

Joseph (Part 1)

The twelfth Surah, which bears the name of Yusuf (referred to as Joseph in English Bibles), is one of the longest in the Qur'an. He is considered the most noble of men, and his story one of the most beautiful. The student of the Bible might say the same thing about him. Our last study dealt with the story of Jacob, and we emphasized that the Bible, not showing favoritism, revealed more than one fault committed by Jacob, even though he was a worshiper of the one true God. The account of his son Joseph presents a man who, from his youth up, acted with integrity.

HIS FATHER'S FAVORITE

Jacob had two wives who were sisters, Leah and Rachel, plus two concubines, Zilpah and Bilhah, his wives' servants. As we have seen, Jacob loved Rachel and had proposed to her father Laban that he would work for him for seven years to have Rachel's hand in marriage. Laban accepted the proposition, but at the last minute he tricked Jacob and gave him Rachel's older sister. Subsequently, Jacob was made to serve his father-in-law an additional seven years to have the one that he desired.

So Leah was not loved but she gave six sons and a daughter to Jacob. Since Rachel was barren, she gave her servant Bilhah to Jacob to have children for him in her place. (This was the same custom that Sarah followed when she proposed to her husband Abraham that he have a child with her servant Hagar.) Bilhah had two sons with Jacob. Then Leah gave him her servant, who also gave him two more sons.

Finally God had pity on Rachel and allowed her to become pregnant by Jacob. The child who was born, for whom the favorite wife had waited so long, was named Joseph. Among the twelve children, he was the most loved by his father, who did not hide his favoritism. Some years later, Rachel had another son, Benjamin, but she died while giving birth. The story of Joseph begins in Genesis 37 when he was 17 years old:

“Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children... He made him a tunic 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 peaceably to him.

Now Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him even more. He said

to them, ‘Please hear this dream which I have dreamed: There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Then behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf.’ And his brothers said to him, ‘Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?’ So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Then he dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, ‘Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me.’ So he told it to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, ‘What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?’ And his brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter in mind.”
(Genesis 37:3-11)

JOSEPH SOLD BY HIS BROTHERS

The story continues like this:

“Then his brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, ‘Are not your brothers feeding the flock in Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.’ So he said to him, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said to him, ‘Please go and see if it is well with your brothers and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me.’ ... So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan.

Now when they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him. Then they said to one another, ‘Look, this dreamer is coming! Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, “Some wild beast has devoured him.” We shall see what will become of his dreams!’ ...

So it came to pass, when Joseph had come to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the tunic of many colors that was on him. Then they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat a meal. Then they lifted their eyes and looked, and there was a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead with their camels, bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, on their

way to carry them down to Egypt. So Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother and our flesh.' And his brothers listened. ... So the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt...

So they took Joseph's tunic, killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the tunic in the blood. Then they sent the tunic of many colors, and they brought it to their father and said, 'We have found this. Do you know whether it is your son's tunic or not?' And he recognized it and said, 'It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces.' Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, 'For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning.' Thus his father wept for him." (Genesis 37:12-35)

JOSEPH IN POTIPHAR'S HOUSE

We find Joseph again in Genesis 39, where we read:

"Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. So it was, from the time that he had made him overseer of his house and all that he had, that the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had in the house and in the field. Thus he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he did not concern himself with anything but the food which he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, 'Lie with me.' But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Look, my master does not

concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?'

As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her. But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house was inside, that she caught him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me.' But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. And so it was, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and fled outside, that she called to the men of her house and spoke to them, saying, 'See, he has brought in to us a Hebrew to mock us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And it happened, when he heard that I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me, and fled and went outside.'

So she kept his garment with her until his master came home. Then she spoke to him with words like these, saying, 'The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came in to me to mock me; so it happened, as I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me and fled outside.' So it was, when his master heard the words which his wife spoke to him, saying, 'Your servant did to me after this manner,' that his anger was aroused. Then Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were confined." (Genesis 39:1-20)

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

We have much more to see in the life of Joseph. For the moment, we see him as the victim of great injustices. But God will turn all the evil to good to bless not only Joseph, but all his family. The rest of this story will give us the background for some of the most important events in the history of the Jewish people. But first let's pause to draw some spiritual lessons from what we've just seen.

Joseph's brothers didn't exactly tell their father, Jacob, that Joseph was dead. The only direct lie that they told was to say that they had "found" Joseph's coat. Then they said: "Do you know whether it is your son's tunic or not?" Jacob recognized it and cried: "It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces." Jacob's sons

were definitely guilty. Leviticus 19:11 says, "You must not steal. You must not act deceptively or lie to one another." They didn't use lies but they certainly used deception with their father.

Even religious people too often justify themselves when they decide to lie, and even more so when it comes to persuading someone to believe something that is false without speaking an actual lie. Let's be painfully honest with ourselves. The Bible says that it is impossible for God to lie, and He doesn't want his servants to lie either.

Let us bring out the fact that Joseph had not died, but the feelings of sadness in Jacob's heart were as intense as they would have been if his son had really been torn by wild animals. A lie which someone believes is able to produce emotions that are just as strong as those that would have been produced by truth. Some people tell themselves that they are saved, that they have God's favor or that their religion is good because of the way they feel in their heart. A woman once said, "I would not trade the feeling I have in my heart for a stack of Bibles as tall as I am." She meant that even if the Bible taught that she had not followed God's will for salvation, she would still be convinced of her salvation because of her feelings about it. It is a dangerous error to reason this way. The example of Jacob, who believed a lie, shows this clearly. It is not our emotional reaction to a message—whether it is a reaction of joy or sadness or anger—that determines if the message is true or not.

Let's add some remarks concerning the integrity of Joseph when his master's wife wanted to have sexual relations with him. Joseph did not want in any way to betray the confidence Potiphar had placed in him. This is an attitude that everyone should imitate, and not only in matters of sexual purity. Whether we are employees, government workers, authorities elected by the people or even people to whom the church has entrusted responsibilities, we must always strive to deserve the trust others place in us.

Joseph recognized that adultery was a sin against his master, but above all he saw that it was a sin against God. He said to the woman, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Actually, all sin is a rebellion against **His** law, a lack of gratitude toward **Him**, negligence in regard to a duty ordained by **Him**. As King David said to God, after committing adultery with Bathsheba, "Against You—**You alone**—I have sinned and done this evil **in Your sight**" (Psalm 51:4). Let's not take lightly the idea of

sin, especially our own sins, which sometimes seem—to us at least—to be less serious than the sins of others. To sin against your fellow man is also to disobey your Creator.