

THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

JOSEPH: MAN OF FAITH...IMAGE OF CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

The whole idea of celebrating the new year usually fills most of our hearts with a keen sense of hope that this is the year we are going to take some steps toward much-needed changes for the betterment of our physical, emotional, and spiritual health. We hope we will get better control of our lives, and usually we hope to develop better relationships within our immediate family as well as our spiritual family. We hope for some sign of improvement in our maturity, wisdom, peace, and joy. But if we look closely at our hopes, we find that they are often cast as statements about ourselves. None of these hopes we have for ourselves are wrong, but what is wrong is that they are very short-sighted. For if we stop at this point in our hopes, we will not be able to see or understand what God is doing in the midst of both our good circumstances and our difficult circumstances in this new year.

In order to help us see how God is at work behind the daily circumstances of our lives, we are going to study the life of Joseph, who was a man of faith and an image of Christ. For it is out of the life of Joseph (the eleventh son of the patriarch Jacob) with its joy, sorrow, pain, confusion, temptation, and honor that we will begin to understand more clearly that God is the Potter and we are his clay (see Romans 9:20; Isaiah 45:9, 64:8). The apostle Paul reminds us, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Therefore, God is free as the Master Potter to mold us into the very image of his son Jesus (see Colossians 3:10), so that we can become part of his overall plan of salvation for the nations, to his honor and glory and to our personal joy.

That process begins when we become a spiritual child of his: First the fresh lump of clay is placed onto the potter's wheel, then we are shaped by his loving hands into a chosen vessel. We are then placed into the fire to be strengthened, and finally we become a useful vessel from which he can pour out his life, love, influence, and gift of salvation to many over our lifetime. Also, God uses the daily circumstances of our lives to mold us and place us into the fire again and again with the goal of conforming us to the image of his Son Jesus.

Let's begin by looking at Joseph's early life.

The lump of clay

Genesis 37:1-11

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.
This is the account of Jacob.

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and

bowed down to it."

His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

The lives of Abraham, his son Isaac, Isaac's son Jacob, and one of Jacob's twelve sons named Joseph are recorded for us in Genesis 12-50. They cover a period of 345 years (2160-1815 BC). All four of these men, in spite of the fact that their lives were characterized by great weakness mixed with great strength, ended up in God's "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11. They entered this "Hall of Faith" because behind the curtain of eternity was the fine hand of the Master Potter taking the clay of broken and fallen humanity and molding a holy people into the nation of Israel and, in time, the church of Jesus Christ. And it is through these two instruments of grace, Israel and the church, that God kept his promise to Abraham that through his seed (Christ) would come the blessings of salvation to a humanity held captive by the world, the flesh, and the devil (see Genesis 17:8; Galatians 3:16).

Isaac and Rebekah gave birth to twins, Esau and Jacob, the latter of whom would become Joseph's father. When the twins were in their teens, Esau sold Jacob his birthright. When Isaac became ill, he decided to give his blessing to his first born son, Esau. But Jacob deceived him and received Esau's blessing as well (see Genesis 25:27; 27:1-30). The crisis precipitated by this deception forced Jacob to leave his family and go north to Syria to live with his uncle Laban, where he met Laban's daughter Rachel. Jacob worked for his uncle for seven years in order to marry Rachel. On the wedding night, he went into the wedding tent only to discover that his uncle had substituted his older daughter Leah for Rachel. Jacob ended up marrying both Leah and Rachel and was beholden to his uncle Laban for another seven years. He then married Bilhah and Zilpah, and all were having children except Rachel. Finally, "...God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, 'God has taken away my disgrace.' She named him Joseph, and said, 'May the LORD add to me another son.'" (Genesis 30:22-24.) So Joseph (1905-1815 BC) then became Jacob's eleventh son and Rachel's first son. He was born at the end of Jacob's fourteen-year obligation to Laban.

Because of the jealousy of Laban and his sons over Jacob's growing wealth, Jacob sensed it was time to move on. The Lord said to him, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you" (Genesis 31:3). On his way from Syria to Hebron with his family and flocks, he met and wrestled with God, who renamed him Israel ("Wrestler with God"). He reconciled with his brother Esau and then settled in the outskirts of Shechem, Canaan. Here his daughter Dinah was raped by a man from that city, so two of his sons killed the men of the district. This forced Jacob to leave the area and head down to Hebron (the burial place of Abraham and Sarah). By the time the caravan arrived in the region of Bethlehem, Rachel was struggling to give birth to her second son, so she called him Ben-Oni, "Son of My Trouble." Rachel died in childbirth, and Jacob renamed the child Benjamin, "Son of My Right Hand" (Gen. 29-35:20). Then his father Isaac died in Hebron and was buried in the cave with Abraham and Sarah.

As our story opens, we find that Joseph is seventeen years old and living in the town of Hebron, Canaan with his eleven brothers and one sister. (Leah had given birth to six sons: Reuben, Simeon, Issachar, Zebulun, Levi, and Judah; and one daughter, Dinah. Then Zilpah had given birth to Gad and Asher; and Bilhah had given birth to Dan and Naphtali. And finally the barren Rachel had given birth to Joseph and Benjamin. This is the beginning of the twelve tribes of Israel.) One day while Joseph was tending the family flock of sheep with his half-brothers Gad, Asher, Dan, and Naphtali, he saw them violate some family rule. He felt compelled to tell his father Jacob, which started the fire of his brothers' jealousy and hatred of him. Adding fuel to this fire, Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, "because he had been born to him in his old age." That partiality was made visible and obvious when Jacob gave Joseph a richly ornamented robe (a royal robe in

contrast to a normal robe).

At this point we begin to see the image of Christ in the life of Joseph, for our heavenly Father said of Jesus through his prophet Isaiah (Matthew 12:18-21; see also Isaiah 42:1-2),

"Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations."

Still more fuel was added to the hatred by Joseph's two dreams. Now, God had communicated to men and women in many different ways. He walked and personally spoke with Adam in the garden. He spoke directly to Cain and to Noah. He spoke to Abraham in a vision and a dream when he made his covenant with him and told him of the future of his new nation (see Genesis 15:12-21), personally when he renewed the covenant (see Genesis 17), as well as through angels when he announced the birth of Isaac (see Genesis 18:1-14). Jacob met God at Bethel in a dream and saw a ladder going up to heaven with angels ascending and descending, and heard God renew his promises to Abraham: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring" (Genesis 28:10-15). Later God told Jacob in a dream to leave his uncle Laban's place in Syria and return to Canaan (see Genesis 31:11-13).

So it was not surprising that God would give Joseph two dreams in which he outlined the future of his people Israel. Joseph had no control over the content of these dreams; he was only reporting to his family what they were about. The dreams spoke of the position of ruling but not of the place or time. The fact that there were two dreams may suggest that these things would happen soon, for later Pharaoh had two dreams and Joseph explained that "two" meant soon (see Genesis 41:32). It is interesting that Jacob, who had received two dreams from God, seemed to have difficulty accepting the fact that God wanted to speak to his son about the future with two dreams. But at least Jacob kept it all in mind.

Let's look at the dreams themselves. "We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it." Having them bow down to him suggests royalty or kingship rule over a people. This dream may also suggest that Jacob and his sons were to be farmers as well as shepherds.

"...The sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." [This speaks of the future of Israel, see Revelation 12] To this the brothers responded with all the more hatred and jealousy, and his father rebuked Joseph for even considering that some day his father and mother (in memory) and eleven brothers would bow to the ground before him.

The fire of hatred, jealousy, and pride was reinforced by Jacob's rebuke, and the plot for murder stood in the wings awaiting its cue. "For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice" (James 3:16).

In Joseph's being rejected by his brothers he was again an image of Jesus. "For even [Jesus'] own brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:5). "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it...He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (John 1:1-11.)

In spite of Joseph's youthful self-righteousness and pride, God placed the clay of this young man on his potter's wheel and began the process of molding him to become the ruler and savior of both the nation of Egypt and the surrounding nations including his own family. Some five hundred years later God would call out Moses as a young man and begin to prepare him to become the deliverer of his people from Egypt. God called a young man named Samuel to become his prophet in Israel. He used the prophet Samuel to call out another young man named David to become king of Israel. And God appointed John the Baptist and Jesus his Son to serve him before they were even born. Each man, including Jesus in his humanity, was placed as new clay on the Master Potter's wheel, molded, and placed into the fire to become a chosen vessel to carry eternal

life to a dying humanity. (Joseph, Moses, and David were all shepherds looking for the coming of the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 and John 10:1-18.)

The Scriptures help us greatly by giving us this perspective, for if not for them we would be consistently shortsighted about what God is doing. We tend to make resolutions like, "I'm going to stop drinking so much coffee," or "This year I'm really going to ride that bike parked in the garage." But the Scriptures reveal the plan of God that he began with the life of Abraham. And they remind us that we must not go through life with such a small view of what God wants to do in and through us, his chosen vessels. We need to understand that we are part of many generations that will bring the word of God to a dying world. We need to understand that our natural and spiritual children all have tremendous value in the sight of God as he molds them into vessels he can use to bring the message of salvation to yet another generation.

First the lump of clay, then....

The molding

Genesis 37:12-24

Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."

"Very well," he replied.

So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?"

"They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'"

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

"Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe---the richly ornamented robe he was wearing---and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

Joseph was still seventeen when his father sent him thirty miles north to the fields of Shechem to find out how his other sons and the flocks were doing. When Joseph arrived in Shechem, he found out that his brothers had moved twenty miles farther north to the city of Dothan ("Two Wells"). One of the brothers spotted Joseph coming toward them, and the root of bitterness, jealousy, and hatred began to take full flower: "Here comes Daddy's Favorite with his coat of many colors and his dreams that one day the whole family will be subject to

his rule! Enough is enough! He gave our father one bad report, let's not let him give another."

Anger, jealousy, and bitterness became a murderous mood. When they saw him, the issue was not whether they should kill him but how they should kill him. The mob-rule mentality had set in: "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." This all was going on before Joseph even reached the camp.

But in the middle of this jealous rage, Reuben the first-born son of Jacob and his first wife Leah, who should have been the favored son, stepped in with a weak solution: "Don't kill him, just throw him into the dry cistern," for he fully intended to come back later and rescue him. Unaware of the murder that had filled their hearts, Joseph arrived in their camp. Instead of being greeted with joy as he ought to have been, he was grabbed by his brothers, stripped of his richly ornamented robe, and thrown into a dry cistern with the hope that he would be found by some wild animals and eaten, rather than being killed by them personally.

In this threat to his life also, Joseph was an image of Christ. Herod tried to kill Jesus within a year of his birth, but "...an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph [the husband of Mary] in a dream. 'Get up,' he said. 'Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.'" (Matthew 2:13; see also 2:14-15.) The men of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth tried to kill him after he told them he was their long-awaited Messiah (see Luke 4:14-30). And finally, the chief priests of Jerusalem had murder in their hearts: "Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him" (Mark 14:1). Eventually they arrested Jesus and then...

"...The high priest asked him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?'

'I am,' said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'

The high priest tore his clothes. 'Why do we need any more witnesses?' he asked. 'You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?'

They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, 'Prophecy!'" (Mark 14:61-65.)

Why? Because, although Jesus wanted to offer them salvation and the gift of eternal life, their jealousy, pride, and envy blinded their spiritual eyes and led them to murder him, the only one who could redeem them and eventually save their lives.

First the Master Potter takes the spiritual clay of our new life in him and places it on the potter's wheel, and then his skilled hands begin the molding of our lives to begin to look like his Son Jesus. Then the vessel has to be placed into...

The fire

Genesis 37:25-36

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?"

Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Ishmaelites were the descendants of Ishmael out of the loins of Abraham and Hagar, in contrast to Israelites, who were the descendants of Isaac out of the loins of Abraham and Sarah. The Ishmaelites were a blending of three groups of people: the Midianites, the Amalekites, and all the other eastern peoples (see Judges 6, 8:24). This caravan was coming from Gilead (modern Jordan and Syria), on the east side of the Jordan River, and heading south toward Egypt. When the Midianite merchants came by, nine of the brothers sold Joseph to them for twenty shekels of silver, and they took this teenager to Egypt. Later Moses would fix the price for a boy slave between the ages of five and twenty years at twenty shekels, but the average price for a slave was thirty shekels (see Leviticus 27:2-5; Exodus 21:32). You can almost hear the sound of thirty pieces of silver dropping into Judas' hands as he asked the chief priests, "What are you willing to give me if I hand [Jesus] over you?" (Matthew 26:14).

Reuben, the oldest brother, was responsible to his father for his brothers and the flocks. He was not present when all this happened. Upon his return, he found out that it was too late to save his brother. He cried out to all who were willing to listen, "Where can I turn now? What is going to happen to me? I am responsible for his life before my father Jacob!"

King David would write some nine hundred years later (Psalm 105:16-19),

"[God] called down famine on the land
and destroyed all their supplies of food;
and he sent a man before them---
Joseph, sold as a slave.
They bruised his feet with shackles,
his neck was put in irons,
till what he foretold came to pass,
till the word of the LORD proved him true."

To the many colors of Joseph's robe was added one more: red, supposedly the blood of the slain beloved son. The brothers in concert brought the robe to their father (referring to him as Jacob's son, not as their brother). Jacob the former deceiver was deceived once again, unfortunately this time by his own sons. Jacob mourned the apparent death of his favorite son Joseph. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 2, Zondervan Publishing House, says this:

Thus Jacob's own fate and that of his sons is briefly sketched out in this opening narrative. What happens to Joseph foreshadows all that will happen to the sons of Jacob. They will be carried down into Egypt and will be put into slavery. In this sense, then, Jacob's final words set the focus of the narratives to follow: 'In mourning will I go down to the grave (Sheol) to my son' (v. 35). Ironically, the Joseph narratives conclude with Jacob's going down (47:3-4)

to Egypt to see his son and then with his own death (50:24-26).

Meanwhile, the favorite son, greatly loved by his father and mother, a shepherd with the freedom of space and seasons for seventeen years, was being led in chains to Egypt, a foreign country with different language, customs, dress, and religion. It was a modern civilization with temples to every god possible, great pyramids for the dead, beautiful homes, paved streets, trade on the Nile, and great reed sailing boats---as well as an all-out denial of Joseph's God *Yahweh* . It was a dark day for Joseph, and to even make it darker, the Midianites placed their slave on the slave block in the marketplace and eventually sold him again to the highest bidder: Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard (the Egyptian secret service).

Joseph was an image of Christ here, too. Paul would later write to the church in Philippi (Philippians 2:6-8), sharing how Jesus the beloved Son of God took upon himself our humanity and was sent by the Father into the kingdom of Satan, this world, which is symbolized by Egypt. It was a traumatic event for the innocent Son of God, Christ Jesus,

"Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death---even death on a cross!"

Joseph was of the natural and spiritual seed of Abraham and was being molded by the hands of God to become a man of faith and an image of Christ. He began his life loved by his father and rejected by his brothers. But we will also see in the life of Joseph his faith in God during the most trying of circumstances which finally turned into a season of joy. For behind all of those trials and blessings stood a God who was arranging Joseph's life, the life of his father Jacob, and the lives of his eleven brothers, who were also to come to Egypt. We will see foreshadowed in Joseph's life the wonderful plan of salvation designed by God the Father and carried out by his Son Jesus. Joseph "...clearly appears as the forerunner, sent into Egypt to prepare the way for the coming of the 12 tribes into that land, and as such he pictures our great Forerunner who has gone on before us, even Jesus our Lord, to prepare the way for all His own to come into glory with Him and to share that glory together." (Ray C. Stedman, *Highlights of the Bible* .) As the years passed, Joseph came to a place just before his death when he was finally able to say to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20.)

Joseph's life should be a source of great spiritual encouragement to each one of us in the midst of our struggles as well as our victories. For in it we will see that just behind all the circumstances of our daily lives stands the Master Potter molding us on his potter's wheel, then placing us into the fire, in order to finally use us as vessels so Jesus can be poured out through us into our dying communities for the saving of many lives.

As we start this new year, may our hopes and dreams become focused on Jesus rather than on ourselves. And may our prayer be,

"Have Thine own way Lord! Have Thine own way!
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still..."

Have Thine own way Lord! Have Thine own way!
Hold o'er my being absolute sway!
Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me!"

May we all have the faith of Joseph (shepherd, slave, prisoner, and ruler) and Jesus (carpenter, shepherd,

prisoner, and ruler) to trust God our Father for our lives today and for the future, for all of his plans for us are for good and not evil (see Jeremiah 29:11).

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