

How to Handle Resentment

By David H. Roper

I would like to relate a very simple story--one that is quite direct and straightforward, and yet very profound. It is the story of Joseph, which I am sure many of you are familiar with, having been taught this story in Sunday school. The principle embodied in this story is likewise simple to state, and very easily understood. And if it is understood and acted upon, it will save all of us a great deal of heartache. Yet it is a principle that is very difficult to believe--not because it is incredible, but because it is so contrary to our experience.

Turn with me to chapter 37 of Genesis. We will spend the bulk of our time in chapter 45, but in order to understand the principle stated in chapter 45, we have to see something of the background circumstances, something of Joseph's life up to that point. The story of Joseph begins at a crucial point in the book of Genesis. Moses turns the corner in his narrative in chapter 37. Chapters 12 through 36 are intended to be individual histories of the patriarchs, and the emphasis in those chapters is on the private lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Although other story lines are taken up, they are dismissed in summary fashion. The main line runs through the private lives of the patriarchs.

But in chapter 37, Moses begins to deal with the tribal life of the nation of Israel and introduces us to certain facts we need to understand before we get into the book of Exodus, where we see Israel being forged into a nation. The Israelites go into Egypt as a loose aggregation of tribes; they come out a congregation--a nation. These final chapters of Genesis form a narrative that is intended to trace the disintegration of the family. The people of God have begun to identify themselves with the Canaanites, and Canaanite worship has become their own worship.

So it is necessary to take the Israelites out of Canaan, give them the Canaanite cure for a period of time, and then put them in Egypt where they are totally isolated. In Egypt they are isolated both geographically and socially. The Egyptians did not like Asiatics in general, and they didn't like shepherds in particular, so they would have nothing to do with them socially. Besides, the Israelites were placed in the delta area in Egypt, where they were geographically isolated from the rest of the people in Egypt. As far as we know, they did not marry with the Egyptians, or embrace any of their idolatry--they were comparatively free of idolatry (at least of Egyptian idolatry) when they came out of Egypt. This was part of God's Canaanite cure, an important part of the process of preparing the people to be a nation.

Chapter 37 and the following gives a description of the preparation for their migration into Egypt and certain events that took place in conjunction with it. Joseph's story is brought into the narrative at this point in order to describe some of the efforts that God took to make preparation for his people. The narrative begins in chapter 37, and we are given a glimpse into the patriarchal family. Frankly, it is not a happy family. You would think that because they were God's people, they would be godly; but sometimes God's people are the most ungodly people of all. Certainly this is true of this family.

The family was filled with greed, jealousy, petty ambition, and rather disastrous attitudes toward one another. Reuben, who was the eldest, and the recipient of the promise, since he would receive double the share of the inheritance, disqualified himself through an act of incest. The next two sons, Simeon and Levi, likewise disqualified themselves because they were cruel and vicious men. Judah was unknowingly implicated in an act with his own daughter-in-law. While he was not disqualified, it tainted his life.

The family's problem was furthered by Jacob's preference for Joseph. Joseph was the son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. From the very beginning, Jacob gave Joseph preferential treatment. He was given a position of leadership

over his older brothers; he was given a robe that signified his managerial role. That is the significance of the multi-colored robe you are all familiar with. It was probably a long robe, with long sleeves and a long skirt, and served to identify him as a white collar worker. He was a manager rather than a worker. And though he should have been under his brothers, he was placed in a position of authority over them, which galled them no end.

In addition, Joseph had a number of dreams which, unfortunately, he communicated to his family and his brothers. The dreams, I believe, came from God, because that was the way that God did reveal this young man's destiny to him. In the dreams, he was told in a symbolic way that both his parents and his brothers would bow down to him. Unfortunately, he must have told and retold the story many times, and that, likewise, separated him from his brothers. In chapter 36, it says that his brothers hated him "for his dreams and for his words." I get the impression that he must have told them about his dreams and what they signified many times.

In addition to all these problems, Joseph brought back an evil report on his brothers, charging them with unfaithfulness in carrying out their duties. The impression I get of Joseph is that he was a spoiled brat. He was the favorite of his father, who poured every blessing on this young man, and it served to alienate him from his brothers.

As we pick up the account in chapter 37, Joseph is on his way north to observe his brothers again. In verse 13, we are told that he came to Shechem and didn't find his brothers there, so he went on to Dothan. It struck me, as I read through the passage, that the route that he took to Dothan was exactly the one we took on our recent trip to Israel, driving north through Palestine. From Dothan you can look back to the south, all the way down the line of the Judean hills, to Hebron.

I think the brothers must have seen Joseph coming when he was miles away, and they began to plot his death. At first they planned to slay him and throw him in a pit. But Reuben, the eldest of the twelve, trying to circumvent their scheme, counseled them to throw him into a pit and allow him to die there--then they wouldn't be directly involved with his death. His plan was to rescue the boy later on and send him back to his father.

But as you know, his plan backfired. They did throw Joseph into a cistern. Some of these large underground cisterns are a hundred feet across, lined with plaster, so there would have been no way to get out. On the basis of other facts in the narrative, I think he was kept there about three days. We are told later on in the account that he wept and pleaded with them to take him out of the pit, but they went off to eat, ignoring his cries. This shows something of the hardness of these men toward their own brother.

As you know, Reuben's plan was thwarted because some Midianites, traveling in a caravan, came through that area, and Joseph was sold to the Midianites, who took him down into Egypt. The caravan route ran close to Hebron, and as this young boy was taken--I'm sure, in bonds--down into Egypt, they passed by his hometown. He could have looked up on the ridge to the east and seen the location of his father's tents. He was only seventeen years old at this time, and I am sure his heart longed for his father. He was never able to go home again. He was taken down into Egypt and sold to Potiphar.

The account begins again in chapter 39. There is a parenthetical section in chapter 38, describing Judah's affair with Tamar, but chapter 39 picks up the thread of the story again.

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. And the Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer in his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge....So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him around he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate. [Egyptians were so fastidious about their food they would not allow a foreigner to touch it.] Now Joseph was handsome in form and

appearance.

We would say Joseph was a well-built, handsome young man, seventeen years of age. We don't know how long he was there, but it wasn't long before he was placed in a position of authority in Potiphar's household. Potiphar was the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard, a very important official in Pharaoh's cabinet, and Joseph was successful in his home.

As a handsome man, it wasn't long before he attracted the attention of Potiphar's wife. Verse 7 tells us that she tried to seduce him, and he resisted her a number of times. Finally, one day as he was walking about the house, she grasped his robe, and he fled out of the house in his skivvies. Potiphar learned of these events, his wife lied to him, and, verses 19-20 say, Now it came about that when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," that his anger burned. So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail.

As far as we know, he was in prison for thirteen years, until he was thirty years old. Now, there was an opportunity to build a great case of resentment. The only sin you can pick up in this young man's life is that he was spoiled, and a little demanding, and flaunted the favor that his father bestowed on him. The first time Joseph was in bondage, he might have reasoned, "Perhaps I deserved to be sent into slavery because of my attitudes toward my brothers."

But now that God had prospered him and he was in prison the second time, he might justifiably reason, "This isn't fair. I was walking with God, doing what was right. I was resisting this idolatrous household." Potiphar's name means "dedicated to Ra." This was a household that worshiped the Egyptian god of the sun, Ra. In that pagan household, Joseph obeyed God. He did what was right and resisted the attempts on the part of Potiphar's wife to seduce him. All he got for his trouble was a 13-year jail sentence. That would have been a great place for Joseph to get bitter and resentful at his brothers, because he certainly didn't deserve that sort of treatment. We are told in verse 21, But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer.

The word "kindness" is the Hebrew word "chesed" that occurs throughout the Old Testament to refer to God's loyalty to the covenant. God is true to his word. God was loyal to his word to this young man. God had promised to exalt him. That was the promise given to Joseph in his dream, and God was loyal to him. He didn't abandon him, but stayed with him. Verses 22-23:

And the chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were with him in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper.

In the terms of our modern day idiom, he became a trusty. He was given certain privileges and responsibilities that no one else in the jail had. He was still in jail, but he had a measure of freedom.

Through one of those divine coincidences, after a number of years, two officials from Pharaoh's court came into his life, and their imprisonment is described in chapter 40. The butler, or cupbearer of the Pharaoh, and the baker somehow fell into the king's disfavor, so they were cast into prison.

Three days before Pharaoh's birthday party, they both had a dream--different dreams, but with certain similarities. Perhaps they were thinking that, were they not in prison, they would have been involved in various activities concerning the birthday celebration in Pharaoh's house, and, in thinking about their former life, they dreamed.

The cupbearer's dream was this: He saw a grapevine with three branches, and as he watched, it flowered and

produced grapes. He squeezed the grapes into Pharaoh's cup, placed the cup into Pharaoh's hand, and Pharaoh took it from him. Joseph rightly interpreted that dream to mean that Pharaoh would restore the cupbearer again to his household, that he would again take the cup from his hand, and that this would happen in three days. As we know from the following narrative, that is what occurred.

The baker's dream was a bit different, although the number three occurs again. He saw three baskets of bread on his head, and the birds came and ate the bread from the baskets on his head. Joseph rightly interpreted the dream to mean that the baker would lose his head, that the birds would devour him. And in three days, both dreams were fulfilled. The butler was restored to his position of eminence; the baker was executed. Joseph had said to the butler in verse 14, "Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house." The word translated "kindness" is the same word that occurs in chapter 39, verse 21, "the Lord extended kindness." It has to do with loyalty to your word. Joseph had made a covenant with the butler, and when he went back, the butler was to secure his release. But verse 23 tells us, Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

For two more years, Joseph languished in prison, forgotten. Now that will make you bitter. It will make you bitter against your brothers, and against the cupbearer. Everyone is treating you unjustly.

At the end of two full years, we are told in chapter 41, Pharaoh had a dream. In fact, he had two dreams, with the same element in each. His first dream was of seven fat cows coming out of the Nile, and the seven fat cows were devoured by seven lean cows. Then he dreamed that seven fat ears of corn were devoured by seven lean ears of corn. The wizards and magicians of that day tried to interpret the dreams but were unable to.

It dawned on the cupbearer that there was a man in prison who could interpret dreams, and he called on Joseph in prison. Joseph interpreted the dream for the Pharaoh. He said that there would be seven years of plenty and fertility in Egypt, and then seven years of famine. Then Joseph described certain steps that ought to be taken to prepare for the famine. Because his words were so wise, Pharaoh placed him in a position of authority over all of Egypt. He became the vizier of the king, second only to Pharaoh, and he began to implement plans to provide for the people during the famine.

Again, by one of those divine coincidences, Joseph happened to be on the spot dispensing grain to people coming from all over the world (there was famine in all the western part of the Mediterranean, and people were coming from all over to get bread in Egypt) when who should turn up one day but Joseph's own brothers!

That story is given us in detail beginning with chapter 42. I am not going to take time to read that story, but I encourage you to read it on your own. It is very interesting to see what Joseph does with his brothers. It almost appears that he is playing games with them, but he is not. He is trying to get them to face themselves and put away this treacherous trait they have. Whatever it was in them that caused them to deny their brother before was still there. He wanted them to face it and put it away.

At first Joseph treats them harshly and puts them in prison for three days. My belief is that he put them there to give them some idea of how he felt when they put him in the pit for three days. Then he sent them home. But to their amazement, when they opened the sacks of grain, they found the money they had paid for the grain. They couldn't understand this strange fellow off in Egypt who on the one hand, was harsh, and on the other, returned their money.

Two years later, they come back, having run out of grain, and here is the same grand vizier. Again, by some happy coincidence, Joseph happens to be there when they show up to buy grain. This time they are invited to a feast. This is even more perplexing. Then they are sent home.

As they are traveling, they are stopped by one of Joseph's aides. What they don't realize is that before they were sent away, Joseph had one of his helpers plant his silver divining cup in the sack of his brother Benjamin. Benjamin was one year old when Joseph left his father's house. He hadn't seen him for fifteen years, and Joseph

loved Benjamin. Yet, for some strange reason, he implicates that brother in a crime. He puts his own personal silver cup, his most precious possession, in his younger brother's sack, and then they are sent back to Canaan.

Joseph's aide is then dispatched to stop them before they discover the cup, and he accuses them of the crime. They say, "But we are innocent!" Then they vow a great vow: "If you find that cup on any of us, we will be your slaves forever." The aide says, "All right; the person we find that cup on will be Pharaoh's slave for the rest of his life, and the rest of you may go free." They open their sacks and, to their dismay, in the sack of their youngest brother Benjamin is the silver cup.

Here was another chance to betray their youngest brother. Their sacks were clean, so they were innocent. But their younger brother had the cup, and he was now to be the servant of Pharaoh. They could have walked away and abandoned him, as they abandoned Joseph; but they said, "No, we will all go back to Egypt and serve Pharaoh." Do you see what Joseph is doing? He is correcting them, doing something redemptive. He is not playing games, he is trying to get them to face what they are, and to change their behavior. In chapter 45 we have the account of Joseph's encounter with his brothers after they return, a very dramatic moment when he reveals himself. Verses 1-8:

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me." So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. [I would have loved to have been a little mouse present at that scene!] Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance [Listen to this!] Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God..."

There are three things that I see in this passage that are extremely important. One, people will always disappoint you. I hope you have learned that. I hope your expectations of people are realistic. It is amazing how our sense of moral justice is outraged when people treat us unjustly. We can treat others unjustly with the greatest of ease, and justify it. But we are always outraged when people are not just toward us. Somehow we expect them to be just. But why should they be? We are not. People will always disappoint us. Joseph's brothers disappointed him. The cupbearer disappointed him. Potiphar's wife disappointed him. Potiphar disappointed him, because Potiphar should have known better. He had seen Joseph's life and character.

The problem with most of us is that our expectations of people are totally unrealistic. We will be treated unjustly--we can expect it. We can't expect people to be fair. Only the Lord is loyal, in any ultimate sense. The Lord is loyal to his word. What we see throughout this entire account is that the Lord was with Joseph, and the Lord was dealing in mercy and in grace and loyalty toward Joseph. As Carolyn, my wife, frequently tells me when I get uptight at what people do and say, "Men will always disappoint you; try Jesus."

The second thing I want you to see is that God himself accepts the responsibility for all these terrible things that happened to Joseph. God takes the responsibility for all these calamities. Joseph says to his brothers, "You sent me...God sent me." Now, they were responsible. They acted freely, and they acted wickedly. And God would judge them, as he judges the wickedness of people. But God takes the responsibility for their actions.

Now I don't understand that, but I find that principle all the way through the Scriptures. Men are free and responsible, and yet God himself is acting sovereignly in their lives to accomplish his will. That, you see, is what set Joseph free. It wasn't his brothers acting upon him--they were only the secondary cause. It was God who was

working in his life to accomplish constructive, redemptive, purifying things, to prepare for his own people, and to do something in his own life. That principle is found throughout the Scriptures.

Look at the first chapter of Job, and look at all the terrible tragedies that came into his life--his family and flocks and herds were taken away, he was destitute, just he and his wife were left. But Job worships and prays and says, "The Lord gives, and the Lord has taken away." Who did it? The Lord. In case you think Job's theology is off, in the next paragraph, God is speaking to Satan (who is the perpetrator of all these terrible things that happened--at least he is the one who is directly responsible) and says, "You moved me against my servant Job." God takes the responsibility for those actions.

Now that ought to give us a new way of looking at people who have caused us to be bitter. We say, "You made me bitter." We say this about the guy upstairs who turns his stereo on full blast at two o'clock in the morning, the employer who insists you make brick without straw, the man who promises all sorts of things and raises your expectations and then jilts you. Whatever the cause of disappointment in your life may be, this ought to cause you to look at that person in a different light.

Now it may be necessary to go to that person and to correct him in love--which is what Joseph did to his brothers. But the key to this entire operation is Joseph's spirit. There is no bitterness, no rancor, no resentment. He is at peace because he sees that it is God who is at work in his life, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

It is not always true that you and I will see the good things that Joseph saw. He had the privilege of seeing it with his eyes. But that may not occur with us; we may have to take it by faith. John the Baptist died in prison; they cut off his head. Jeremiah, as far as we know, was stoned to death in Egypt. But the eye of faith looks at all those circumstances and says, "That is God at work in my life to accomplish his very best, and nothing can thwart that. And whether I see it or not, it is working together for good, for me and for my brothers and sisters in Christ." That sets you free from resentment.

Many of us have been burdened by bitterness and hatred toward some person who has done some violent thing in our life--perhaps a parent who wreaked psychological havoc in our lives. And we blame this person and brood over it and resent it. Joseph reminds us that it is God who put that parent in our lives. It is God who is behind all those circumstances. It is his fingers that are squeezing us. Realizing this sets us free.

The third thing that I want you to see is that because Joseph understood this principle, he was able to act in love toward those who had wronged him. Turn to chapter 50, verses 15-17:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph should bear a grudge against us and pay us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!" [I would say that Joseph had every right, humanly speaking, to bear a grudge and pay them back, to retaliate. And they were afraid that he would.] So they sent a message to Joseph saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying, 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, "Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

I am convinced that the entire thing was fictitious. Jacob understood his son better than that. I think the brothers fabricated that message in order to save their own skins. Verses 18-21 continue: Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place?" [Only God has the right to take vengeance. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." Joseph says, "I am not in God's place to judge to avenge myself."] And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

The Hebrew says "he spoke to their heart." Jesus says, "Love your enemies. Pray for those that despitely use you." Now, how do you do that? You do it by having a clear vision. You do it by understanding that you do have

the strength of God himself to respond that way to people who have done you wrong. But you also see that ultimately it is God who is working through the terrible things they are doing to you, to accomplish his ends, his intended results.

G. Campbell Morgan says that one mark of maturity is the capacity to ignore secondary causes, not to look at the immediate cause--the person who is pressing you--as the ultimate source of that anguish, but to see that it is God who is at work in that very situation to bring you his good. That is why Paul could say, "Let your forbearance be known to all men, because God is at hand."

It is God at work in your life to will and to do for his good pleasure. What a freeing thing it is! It ought to set us free from resentment. It ought to give us the ability to love those who hate us, and to pray and bless those who curse us and spitefully use us.

Father, we thank you again for this reminder that you are loyal to us. Teach us to be realistic in our expectations of others, and not expect that they treat us the way we think we ought to be treated, but to know that it is always your response to us; that every perfect gift is from above. There are many things that happen to us that we wouldn't call good; but they are good, because these things are intended to produce the good that you are working out in us. So we pray that as we come into situations that normally would call for resentment and bitterness, we may be peaceful, quiet, and faithful people. We ask these things in Christ's name, Amen.

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