

Dreaming Big

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Joseph Receives His Coat of Many Colors" by Shoshannah Brombacher, 2008

Prayer of Illumination

Eternal God, your Spirit inspired those who wrote the Bible
and enlightens us to hear your Word fresh each day.
Help us to rely always on your promises in Scripture.
In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

Introduction

In C.S. Lewis' book "*The Horse and His Boy*" from the "*Chronicles of Narnia*," The young Shasta, an escaped slave, was on the run—famished, limbs shaking, side cramped, and sweat stinging his eyes.

Shasta was nearing Narnia, but was not there yet. He found himself separated from his group and surrounded by enemies. Just he and his horse. There was no shelter in sight along his long and lonely road.

"I do think I must be the most unfortunate boy that ever lived in the whole world," said Shasta. "Everything goes right for everyone except me. Everyone made it safe to Narnia, except for me: I alone was left behind and left out."

He felt very sorry for himself. Tears ran down his cheek.

Suddenly he had a very frightful feeling that someone was walking next to him. It was pitch black, so he couldn't see anything, but he felt a presence and heard the breathing of this Thing or Person, this invisible companion. He hoped it was his imagination getting the better of him. But the feeling stayed with him.

Finally he whispered, "Who *are* you?"

"One who has waited long for you to speak," said the Voice that wasn't loud, but was thick and deep.

"Please go away. I can't see you at all. I've done nothing to you and I'm the unluckiest person in the world."

The boy felt the warm breath of the Thing on his hand and face.

"There," it said, "This isn't the breath of a ghost. Tell me your sorrows."

The boy shared his family problems. His escape from captivity, and his many misfortunes and dangers on his journey. His group was hounded by wild beasts all along the way. And he was so very hungry.

"I do not call you unfortunate," said the Large Voice.

"Don't you think it was unfortunate I met so many wild lions?"

"There was only one lion...I was the lion."

"How do you know?"

The Voice continued: I was the lion that forced you to join with your new companion. I was the cat that comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion that protected you from the howling jackals while you slept. I was the lion that chased your tired horses so they could

find the strength to reach the king in time. I was the lion you do not remember that pushed your boat as a child near death to the fisherman who adopted you.

"Who *are* you?" whispered Shasta.

"Myself," said the Voice deep and low that shook the trees.

"Myself," this time clear and joyful.

"Myself," a third time the Voice whispered, as the leaves rattled.

A peace came over Shasta.

No words were spoken or needed to be spoken.

And then suddenly the fiery brightness of the Lion disappeared.

It was Aslan.



In the Joseph stories of Genesis, God's activity is much like Aslan, the Great Lion of Narnia, working behind the scenes.

As we will see, Joseph's young life had so many setbacks. But the unseen God was working all the time, even in and through the hard times, watching over Joseph, his brothers, and his father Jacob.

Joseph's improbable journey to leadership in Egypt was a long and winding road, but God's dream for Joseph and his people came true, thanks to the unseen hand of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob guiding them every step of the way—even when they didn't see it at the time.

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him," says the Apostle Paul, "who are called according to his purpose."

Let's hear now how it all started.

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Scripture: Genesis 37:1-11 (NRSVue)

¹ Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.

² These are the descendants of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.

³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age, and he made him an ornamented robe. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him. ⁵ Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.

⁶ He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. ⁷ There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf."

⁸ His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

⁹ He had another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰ But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" ¹¹ So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

SERMON SERIES – "Joseph: When Dreams Come True"

SERMON – "Dreaming Big"

Most of the characters in Genesis begin with glaring flaws, yet God still works through them.

I love how Chief Rabbi J.H. Hertz put it nearly a century ago:

The uniqueness of these stories consists in the fact that there is in them a sense of overruling Divine Providence realizing its purpose through the complex interaction of human motives...Not by means of abstract formulae does it bring God and duty to the soul of man, but by the lives of human beings who feel and fail, who stumble and sin as we do; yet who, in their darkest groping remain conscious of the one true way—and rise again.

And the young teenager Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel, is no exception. This isn't a flattering first image we have of the future hero.

Nobody likes a tattle tale. One commentator calls him a "tittle tattle." I'm choosing to not take that personally. 😊

Joseph is the youngest of Jacob's working sons, just an apprentice to the four sons of Jacob's maidservants, and he's developed a bad habit of giving bad reports about the shepherding skills of his older brothers. If you remember, his dad had a habit of critiquing shepherds as well when he was young. It doesn't end there. Joseph loved to show off his technicolor toga his father gave him. These ornamental robes were signs of status and royalty, and definitely not meant to work in—yet here Joseph was showing it off in the fields and rubbing it in his brother's faces. What do you think of my outfit that dad gave me? It doesn't make me look fat, *does it?*

We can't help but understand the brothers' annoyance.



Dad is not helping either. He was his mother Rebekah's favorite child. Now *he's* playing favorites with the son of his old age, from his favorite wife Rachel.

We struggle with this today. It's natural to have people or family members that are easier for us to understand and get along with. But playing favorites always sows seeds of hostility, jealousy, and dysfunction.

James warns us in his letter: *"My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."* (James 2:9)

The hard feelings in the family continue to mount:

"When Joseph's brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him."

On top of that, Joseph throws gas on the fire with his naïveté and braggadocio.

Joseph isn't alone here; we too can fall into oversharing or humble bragging on social media or in our interactions with loved ones...and it doesn't bring health or goodwill.

Joseph hasn't yet learned the wisdom of discretion—the art of knowing when to be silent and when and how to speak. But the good news is he'll eventually learn—and one day become one of the great models of wise and godly leadership in the Bible.

We too are on this learning and curving journey of spiritual and relational maturity. God isn't finished with us yet.

"He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion."

James steers us in the right direction:

"Think of a ship: big as it is and driven by such strong winds, it can be steered by a small rudder, and it goes wherever the pilot wants it to go. So it is with the tongue: small as it is, it can boast about great things."

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Well, Joseph still hasn't learned this self-mastery and shares his grandiose dreams, first with his brothers.

"There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf."

These dreams need no interpretation.

"So you think you're going to rule over us, little brother?"

Contempt for Joseph builds—for his dreams and his words. But the dreamer Joseph is on a roll—he can't be stopped.

He "replies all" with *another* dream, this time with his brothers AND his father Jacob:



"Look, it's incredible! I had ANOTHER dream.

Get this: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

"Me! Isn't that something? I wonder what it all means?"

It's interesting that there's no mention of God in them.

Dad is none too pleased and he chews out his son, *"so even I and your mother and your eleven brothers are going to bow down to you? Joseph this is getting out of hand."*

We *know* something bad is going to happen to Joseph. We're all watching the train wreck in slow motion. *Why is Joseph having these dreams? Will they be fulfilled?*

A dream about wheat on the land. Stars in the sky. Family bowing to Joseph. We can't help but wonder, is *God* playing favorites here? Does God favor Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and now Joseph over others?

But here's the thing: there's a difference between favoritism and chosenness. When we carefully study Genesis, we see that God's chosen people *don't* get preferential treatment.

If anything, being chosen means that you suffer more. You're given a task that's often crushing. God doesn't give his chosen ones technicolor robes. Rather, they're given famine, conflict, barrenness, and profound struggles.

And yes, the chosen *are* blessed...to be a blessing. They're chosen for charity. Selected for service. If you want to become the greatest...be a slave of all, Jesus says.

As God's chosen people, we too have this great responsibility. God equips us, not to showboat or lord it over others, but to carry out his purposes. That's the difference between favoritism and being chosen. We must not abuse this high calling. It's not about us. We're *God's* instruments, or as Mother Theresa put it, *"I'm a little pencil in the hand of God."*

God involves us, but our hands are not the only hands at work. The hand of God is at work, too.

We find out something very interesting in the last verse (37:11): Jacob keeps Joseph's dream in mind. He didn't dismiss the dream or his young son. Ever the planner, Jacob chews on what all this might mean—keeps an open mind.

For he too was a dreamer.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Joseph Receives his Coat of Many Colors*," by Shoshannah Brombacher, 2008,
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/798329/jewish/Joseph-A-Pictorial.htm

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