

BEAUTIFUL DREAMER

by Steve Zeisler

I would like to ask you to think this morning about an occasion when you were chosen for something or other, or perhaps when you were not chosen. I recently attended a Little League tryout where I watched a number of kids going through their paces, hoping to be chosen by one of the coaches who were watching. The kids were giving it all they had--hitting, throwing, and running the bases, hoping they would be the ones selected. This is the time of year also when many high school graduates are hoping their favorite dates will choose them as partners to the high school proms. Some of you may have found the house of your dreams and placed a bid on it. Now you are living in hope that you will be the one whose offer is chosen. Others of you have sent resumes to potential employers. You are wondering if those whose responsibility it is to select new employees will choose you or not.

These are but a few examples to illustrate the fact that we face many situations in life when we are left wondering if we will be among the chosen or not. Sometimes, of course, it is to our advantage to not be chosen. Take Selective Service, for example. There is one group many would just as soon pass up and not be chosen for. Then there is jury duty. I had to respond to that call recently. I spent much of one day hoping I would not be among those chosen to try a long drawn-out court case; not that I have anything against the jury system, but because I already was very busy with other things.

In this series on the lives of certain Old Testament figures we are looking at the life stories of four men who were chosen by God. Three of these men were patriarchs and the fourth was one of the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. The salvation story began when God summoned Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees and depart for a land which was unknown to him. God had determined to reverse the tragedy caused by the fall of Adam by choosing individuals through whom he would work out a plan of redemption for mankind. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were the first three men whom God chose to accomplish his will. Today we will look at the story of the fourth individual, Jacob's son Joseph.

Being chosen by God does not mean an easy life will follow. A case could be made for saying that being chosen of God is more like being chosen by the Selective Service board than being chosen for a Little League team. At times, being chosen by God results in extraordinary hardship, difficulty and danger for the one chosen. Abraham was living quite comfortably in Ur before his call by God. He knew who he was and what was expected of him. Then God chose him and Abraham was thrust out into the wilderness without an idea of where he was to go or what God expected from him. Abraham had to learn to trust someone other than himself in the dangerous years which lay ahead. Jacob was an insecure, fearful man. God called him to a difficult life also. To begin with, he had to live under his uncle's tyrannical rule for twenty years. On one occasion he had to wrestle with the pre-incarnate Christ and suffered a dislocated hip as a consequence. Then he had to return home after many years and face his brother Esau whom he had cheated. As one chosen of God, Jacob had to face many difficult circumstances in life.

We will discover that Joseph too had his difficulties. He had a different set of issues to work on in his life. In order to accomplish that, God called upon him to face hardship and suffering. As was the case with all four of these individuals, responding to God's call can often mean that, rather than receiving what we want for ourselves, we will instead learn of the resources we need to live life.

I say all of this in part because I want to comment on the ongoing controversy surrounding certain television evangelists. It seems to me that one of the saddest things about the controversy surrounding Jim and Tammy Bakker is how deeply this couple misunderstand what it means to be chosen by God. Also, they seem to completely misunderstand what constitutes what they repeatedly refer to as a "ministry." Ministry, first and foremost, is service. To be a minister is to be a servant. It has nothing to do with being given everything you

want in life. It has nothing to do with growing richer and healthier. It has nothing to do with prominence or high standing. A minister is one who is chosen of God to serve others; and he draws upon the power of God so that he may do good for others, very often to his own disadvantage and cost. All of this angling for ministry which we are seeing reported each day, as if ministry were a stepping stone to exaltation, is a very sad thing. To be chosen by God means to be fitted by the hand of God as an instrument which he will use for good in the lives of others. And this call, as we have seen in the lives of the patriarchs, will always bring with it both difficulty and blessing.

If you are chosen by God, for instance, one of the promises you inherit is that you will have peace--the "peace that passes all understanding." Your fears and your brokenness will be ministered to in a very personal way by God himself. That, finally, was Jacob's experience. Being chosen by God also ensures that we will grow in holiness; that we will live lives of increased moral beauty. We become what we really want to be: men and women whose lives are characterized, as Jesus' life was characterized by purity and humility. Also, if we are chosen by God, we are promised his continuing presence with us. He will never leave us or forsake us, Scripture promises.

But, on the other hand, we are not promised certain things. We are not promised wealth or prominence. We are not promised healthy bodies that will respond to all situations with grace and beauty. God does not promise continual harmonious family relationships. He does not promise that we will be considered great among our peers. On the contrary, we will often be rejected, even by our friends. God promises to his chosen, peace, holiness, and a sense of his presence with us. He will make us his instrument to do something good and salutary in our world. He will use us to bring others who do not know him to himself, and to help bring our fellow-believers to maturity.

Let us look, then, at the fourth individual in the line of Abraham's descendants who was chosen by God. We will see in the life of Joseph the twin results of blessing and difficulty which accrue to being among the chosen of God. Genesis 37:

Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan. These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. And his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. And he said to them, "Please listen to this dream which I have had; for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf." Then his brothers said to him, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." And he related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?" And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

There are some similarities in the stories of the lives of Jacob and Joseph. For instance, dreams and prophecies played a part in the story of God's choosing of both of them. Rebekah, Jacob's mother, learned before they were born that the second of her twin boys Esau and Jacob would be the son upon whom God's favor would rest. Joseph, as we have just read in Genesis, himself had strange dreams that had to do with his calling and choosing by God.

But the stories of their upbringing are quite different. Unlike Joseph, Jacob as a boy had to deal with his father's rejection of him in favor of Esau. Throughout most of his life he suffered from the consequences of that rejection. He became a mother's boy, and seemed unable to succeed in a man's world; he was taken advantage of by his uncle. Jacob spent much of his life struggling with understanding how could God possibly be for him when so many things in life were set against him.

Joseph, by contrast, was a "golden" boy. He was his father's favorite. He was the favorite of all indeed, with the exception of those who had to compete with him. As we will see later, he was a very handsome man. He was, in fact, an extremely talented, brilliant man. Joseph was successful in everything he put his hand to. He was a natural leader who always was sought out for his wise counsel. He was favored by both God and man. No Little League tryouts for Joseph! He was everybody's number one draft pick. He didn't have to agonize over whether he would have a date for the senior prom or not. He had his pick of the girls; all he had to do was ask. Failure in any endeavor was something Joseph never had to deal with. He was the ultimate "golden" boy.

As a freshman in college, I had to struggle with the fact that a "golden" boy was living in the room right down the hall from me. I seem to recall that he had a perfect SAT score of sixteen hundred. He was a starter on the freshman basketball team; he regularly played chess with the head of the math department; and he had the good looks of a blond-haired surfer type from Southern California--the whole bit. He was altogether intimidating to me and others until we got to know him.

Joseph was like that. He was a winner at everything he attempted. He was the youngest son for a time before Benjamin was born), and as such was his father's favorite. He also was the son of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. According to the text, his father made him a beautiful robe once, a rich garment that set him apart from others. You would have thought that Jacob, himself all unfavored child, would have learned from his own childhood to not pick favorites. Even the jealousy between his wives, who were continually bickering over who was his favorite spouse, did not seem to teach him much. The turmoil of his older sons over this obvious favoritism did not seem to dawn on Jacob. He went ahead and displayed his bias by giving Joseph a beautiful robe. But it was Joseph's own idea, not his father's, to wear the robe everywhere he went. Even when he traveled miles to find his brothers, as we will see later, he wore this robe which set him apart and which announced to all that he was his father's favorite son. He didn't have to do that.

Furthermore, the dreams which Joseph had which foretold his future prominence did not have to be paraded before his family. He never received instructions in his dreams to tell everybody that he would one day lord it over them. But he did it anyway. And not only were his brothers angry at what his dreams foretold, they were furious at the way he told them about it (verse 8: "they hated him for his dreams and his words"). There was, apparently, a degree of arrogance in his voice and that infuriated them. To rub salt in their wounds, he repeated the hurt by informing them that he had had another dream, and it seemed to portend even greater things for himself in the future.

Joseph was a chosen instrument of God all right, but, despite all of his natural attributes, he was missing something. He was lacking in humility. He would have to learn that it was not enough to know what was true, and to be brave enough to declare it, unless he was humble enough to know what effect his words would have upon those listening to him. Christians are to "speak the truth in love," Paul counsels in his letter to the Ephesians. It's just not good enough to point out error, or misjudgment, or inadequacy, or whatever. If we cannot share such things in love, if there is not some attempt at empathy with the one being confronted, then we really are not ministering as God would have us minister.

Learning that lesson would occupy Joseph for quite a while. When the Lord finally was done with him, he would be able to do both. He would be a fit instrument. Failure was one thing he never had to deal with. Unlike the kid who is last to be picked by the Little League coaches; unlike the high school student who waits almost in desperation for an invitation to the prom; unlike the job applicant who never gets answers to his resumes, Joseph never had to worry about whether he had what it takes, whether he was loved or not. "Do nothing from selfish advantage or empty conceit," Paul says in Philippians, "but with humility of mind let each one of you regard one another as more important than himself. Do not merely look out for your own personal interest, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus, that though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied

himself..." Have the same mindset as Jesus, in other words. He deliberately chose to not exalt himself, but to mingle with the hurting and needy, and minister to them.

The convicted rapist Laurence Singleton has found it impossible to find a community of people in California who will allow him to be paroled among them. Last weekend the governor of the state arranged it so that Singleton may spend the rest of his time on parole, living in a trailer home on the grounds of San Quentin prison. In one community where a man carried a sign saying Singleton deserved a break, the man had to be taken into custody for his own safety. As I have followed this case, I have asked myself what would be my response if this man were paroled in Palo Alto. Would there be a way to combine truth with love, righteousness and compassion in this instance? As Christians and citizens, we will be increasingly faced with decisions with regard to people who are infected with AIDS. It is easy to voice an opinion about rights and wrongs, but it is possible that the voice of self-righteousness will cry louder than the voice of compassion and acceptance.

Joseph had to learn a way to not only tell his brothers that they were messing up--and to tell his father that they were doing so--he would also have to find a way to minister to them in the process. God will see to it that he will learn those skills. When he finally achieves prominence, it will not be the prominence of one who seeks to lord it over all others, but the prominence of a servant who blesses others because God has taught him how to be a blessing to others.

The story of Joseph continues with our hero being sent out by his father in search of his brothers.

And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them." And he said to him, "I will go." Then he said to him, "Go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. And a man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, "What are you looking for?" And he said, "I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock." Then the man said, "They have moved from here; for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

Joseph's brothers were occupied in shepherding the family's flocks. They had apparently driven the animals north, as far as Shechem. Jacob became concerned for them for it was at Shechem they had attacked and taken violent revenge on the local villagers for their sister Dinah's seduction. This is why Jacob sends Joseph to inquire about his brothers.

It seems to me though that Jacob's ten sons, far from being in danger, are themselves a clear and present danger to anyone they came in contact with. These brothers were the "shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later" badmen of early Biblical history, the James gang of their era. They were violent, trigger-happy individuals who allowed no one to come between them and what they wanted. No wonder the man whom Joseph met knew of the brothers' whereabouts. "Oh, those guys. Yes, they left here some time ago. I heard them say they were going on to Dothan. Are the locals ever glad." Jacob's concern for his sons' welfare was misplaced, to say the least.

Verse 18:

When they saw him from a distance and before he came closer to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. And they said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer! Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!" But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, "Let us not take his life." Reuben further said to them, "Shed no blood, cast him into the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him"--that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father. So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without

water in it. Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt. And Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt.

Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. And he returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?" So they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the tunic in the blood; and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, "We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not." Then he examined it and said, "It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!" So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, "Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son." So his father wept for him. Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard.

The sight of these ten brothers sitting around a campfire preparing their evening meal while Joseph lies at the bottom of a pit must be one of the most hardhearted scenes in all Scripture. Then a twinge of conscience enters the picture. It is Reuben, who disgraced himself in a sexual liaison with his stepmother, and who still feels the sorrow he had caused his father over that incident, who experiences the first twinge of guilt. Judah is the next one whose conscience begins to bother him. He suggests that they not kill Joseph, but rather sell him as a slave. His is not a very impressive twinge of conscience, but his solution nevertheless seems a lesser evil to him. The James gang of Genesis at last seem to recognize that there are solutions to problems that do not involve wiping out people. In chapter 42 we learn that the cries of Joseph in the pit were still ringing in their ears many years later. The still small voice of conscience had by then become a shout.

But what a sorry scene this is! The brothers first plotted Joseph's destruction. Then they changed their plans and decided to sell him as a slave, thereby exposing him, for all they knew, to a fate even worse than death. They then crafted a lie to tell Jacob, their father. What a hard-nosed bunch of outlaws! A comment they make during the planning stage of their operation becomes almost a prophecy. Fed up with Joseph's arrogance, his "golden boy" abilities, his self-important dreams, they decide to put an end to this irritant. Having thus decided, they say, "Then let us see what will become of his dreams!" As we will see, the story of Joseph does not end here. They will indeed see what becomes of his dreams.

Abraham had to believe God in the face of utter uncertainty as to what the future held for him. He went on to become a model of faith for his and all generations to follow. Isaac had to overcome personal lethargy and ease of life. He had to learn instead that it was worth taking a certain stand in pursuit of something. Jacob had to learn to overcome inadequacy and fear and to take God at his word. For his part, Joseph had to overcome insensitivity and arrogance. By the end of each of these men's lives they had become instruments through whom God worked in the lives of others. The story of Joseph must be read through to the end, to the culmination of his brothers' cynical comment, "Let us then see what will become of his dreams!" Let us follow his dreams through to the end and see if they are indeed redeemable by God. As we will discover, they are.

Do you battle, like Abraham, with uncertainty? Perhaps you battle, as did Isaac, with lethargy and sloth. Are you, like Jacob, insecure and doubting? Or perhaps you are like Joseph, insensitive and arrogant? Perhaps you suffer from a combination of all of these negative traits. If you are indeed chosen by God, he has called you into a relationship with himself. He is headed in a certain direction with you, and he will not fail you. Let us see what becomes of the dream of each life represented here. Let us encourage one another as that dream is realized. God did not choose us so that we might be exalted before others. He did not choose us so that we might be wealthy and have high standing in our communities. He chose us rather so that he might make us

effective servants in his behalf. Let us see what will happen to all of the dreams represented here this morning.

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Fifth Message
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