

TALKING POINTS

Note to parents

These devotions are designed for you to use as a family. Begin by praying together that God will help you to learn from his word.

The devotions pick up from the lessons that we have been sharing in middle classes in Sunday School so we hope your children know something about what is going on! We have already talked about how God chose Abraham, promising him land and family so that all the families in the earth should be blessed.

The fulfilment of this promise seemed to start slowly, but towards the end of the first book in the Bible, Genesis, we see the pace picking up. God was at work in the life of Abraham's great grandson, Joseph.

The Bible doesn't often answer WHY questions – perhaps because we wouldn't be able to understand God's answers! But the Bible does give examples of how God worked in people's lives during times of crisis and we can learn from them. So while these readings don't tackle the question as to why the virus is ranging through the earth, perhaps they can help you and your family to think about God's love in this time of lockdown.

During the week, we aim to make a second set of devotions available. This first set lasts for 6 days, ending with Palm Sunday.

Day One (Genesis 37: 2-11)

The story begins when Joseph was seventeen. He was the second youngest son of Jacob and was his favourite. You have probably heard about the 'coat of many colours' which Jacob gave him. Those who study the old language of the Bible think that this special coat had long sleeves. These would have got in the way if Joseph was doing messy, everyday jobs so it seems that Jacob did not want his favourite son to have to work hard. No wonder Joseph's older brothers didn't like him! Look at verse 4.

Things got worse when Joseph had two dreams which seemed to suggest he was more important than these other brothers and when he was silly enough to boast about these dreams to his brothers. If you can't remember what the dreams were about, read verses 5-11.

I wonder if James (who wrote one of the last books in the Bible) was thinking of this story in mind when he wrote in James 3:16 (quoted from the New International Readers Version):

Are you jealous? Are you concerned only about getting ahead? Then your life will be a mess. You will be doing all kinds of evil things.

We don't want to be "in a mess", but we can't stop ourselves being selfish and envious at times, especially when we are stuck at home like this. We need God's help to do this and James goes on to tell us that:

The wisdom that comes from heaven is pure. That's the most important thing about it. And that's not all. It also loves peace. It thinks about others. It obeys. ... It is fair.

Pray that God will help us all to follow his wisdom so that everyone who knows us sees God's love in us. After all, we are all children of Abraham and God wants to bless the world through us too.

Day Two (Genesis 37:12-28)

Instead of letting God rule their lives, Joseph's brothers allowed their jealousy to grow. And it caused them do a very evil thing.

Often the older brothers had to wander far from home to find fresh grazing for the sheep and goats. This is why one day Jacob sent Joseph out to check up on them. The brothers saw him coming over the hills and came up with a terrible plan, although they were Id enough to know better:

"Here comes that dreamer", they said to one another. "Come. Let's kill him. Let's throw him into one of these empty wells. Let's say that a wild animal ate him up. Then we'll see whether his dreams will come true.

Of course, if he was dead, the dreams couldn't have come true, could they? So God who had sent the dreams stepped in to protect Joseph through his oldest brother, Reuben. Reuben didn't like the idea of murdering Joseph and persuaded the others rather just to dump him in the pit without murdering him. Reuben planned to rescue him later.

Meanwhile the brothers sat down to eat their lunch. Probably they could hear Joseph's shouts and cries for help, but they ignored him. Then the brothers saw a group of merchants travelling by camel to Egypt to sell their produce there. (Can you name three things they sold – look at verse 25).

As they watched the camels getting nearer, Judah suddenly had a brainwave. Why shouldn't they make some money by selling Joseph as a slave? That way they didn't have to commit murder and would have some extra cash! If they sold him to the merchants, the merchants would take Joseph far away to Egypt and sell him on the slave market in Egypt. They would never have to see him again. They didn't care that this would be hard for Joseph. They didn't even care that their father would be very sad. They were so thrilled with their lovely revenge plan – it would serve Joseph right for telling them about his stupid dreams.

Even though this second plan was also evil, God protected Joseph once again. Although Joseph was sold to the merchants, the brothers couldn't separate him from God. God would be with him in Egypt as well.

A later Bible writer put it like this In Romans 8:36 & 37

I am absolutely sure that not even death or life can separate us from God's love. Not even angels or demons, the present or the future, or any powers can do that. Not even the highest places or the lowest, or anything else in creation can do that. Nothing at all can separate us from God's love because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done.

That means that even during lockdown for covid 19 (corona virus), God's love is with us.

Day Three (Genesis 39)

We aren't told anything about Joseph's journey to Egypt, nor about what it must have been like to be put up for sale. Think of 3 words to describe how you would probably have felt.

Joseph was bought by one of the most important men in Egypt and very soon Potiphar realised that Joseph was a very valuable worker. So, although he didn't set him free, he did give Joseph more and more important jobs. In the end Joseph was running the whole house. There was only one thing Potiphar had to worry about. Can you find out what this was from verse 6?

Potiphar's wife, however, got angry that Joseph was not prepared to make love to her and she made up a story about how he behaved. Potiphar doesn't seem to have listened to Joseph's side of the story. He just believed his wife. And so Joseph was put in prison.

Even in prison God was with him. Joseph trusted God and so he didn't sulk even though it was unfair. As a result the chief jailor liked Joseph and very soon Joseph was running the prison for him! With God's help, Joseph was even able to explain to two of the prisoners what their dreams meant. One of these prisoners was released and went back to serve Pharaoh. Joseph asked him to try to organise that Joseph could also be set free – but the man was so happy to be out of prison that he just forgot all about Joseph. That was mean. Once again it must have seemed that nothing was fair.

God had big plans for Joseph. Joseph was going to be the one through whom God was going to bless the world at that time. But Joseph had to learn to trust God first – and through all these troubles he was doing just that. Things were about to change, even though Joseph didn't know it.

We are often not at all like Joseph. We get angry when things don't go right; we get sulky when things aren't fair; we don't even always do our best when we are told to do something. Just as he loved Joseph even on his 'down days', God loves us and has plans for our lives. But we need to learn to listen to God, not just give in to our feelings.

Let's ask God to forgive us for trying to handle things on our own. Jesus told us to ask God for patience and strength for these days. He is our good shepherd who will look after us and guide us so that we can be useful servants like Joseph, even though we aren't slaves!

Day Four (Genesis 41)

One day everything changed. Dramatic things happened at the prison. Messengers from the Pharaoh arrived. Joseph was summonsed and given smarter clothes. Then he had to shave and wash himself carefully. He was going to meet Pharaoh.

Pharaoh had been desperately trying to find out what two of his dreams meant. No-one could help him. Then, the cup-bearer who had been in prison suddenly remembered how Joseph had explained his dreams correctly and had suggested that Pharaoh ask Joseph. Imagine how weird it must have been: one moment Joseph was a prisoner in a cell, the next he was giving advice in the palace of the king!

The first thing that Joseph did was to make very sure that Pharaoh knew that God was the only one who could explain dreams and that he (Joseph) was just God's messenger. Then Joseph explained that there were troubled times ahead. Read the details about the dreams in verses 1-7. Can you remember what they meant? Read verse 25 to 32. Notice how Joseph reminds Pharaoh that God is more powerful even than any Pharaoh.

Joseph gave Pharaoh good advice from God. Pharaoh must find a person to organise the grain collection so that people would not starve when there was famine. Pharaoh didn't even bother to consider anyone else;. He knew that the right person to do that job was Joseph. Suddenly Joseph was no longer a slave or a prisoner. He was the second most important person in the land!

But Joseph had learnt the lessons God had taught him. He knew God had done this for him so he didn't boast as he might have done long ago. Thanks to the things which had happened to him, he had also learnt to plan and to organise. And he had learnt that God loved him and that God was always with him – as a slave and as a ruler.

So God's plan became clear in Joseph's life. God had promised that the whole world would be blessed by Abraham's family – and here it was happening. Thousands of people had enough to eat during the seven long years of famine. Many of them didn't pray to God and probably didn't even realise God who was looking after them, but God provided for them.

Today there are many Christian doctors and nurses looking after patients who have the virus. Many of those who are ill don't know God but he has provided help once again for the world. There may be even more signs of God being at work. Think about it: maybe the fact that so few factories are operating or cars are being driven will help to reduce the speed of global warming. Maybe God is using this time of trouble to re-build the world he created.

As Joseph told his brothers many years later:

You planned to harm me. But God planned it for good. He planned to do what is now being done. He wanted to save many lives. (Genesis 50:20 NIRV)

That is still true today. Let's thank God!

Day Five (Genesis 42)

Once the famine took over the land, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt looking for grain. They bowed down before the important Egyptian leader organising the food, not thinking for even one moment that he could be their brother Joseph. The Bible doesn't tell us why they didn't recognise him, but I can think of at least 3 reasons. Can you? (Clue: He was probably dressed as an Egyptian, spoke the Egyptian language, and, of course, he had grown up.)

But Joseph recognised them, realising that his early dream was coming true – there they were bowing before him! Joseph didn't know whether they had changed at all and he set out to find out if they had allowed God's ideas to influence their lives or whether they were the same jealous, uncaring people they had been when he was seventeen. He wanted to see if they really cared for anyone except themselves now. So he set them a kind of test.

First he gave them a taste of prison life for three days. Then he let all except one of them go. He told them that he would not provide any more grain nor would he release their brother unless Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin, was with them.

Months later they returned with Benjamin, having promised Jacob that they would not let him be harmed. They didn't know that Joseph understood what they said to each other, and that he therefore picked up a different attitude among the brothers. But Joseph wanted more proof of their change of heart and so he set another test for them. You can read about it in Genesis 44:1-13.

Only when Joseph was satisfied that they really did care about their father, did he tell them who he was. Imagine their shock and fear, but Joseph didn't want revenge; he showed forgiveness. I am sure Joseph was not perfect but he allowed God to shape him. Can you suggest what sins he must have had to fight against now he was a ruler? (eg his new power must have tempted him at times to feel really important.)

Now that they knew about Joseph, his brothers persuaded their father, Jacob, to come down to Egypt to meet him again. Pharaoh provided Jacob and his sons and their families with land where they could look after their sheep and be near Joseph. Even after his father had died, Joseph didn't try to get revenge. He knew that was not God's way.

Through one man's faith, God had worked good things for Joseph and his family and for everyone affected by the famine. I am sure there will be similar stories told after the corona virus has disappeared for God is using people to do his will even now. And in small ways, he wants to use us all to be his servants and make a difference in these difficult times. Why not talk to him about being God's person now? Tell God that you don't want to make a mess of your life, Ask him to teach you the lessons you need to know so you can be useful to him, to your family and perhaps even to South Africa at this time.

Let's remember what Paul said many centuries later:

My God will meet all your needs ... because you belong to Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19 NIV)

Day Six (John 12:12-16, Matthew 21:1-11)

It has been suggested that Joseph is a picture of Jesus – perhaps a bit like the outline one sees before one does water painting or before one joins the dots. Through Joseph (Abraham's great-grandson) we see the first example of how God would bless the all people of the world through Abraham's family. Think about it: Decide which of these statements are true and which are false:

1. Both Jesus and Joseph listened to God.
2. Both Jesus and Joseph got promoted by the government.
3. Both Jesus and Joseph forgave those who treated them badly.
4. Both Jesus and Joseph knew what it was like to be a prisoner.

When Joseph was given power to organise the food supplies in Egypt, Pharaoh arranged that Joseph would ride in a chariot and that, as he came by, people had to bow down (Genesis 41:43). I don't imagine all the Egyptians liked bowing to an ex-slave who wasn't even an Egyptian by birth but they had no choice.

Many hundreds of years later Jesus also rode through the crowds. But he didn't have a chariot; he rode on a very young donkey which he borrowed for the occasion. The crowds cheered and shout, waving palm branches and putting down their coats in the road so that the donkey could walk more easily. The crowd celebrated by singing Hosanna. They thought that Jesus was coming as their earthly king and would give them freedom. Of course this wasn't true. Important people didn't ride little donkeys. Like Joseph, earthly leaders would have had chariots or even great big horses.

Like some of the Egyptians, the leaders who watched Jesus that day were jealous. They tried to get the crowd to keep quiet and, when they left the scene, they made final plans to arrest Jesus. And a few days later Jesus was crucified. Some of the same people who had been cheering for him, now shouted "Crucify Him". Yet, all this was part of God's great plan.

If Joseph hadn't been taken to Egypt, if he hadn't learnt to allow God to live in him, he wouldn't have been able to be part of God's plan to save the world from hunger.

Jesus was also a descendant of Abraham. (Jesus was not just a great grandson like Joseph, but a great, great, great ... grandson. We would have to write 'great' many, many times.) Like Joseph, Jesus had to leave his home so that he could save people. Like Joseph, Jesus was obedient and allowed God to work in his life.

The big difference is that Joseph helped the people of his day, but Jesus rode into Jerusalem to die for us also. One of the songs the people sang or shouted out as Jesus rode the donkey contained the words "Do not be afraid."

That is still true today. We needn't be afraid. Jesus died so we can know that God loves us so much that he gave his only son to die in our place. Our bodies will die, but if we trust God the real part of us will go to be with God in heaven. That's why we celebrate Jesus two thousand years after his death, even though we don't celebrate Joseph.