

Joseph (Part 3)

In our series of lessons about people in the Bible who also appear in the Qur'an, we take a last look at the very interesting story of Joseph, or Yusuf, the favorite son of the patriarch Jacob. The ten older brothers of Joseph, jealous of the fact that he was so obviously more loved by their father, sold him as a slave to merchants in a caravan headed for Egypt. The merchants, in turn, sold him to the captain of Pharaoh's guard, a man named Potiphar.

Things went well for the young man until Potiphar's wife began to lust for him. When he refused to sleep with her, she accused him of trying to rape her. and her husband threw Joseph in prison. But God never abandoned his servant and not only got him out of prison but lifted him up to a position of authority over all the country of Egypt. In fact, only Pharaoh himself was more powerful than Joseph.

Joseph first administered a levy on the crops all over the country during seven years of abundance and then supervised the distribution of the reserves during the following seven years of famine. As the famine extended well beyond the borders of Egypt, Joseph's family still in Canaan were also affected by it and his father sent the oldest ten sons to Egypt to buy food.

JOSEPH TESTS HIS BROTHERS

When his brothers come to buy grain, Joseph is present and recognizes them. But his brothers never suspect that their little brother is before them. When they come to bow before him, their faces to the ground, Joseph remembers the dreams he had about them; but he does not make himself known to them.

He speaks harshly to his brothers and accuses them of being foreign spies. They protest in vain that they are simply brothers, sons of the same father, come to buy food. They tell him that they were twelve brothers but the youngest has stayed with their father and another is no more. Joseph acts as though he doesn't believe them. He puts them all in prison for three days, after which he proposes that one of them remain in prison while the others take the grain to their families. Then they would have to return with the youngest brother as proof that they were telling the truth. The brothers accept the proposition but with very heavy hearts. Among themselves, they say, "Obviously, we are being punished for what we did to our brother. We saw his deep distress when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this trouble has come to us" (Genesis 42:21).

Joseph had Simeon chained before their eyes and sent them off with their bags of grain. But without the brothers' knowledge, Joseph had each one's money put in his bag. When they got back to their father Jacob, the nine brothers explained everything to him, including the condition that the "governor of the country" had set: "Bring back your youngest brother to me, and I will know that you are not spies but honest men. I will then give your brother back to you, and you can trade in the country" (Genesis 42:34).

When Jacob heard this statement, he categorically refused. He had already lost Joseph, the first son of Rachel, his favorite wife. Now he had lost Simeon, and they were talking to him about taking Benjamin, Rachel's other son, to this unpredictable Egyptian. He said, "My son will not go down with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left. If anything happens to him on your journey, you will bring my gray hairs down to Sheol in sorrow" (Genesis 42:38).

But the famine continued to weigh on the country of Canaan, and Jacob was forced to change his mind. He sent Benjamin to Egypt with the other brothers and asked God to have pity on them. To their great surprise, Joseph received them very well and prepared a good meal for them.

With a great deal of effort, he hid the emotion he felt in seeing his little brother. This was necessary to complete his plan to test his brothers and learn if they had really changed. He wanted to know if they would try to save their little brother and spare their father an unbearable grief, or if they would act in regard to Benjamin, Jacob's new favorite, as they had treated Joseph himself twenty years earlier. So after the meal, he gave this order to his steward: "Fill the men's bags with as much food as they can carry, and put each one's money at the top of his bag. Put my cup, the silver one, at the top of the youngest one's bag, along with his grain money" (Genesis 44:1,2).

"At morning light, the men were sent off with their donkeys. They had not gone very far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, 'Get up. Pursue the men, and when you overtake them, say to them, "Why have you repaid evil for good? Isn't this the cup that my master drinks from and uses for divination?"'..."

When he overtook them, he said these words to them. They said to him, 'Why does my lord say

these things? Your servants could not possibly do such a thing. We even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the money we found at the top of our bags. How could we steal gold and silver from your master's house? If any of us is found to have it, he must die, and we also will become my lord's slaves.' The steward replied, 'What you have said is right, but only the one who is found to have it will be my slave, and the rest of you will be blameless.' So each one quickly lowered his sack to the ground and opened it. The steward searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest, and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. Then they tore their clothes, and each one loaded his donkey and returned to the city.

When Judah and his brothers reached Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell to the ground before him. 'What is this you have done?' Joseph said to them. 'Didn't you know that a man like me could uncover the truth by divination?' 'What can we say to my lord?' Judah replied. 'How can we plead? How can we justify ourselves? God has exposed your servants' iniquity. We are now my lord's slaves—both we and the one in whose possession the cup was found.' Then Joseph said, 'I swear that I will not do this. The man in whose possession the cup was found will be my slave. The rest of you can go in peace to your father.'" (Genesis 44:3-17)

JUDAH AND HIS BROTHERS PASS THE TEST

But Judah approached Joseph and spoke to him of the love their father had for his youngest son, the one who was born in his old age. Judah told him:

"If I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us—his life is wrapped up with the boy's life—when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die. Then your servants will have brought the gray hairs of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow. Your servant became accountable to my father for the boy, saying, 'If I do not return him to you, I will always bear the guilt for sinning against you, my father.' Now please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave, in place of the boy. Let him go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father without the boy? I could not bear to see the grief that would overwhelm my father." (Genesis 44:30-34)

So we see that Judah, the brother who had suggested they sell Joseph to the merchants, had

totally changed (and the other brothers had probably changed as much). Before, Judah had been without pity for his young brother or for his father. Now he shows a real concern for his father. He accepts simply and without any sign of jealousy the fact that his father loves Benjamin more deeply than the others, and he shows great courage and love in proposing that he become a slave in order to save his father and his brother. He cannot bear the idea of seeing the pain his father would experience if he lost Benjamin.

JOSEPH IS RECOGNIZED

The narrative continues:

"Joseph could no longer keep his composure in front of all his attendants, so he called out, 'Send everyone away from me!' No one was with him when he revealed his identity to his brothers... Joseph said to his brothers, 'Please, come near me,' and they came near. 'I am Joseph, your brother,' he said, 'the one you sold into Egypt. And now don't be worried or angry with yourselves for selling me here, because God sent me ahead of you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there will be five more years without plowing or harvesting. God sent me ahead of you to establish you as a remnant within the land and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.'" (Genesis 45:1-7)

He tells them to go get Jacob and all the family and come settle in Egypt. He will supply all their needs. When Pharaoh learned that Joseph's parents were there, he too insisted they settle in his country. So after a separation of more than twenty years, Joseph saw his father again, and Jacob's descendants ended up in Egypt, enjoying the security, abundance and favor of the Egyptian king and people.

CONCLUSION

The story of this great man of God teaches us several important lessons. Joseph was the victim of great injustice in his life but he never showed bitterness, neither against God nor others. Despite the great evil that his brothers inflicted on him, it is clear that he forgave them. Many of us have been subjected to insignificant wrongs in comparison to what Joseph experienced, which we have trouble forgiving. This man gives us an example, not only of justice, but also of kindness and forgiveness.

We also see that the purity and integrity of Joseph did not allow him to avoid suffering. Just people should not expect to immediately receive the reward

of their righteousness. It is necessary to be patient and remain faithful until the moment fixed by God. Not only that, but the suffering of the righteous is sometimes part of God's plan to save a multitude of people, some of whom are less deserving than the one who suffers. This was the case with Joseph. It was the case in a much deeper sense for Jesus. As 1 Peter 3:18 says, "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

Finally, we see clearly in the life of Joseph the providence of God. The Lord had been at work in all the trials of Joseph to save his family. Joseph told his brothers in Genesis 50:20, "You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people." We must understand that God is able to do similar things in our lives. We must not be discouraged when we encounter difficulties, obstacles and suffering. The Christian has this formal promise in the Bible in Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose."