

The Story of Joseph

Reuben's Rescue

Part 39 – February 10, 2013

10 brothers sell out Joseph. 21 years later: famine. They pass a grain city, search the royal city, and unknowingly encounter him. He recalls his dreams, ignores his dreams, and throws 'em in prison.



And he put them all in custody for three days. [And told them to choose just one of the ten to return home, empty handed] – Genesis 42:17 NIV

But, why *three days*? Many scholars regard this as an implied parallel to how long the brothers held Joseph captive in the pit. But, is there any evidence?



[Flashback 21 years] ... they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it. As they sat down to eat their meal, [Is this immediately after, or sometime later?] they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites ... [and sold Joseph to 'em] – Genesis 37:24-25a NIV

The abbreviated writing style can lead a *modern reader* to assume it's more like three *minutes*.

But Moses' *original audience* would have seen as *obvious*, a timespan description we only see as *odd*. "The cistern was empty" and "there was no water in it". *Two separate* details. The cistern was empty, so there's no danger of drowning, *but* ... there was *no* (drinking) water in it. Not even a drop! This would *leap out* at a culture so attuned to a hot climate.

And, this *ticking clock detail* would only be added if it directly affected Joseph's survival which, under those conditions, would've been between 48-72 hours, that is, sometime *on* the third day.¹

Now, Joseph imprisons his *abusers* for three days, *because* we're all bent on reacting to unkindness *in kind*. *But*, Joseph changes his mind, submits to God's will, and confesses his faith. Whenever we restrain this natural inclination, and *choose* to respond to please *God*, we become *living praise*. And not only do we *not sin*, but we free His hands to work on our behalf.

¹ A healthy adult can go 3-5 days without water; but, as temperatures rise, survival time decreases. In Dothan, Israel, at the end of summer (when cisterns would be empty), the heat, offset by the shaded pit, would reduce this to 48-72 hours.

On the third day, Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear [the One] God: [their God!] If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households. But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die.” This they proceeded to do. [What do they proceed to do?] – Genesis 42:18-20 NIV

They proceed to choose which brother to abandon in prison.

... Joseph said to them, “Do **this** and you will live ... **let** [other translations say, “leave” or “choose”] one of your brothers [to] stay here in prison ... **This** they proceeded to do. [Now, like Joseph, we get to listen in on their thought process as they make the decision] They said to one another, “Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that’s why this distress has come upon us.” – Genesis 42: 18b-19a, 20b-21 NIV

It’s no coincidence that they see *God’s* hand, and confess *their* guilt, *after* Joseph responds, perhaps *reluctantly*, to please God. They’re overwhelmed with relief. Their families will be fed! And the harsh man who changed his plan just said *their God* made it happen! They’re convicted by Joseph’s expressed obedience! And in the face of unmerited mercy and undeserved grace, they no longer blame their father for his favoritism. They don’t condemn Joseph for his teenage conceit and condescension. No excuses. So long as you blame someone else, you avoid what God’s trying to address in *you*. So, avoid blaming or you’ll avoid healing.

But, what’s this have to do with deciding on who stays? Simple: they’re agreeing on why God has put them there, so that they can choose the brother most responsible in God’s eyes.

Reuben [Jacob’s #1 son] replied, “Didn’t I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn’t listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood.” [He’s quoting God’s covenant with Noah regarding murder (Gen 9:5-6)] – Genesis 42:22 NIV

Time won’t heal a guilty conscience: loved ones we’ve hurt. Lies we’ve told. Gossip we’ve spread. People we’ve used. Cruel wounds and hurtful scars, *we’re* responsible for, haunt our memories. When Joseph yelled, in Egyptian, do you think his older, harsh voice subconsciously triggered memories of his young, distressed pleas that had haunted, followed, and finally caught up to them? The internal ache lingers, longing to be freed, begging us to acknowledge, repent, and take surrendered, obedient steps toward making amends and bringing reconciliation whenever possible.

Why is only Reuben quoted by name? As the eldest he was, by default, the *most accountable*.



So, he reminds them that he was *against* their plan. What was their plan? To kill Joseph, to hide the body, and to say an animal had attacked him. (37:20)

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. – Genesis 37:21-22 NIV



Why would Reuben *now* say that they did what he said not to do, and that they must pay for Joseph's blood? And why does he quote God's covenant regarding *murder* if they came to look for Joseph? When Reuben left his brothers, in order to return to the pit, to rescue Joseph, the brothers decided to go through with their plan. But God had timed this murderous moment with the arrival of Ishmaelite traders, and the troubling of #3 son, Judah's, conscience.

Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? [Hide the body] Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him ..." [Joseph is in the cistern] – Genesis 37:26-27a NIV

[Now we come to the cliffhanger] When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. [in anguish] 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 ... – Genesis 37:29-32a NIV



This is when young Yeshua bar Yosef (Jesus, son of Joseph) would've said, "Rabbi! You've left something out. What did they tell Reuben?" "It doesn't say." "But, the Word says Reuben excelled in power and was turbulent as the waters (Gen 49:3-4) did he take his sword and go after the Ishmaelites?" "No. He helped to deceive his father." "Why?! He would've given his life to save him!" "You're getting very worked up. I think we better stop." "No, I'm okay. Read more." "Okay. All right. Now let's see, where were we?"

[And we don't hear from Reuben again, until in the prison when he says] "Didn't I tell you not to sin against [kill] the boy? But you wouldn't listen! [You did it anyway!] Now we must give an accounting for his blood." [His murder] – Genesis 42:22 NIV

Young Yeshua would've jumped up, "That's why he didn't go after the spice traders! He was told they'd gone through with their plan! They needed Reuben, as the eldest, to present the robe to their father, Jacob; and they knew Reuben's torn clothing, and anguish, and broken heart, and genuine tears would convince Jacob, and cover their sin! Reuben doesn't even know the *real reason* the others wanted to come to the capital! Reuben went to the pit, on the third day, found it empty, and thought Joseph was dead. He doesn't know, even now, that Joseph's alive and listening, and so close he could touch him!"

They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. [... which is *so important*, in order for Joseph to know, in his heart, that their confession is for real] – Genesis 42:23 NIV

So much of the cure is in the confession. God is always sovereignly doing so much more than we ever imagine. And *that's* what we trust. He's always working to heal that internal ache.

Why didn't Joseph, when in power at Potiphar's, or now with his wealth and authority, send someone to see if his father, Jacob, needed to be rescued from his ten wicked brothers? This is the key to unlocking so much in this incredible story!

No doubt, in that pit, Joseph felt what Jesus spoke on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But, the rabbis have always taught that Joseph thought his earthly father had forsaken him as well.

Joseph was spoiled. He caused family discord. And when he shared his 2nd dream his offended father turned on him, and publically rebuked, and likely shamed and devastated, his overindulged son. Then, his father sent him, all alone, to his brothers in Shechem, who weren’t in Shechem. However, a stranger approached *him* and directed him to the middle of nowhere, alongside a trade route.

Ambushed. Beaten. Mocked. Most likely taunted over his father’s rebuke. He’s held captive until, as though prearranged, a caravan of his father’s relatives come and collect him.

He knew the story of Great Grandpa Abraham rallying 318 trained men to rescue his nephew, Lot, who was similarly taken captive. (Gen 14:12-16) But no one is ever sent to Egypt to even check on Joey. So, when he names his son, *Manasseh* (to forget), he doesn’t say he has thankfully forgotten his *brothers*, but his *father’s house*. How else to explain why Joseph *never attempts* to determine or ensure the safety of his father? He thought he’d been forsaken.

Reuben’s statement would’ve confused Joseph ... *momentarily*. “They sold me. Enslaved me. They’ve come *looking* for me. Why’s Reuben saying they murdered me?! Why aren’t they correcting him? They’re not trying to deceive *me*. They don’t even know I can understand their language.” Oh, to be there in that moment when the truth began to dawn ... “Reuben thinks I’m *dead*. Reuben thinks *they* think I’m dead. Reuben wasn’t there when I was sold. *Reuben was told I was killed!* Even now, they’re afraid to tell turbulent Reuben the truth, because of what he’ll do to *rescue me!* And if *Reuben* is still deceived about my death, then *my father* never ...”

And on the third day, in that prison chamber, it was revealed, as it later was with Jesus, that his father *hadn’t* forsaken him. And the emotional shockwave hits like a turbulent tsunami!

He turned away from them and began to weep ... – Genesis 42:24a NIV

He doesn’t even have time to leave the room! He weeps with the staggering realization that, as unimaginable as it was only minutes before, true reconciliation is now actually doable. Reuben thought he’d failed to rescue Joseph; but, he was just unaware of the moment *God* had ordained for his rescue to come.

It’s easy to conclude that God has forsaken us when *we* haven’t taken the obedient steps that free His hands. And yet, we so often resent His *lack* of blessing in our *disobedience*. But, His love won’t enable our sin ... or *anything less* than our *best*. When you surrender to God’s Word and will and ways, you’ll see: you were never, ever forsaken; He’s only been patiently waiting.

“Rabi, Rabi! Who’d they choose to stay?!” “Simeon, of course.” “Why *Simeon?*” “Oh, little Yeshua bar Yousef, *God Himself* needed Simeon to stay! It’s a *great story*. It’s ... next week.”

Because, *this* is where we have to close God’s story for today.