other servants into conformity, but he intended to deliver a good report to Potiphar at the end of the day about the state of his household.

Again, we see something critical shaping up here. When God had a bigger task to perform – the rescuing of Abraham’s family and caring for them at this pivotal time of changing from Family to Nation. He didn’t need a half-hearted attempt, nor did he need someone seeking their own glory with their own ideas. He needed an Heir who had God’s agenda on his heart, who worked for God’s glory, who did things God’s way – and who would deliver a good report at the end of the day that it was all done exactly the way God would have it. In other words, Joseph was a “man after God’s own heart,” a true Son who was passionate about his Father’s will. This critical characteristic shows up again and again in the Designated Heirs of the history of Israel.

**Blessing the Egyptian** – As much as we’d like to give Joseph the credit for his success, the story makes it plain to us who deserves the credit. What Joseph did right was to put himself at the feet of God, the only source of good. “The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man.” “His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands.” “The LORD blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he

had, in house and field.” “And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed.” There is no mistaking these clear statements.

This again is a rare characteristic in a man or woman: we like to do our own thing, take all the credit, blame others for failures, depend on our own strength and wisdom, and generally leave God out of the picture. Not only is this a recipe for disaster in our relationship with God, it would be a catastrophe for the Executor of Abraham’s Estate to deal with the Covenant people in this way. The *only* source of their treasure is their God; the Heir has to understand that, and put himself at God’s feet to transfer that treasure – intact – to God’s people.

Joseph was a master at this skill. From the prosaic, seemingly trivial situations overseeing his brothers, through the humiliating circumstances of slavery and even prison, to the glorious and heady years of international power at Pharaoh’s right hand, Joseph quickly and naturally went to the Source and fixed his feet solidly *there*. From there he reached up to receive from God the blessings which the Creator had for all peoples, and what Israel’s God had for his Covenant Family. Everyone could depend on this man to provide not from his own strength and wisdom and resources, but from God’s – which, in all of these situations, was what was really needed.

There were spiritual issues in this great work. So much of what would happen in the future – the life of Israel before God, the Temple, the Kingdom, the coming of the Messiah and the creation of the Church – would depend on getting in touch with the resources of Heaven and laying down that spiritual foundation at the beginning. It may look

as if this is a purely physical work in the context of a physical world, but the Designated Heir knows how important that connection to the spiritual God is for the people of God. This is God’s work, not man’s.

**Fully in charge** – The story stresses the point that Potiphar “put him in charge of all that he had;” “he left all that he had in Joseph’s charge.”

There’s an important principle that the military community understands: *only one person in charge*. If you have several people in charge of a project, that project will probably fail – or at least you will not achieve what you were hoping from it. Everyone has his/her own point of view, and their own judgment, their own skills, and their own understanding, and their own desires. This leads to inevitable conflict when decisions have to be made, and appropriate action taken. Napoleon once said that he would rather fight two good generals than one bad general; as good as they may be, having two good generals in charge of the same army are going to lead to confusion and a battle of wills.

Potiphar, being Pharaoh’s captain of the guard, understood this principle. He evidently had a rather large household of servants besides his own family. So it was to his great benefit that he found such a capable person as Joseph who seemingly had every skill necessary, and the heart for the job, to satisfy Potiphar’s requirements. So all others were put under Joseph’s authority.

It’s the combination of the right person, and putting all under his authority, that sets the stage for the much more important work of protecting Egypt’s well-being and bringing Jacob’s family under Joseph’s care. It’s not

often when these two aspects align so perfectly and successfully in one person. It is, in fact, a sign of the Designated Heir, the one person whom God has prepared and selected for a critical task in his work of the Kingdom. We have to appreciate the uniqueness of Joseph in this role – seen here on a lower level in Potiphar’s house but so clearly seen in later events.

At the beginning, Joseph’s family was in no mood to humor his dreams and “exalted” idea of himself. But as time showed, he really was the right man for the job, and the only sensible thing they could do – what they were forced to admit that they must do for their own survival – was to trust in him as *the only right man for the job*, sent by God at the right time. There was to be no sharing of responsibilities; he will bear the entire load.

**The wife’s temptation** – One obvious direction to take this story is a moralistic sermon about adultery. Sexual sin is always near the top of the list as far as reprehensible crimes in God’s eyes. What makes it so fatal is that our need for sex is a fundamental craving, like food and air, and in our struggle to “play by the rules” we come up with all sorts of excuses for giving in to our desires and forgetting the rules.

But we only see what’s on one side of that door. Open the door, and there are all sorts of demons – ruined marriages, broken families, parentless children, abortions, diseases, unfaithfulness, grief, jealousy, poverty, isolation (just to name a few of the attendant evils that spring from the breakup of the family) – probably no other crime has done so much ruin to the human race as sexual sins. It only proves the point we learned in Genesis 3

– it is *not* true that we can commit this sin, in any of its forms, and “get away with it.” Sexual immorality has ruined many a man and woman in the Church. Such a sin would have eliminated Joseph as a candidate for the job before him (as did his brother Reuben).

**Joseph’s rebuke** – Now we have a chance to look into Joseph’s mind and heart. We discover that God prepared his servant well: here is a sterling character, the kind of person who can be entrusted with the holy things of God for the sake of his Covenant people.

*First*, he considered his master’s charge as a sacred trust. He understood the value of authority, of service and faithfulness, of responsibility and loyalty – the things that make up the very fabric of a workable society. Throw these away for any reason, for any excuse that idolizes one’s personal ambitions and lusts, and peace and happiness and success are impossible for society. He has a larger view of things than his own personal desires.

*Second*, Joseph’s attitude about sin was not the laid-back, low-key attitude that so many people have of it. This is not a game: committing sin is a breach of trust with God himself, nothing less. Sin is destructive; sin is traitorous toward the King. Adultery, in Joseph’s eyes, was “great wickedness and sin against God.”

That insight which sees that all sin, ultimately, is against God, shows profound wisdom concerning our calling in this world, what we were made to do in all of our actions and even our thoughts. We were made to serve the King, to glorify him, to follow his commands, and to be passionate about it. When we do anything at all to threaten the peace and prosperity (physical as

well as spiritual) of God's world, we are attacking God himself, and he will take it very personally.

Since sin is *the* basic problem of the human race, it's nice to see someone paint it in its true colors. No excuses, no lies, no watering down its real nature – just a horror at the very thought of it. The issues of right and wrong are clear-cut, easy to see and understand – this is not an intellectual issue but a moral one. It's not that people can't understand the problem, it's that they *don't want* to.

Joseph again showed his character when he took evasive measures. *First*, he didn't trust himself around this woman. Turning one's back on a temptation may make us look foolish and weak, but it's the safest way, and it shows our simple, child-like faith in God's commands. It's not our own glory that we're after here, but God's glory. We think we can "handle it" when we play with fire, it makes us look stronger when we play with it in a casual way, but we little know what that fire will surely do to us when it gets too close. Joseph knew. In actuality, when we play with fire, we are showing that we are secretly entertaining the thought. Joseph didn't want to go there either.

*Second*, there was certainly no way he could clear his reputation later if he had not taken drastic measures to get clear of this woman. Actions speak louder than words. We have no doubts about Joseph's spiritual state in light of the details of this story. I wonder if the same thing could be said of our actions ...

So Joseph is the kind of man that God can use to build *his* Kingdom, to whom he can entrust his Treasures. He proved his worth in lesser things, so now he's ready to move on to the greater

treasures of God's Kingdom. He's not going to endanger God's Kingdom with his personal lusts. And the rest of us also know now what to expect from his rule over us – the same high standards of holiness and righteousness. Here is a true Son of God.

**The master's wife** – In a master/servant relationship, there are two things that the second-in-command must not do – and the first one is in this story: you do not mess with a man's wife. The master put all other things in Joseph's hands to manage, but his wife is his own.

Not only does the Bible make a case for the sanctity of marriage, but even the world knows that. There is a lot of adultery going on at all times; but when it happens to you, you have no problem understanding the pain and shame and jealousy that comes over a rejected husband.

For jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge. He will accept no compensation; he will refuse though you multiply gifts. (Proverbs 6:34-35)

This is why a wise man never puts himself between a husband and his wife. The wife is her husband's responsibility; and even if the husband sends someone as a messenger to his wife, the messenger knows his limits of responsibility – he delivers the message and then backs away out of the picture. He has no authority to do what only the husband has the right to do.

The Designated Heir, then, knows his limits. He is not called to assume the rights and position of his master over his master's wife, though he may have been given everything else in the master's house. We will see this respect for the

master's sole possession in other Designated Heirs: Moses spoke the Word of the LORD to the Israelites and then backed away as God alone dealt with their unfaithfulness to him; David brought Israel back to her God, not to himself; Jesus brings the children back to his Father, not to himself; the Apostles bring the Church as a Bride to her Husband, not to themselves. The Designated Heir has been given the power to care for the husband's wife, but he knows who the wife really belongs to, and he respects that relationship. It would be a good thing for church leaders to remember that.

**The crisis** – Remember that in the lives of God's people, everything happens for a reason. We particularly have to keep this in mind when we go through crises, because otherwise we may blame God for a situation gone out of control that is threatening to hurt or destroy us. Where is our God in such moments?

For a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

Abraham had gone through his tests, Isaac his, Jacob his tests – and now it was Joseph's turn. Each man was tested in the area in which he was called to exemplify the Covenant's principles: Abraham for his faith, his insights into the essence of the Covenant Promises; Isaac as the spiritual Heir of the Covenant; Jacob for his desire for the Firstborn's inheritance rights. Now Joseph is tested as the manager of the

estate, taking care of his master's property according to his master's will.

And in the moment of crisis, Joseph passes his test.

**Revenge** – The wicked only have one thing in view: satisfying their own desires and lusts. If they can, they're happy; if they can't, then they are miserable and they plot and plan on how to get what they want.

The one time they will get furious, however, is when they are confronted by the people of God about their sin. Until they confront God and his Word, sinners explain away their actions with excuses, changing definitions of right and wrong, justifying their actions – anything to soften the edges of morality and ethics to favor their own desires. But when God confronts them with his definitions, and strips away their pretense and shows their souls for the ugly and useless mess they really are – sinners will react in retaliation at whoever they can reach, which is usually the messenger. Their guilty conscience is throbbing and someone is going to pay. We saw this already in the story of Cain and Abel. It only proves that we are all creatures of God, made in his image, responsible to serve him alone, and therefore are truly guilty of treachery against our God. It's so easy to prick the sinner's conscience with the truth.

Joseph certainly didn't leave her any leeway to reinterpret the situation. He identified what she wanted as "great wickedness," and "sin against God." He shamed her by having more interest in Potiphar's welfare than she, his own wife, was showing. He was doing exactly what people hate to see in God's people: being better persons than they are, the good among the wicked. His

holiness was putting her in shadow, as a moral cesspool compared to his purity.

So she retaliated, as did his brothers when faced with their sin. She invented a story accusing *him* of attempted adultery and convinced her husband of the lie. In the battle between good and evil, God will often let the evil have the first victory. The greatest example of this “way” of the LORD is in the crucifixion of Christ – seemingly the ultimate defeat, but it proved to be the very thing that would bring down the enemy’s spiritual strongholds. God knows what he’s doing.

But we mustn’t miss the bigger event going on here, recurring over and over in the story: Joseph’s second major defeat (it *is* a bit inexplicable that Potiphar would so quickly believe his wife’s accusation and turn against Joseph in light of the deep trust he once had in his servant!) once again severed the ties to resources, privileges and position to move him on to a higher ground, different resources, different privileges. Joseph is learning not to put his feet on what he has here in this world, good though it might be, but rather on the LORD himself. Even if things change completely, the Rock never changes. The Designated Heir will need this skill to 1) live in a foreign land without being polluted, 2) draw from spiritual Treasures alone for God’s Covenant people, and 3) provide the necessary foundation for the growth of God’s Nation which will one day leave Egypt prepared for the Promised Land. His experience in Egypt, in other words, didn’t *depend* on Egypt but rather *used* Egypt for God’s purposes.

**Punishment** – Joseph is getting closer to his goal. Potiphar, being the Pharaoh’s captain of the guard, “put him into the

prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined, and he was *there* in prison” (as if to emphasize the strategic placement). God is showing his strategy of putting his servants exactly where he wants them for the next step, though it looks (on the surface) like the worst place.

**Joseph in prison** – It turned out that Joseph’s “punishment” was another “rose in the desert” experience: he thrived there too.

Once again we see everything taken away from Joseph, and even that he is cast down lower at every step – and yet he finds a new source of strength and resources to proceed with. He lost every privilege and resource he had with his father Jacob when he was sold by his brothers into slavery; yet he ends up on top again as Potiphar’s special attendant. Then he loses all of those privileges and he’s thrown into prison; yet here, again, he becomes the jailor’s right-hand-man and is given the run of the prison, and all the resources he needs to do his job. At every stage, he taps back into the real source of his strength – God himself – and so proves that there is no destroying this man, that God prospers everything he does without any need for going back to the position or privileges he once had. This is so unlike the normal life that we all know – to experience complete loss and failure over and over, and end up on one’s feet once again with new resources even greater than before. Joseph obviously had his feet on another Rock, his mind and heart in another world, where the Treasures are not only never-ending, they are not affected in the least by this world’s treasures or lack thereof; the affairs of this world can’t touch him.

I know how to be brought low,  
and I know how to abound. In any

and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:12-13)

The people of God need this kind of leader who can provide for their needs out of a higher treasury than the things of this world – because this world's treasures are often going to fail them, usually right in the middle of a crisis.

**The Point** – Joseph's story covers 13 chapters in the book of Genesis, so we can surmise that his role was extremely critical for the creation and survival of the Covenant. As we've seen, his actions provided the pivoting point in the history of Abraham's Family where they turned from a wandering tribe in the desert into a growing Nation, which will eventually come out of Egypt and take possession of the Promised Land.

Joseph's character and skills are both revealed and developed in this chapter. He receives valuable training that he will later use when managing Pharaoh's realm. But he also shows a love for God, a purity of heart according to the Law of God, wisdom that grasps the importance of justice and loyalty and responsibility. He is exactly the kind of person that we all want to see as the Executor of the Estate. Even modern students, who have had such heartburn over the behavior of other characters in the Genesis account, should be thoroughly comfortable with Joseph since he clearly exemplifies a New Testament ethic and spirituality – or, should we say, a Christ-like character.

An obvious lesson in this story is the focus on sin versus righteousness. Here is a clear statement about the critical nature of a holy character in God's Son.

*Sin is not acceptable to God.* The work required of the Son of God depends first and foremost on his purity in heart and mind.<sup>1</sup> We are so used to living in our sins that we think almost nothing of it; God, however, thinks of almost nothing else. So God makes it very clear to us that the Man he has chosen to save the rest of us is “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) That's primarily why God passes over us and chooses his Son to do the work for us.

But this unique character of Joseph illustrates the whole idea of the Designated Heir. Moses was holy, turned away from idols, and pressed upon the Israelites the importance of the Law, leading them into righteousness and holiness. David was a “man after God's heart” who was wholly devoted to God's Kingdom and capable of bringing it about according to God's Plan. Daniel purified himself in the midst of Israel's exile in pagan Babylon and so received God's strategy for the next phase of Israel's life with her God. These and many other examples show the need for a skilled person, a person passionate about God's Kingdom and glory, a person set apart from others not only by his/her abilities but also by what their mind and heart were focused on. And each of them were cut off, in some way, from the world that the rest of us depend on, and found a Rock under their feet where they could draw their spiritual sustenance even in the midst of crises. It was because of their unique position, and because of their special character guaranteeing their altruism for everyone's well-being and God's honor,

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<sup>1</sup> Which is why Genesis never showed us the Patriarchs as sinners *per se*, but as receivers of God's grace and mercy. Holiness was reserved for the story of Joseph.

that we can trust them for giving us our share of the Covenant inheritance.

In the end, however, this isn't about us – it's about the Heir who is designated to care of us. It's easy to turn the story of Joseph into moralisms and teach that we all must act as Joseph did in similar life circumstances. But that misses the point. We are seeing the holiness and righteousness of the Designated Heir; his brothers weren't like him. *He* must be this way, so that he can save the rest of his Family. The Designated Heir is unique among his brethren.

And in the next chapter, we are going to see another critical aspect of the Designated Heir that will round out his character and prove his ability for the job before him.

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