

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 30, 2009**

NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE

Genesis 37:2-11

Last Sunday we concluded our look at the Lord's Prayer. Today I invite you to begin with me a study of the life of one of the great men of God in the Old Testament and the lessons of his life for our lives today. I'm speaking of Joseph, the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons, the first son born to Rachel, the true love of Jacob's life.

Rachel had been childless for many years. In that culture, to have no children was a badge of shame and dishonor. The greatest stigma for a woman in that time was infertility. It was considered a disgrace. But we read this in Genesis 30, beginning in verse 22:

Then God remembered Rachel. He listened to her (prayers) 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 (which means "may He add") and said: "May the LORD add to me another son" (30:22-24).

Joseph's story is told in great detail beginning in Genesis 37. Let's look together at God's Word from Genesis 37, beginning with verse 2.

Joseph is a common name. (Bet you already knew that.) In fact, it is the 10th most common first name in the U. S. today. After:

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| 1) James | 6) William |
| 2) John | 7) David |
| 3) Robert | 8) Richard |
| 4) Michael | 9) Charles |
| 5) Mary | |

There is only *one* female name – Mary – in the top ten most common. Does that mean there are more girls' names to choose from? Keep in mind, this is not a list of the most popular baby names at the moment, but the most common names of people living in the U. S. (Source: www.namestatistics.com).

Lots of famous people are named Joseph or Joe: Vice President Joe Biden and U. S. Senator and former Vice Presidential candidate Joe Lieberman. Singer Joe Jonas, one of the Jonas brothers. Hall of Fame football quarterbacks Joe Namath and Joe Montana. We can't leave out Redskin greats Joe Gibbs and Joe Theismann. Or "Mean Joe" Green of the Pittsburgh Steelers, who has four Super Bowl rings. Baseball Hall of Famer Joltin' Joe DiMaggio who holds the Major League record for hitting safely – 56 consecutive games in 1941. In 68 years since, no one else has ever come close to his record. Closest since then was Pete Rose's 44-game streak in 1978. DiMaggio was once married to movie star Marilyn Monroe. In the

1960s, long after his playing days were over (he retired from the New York Yankees in 1951), Simon and Garfunkel sang about him in their song “Mrs. Robinson.”

“Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio
A nation turns its lonely eyes to you
What’s that you say, Mrs. Robinson
Joltin’ Joe has left and gone away”

We can’t forget Joe the Plumber from the 2008 presidential campaign. And then there is perhaps the most famous Joe of all – G. I. Joe.

Joseph is an important name in the Bible. First and foremost we think of Joseph the carpenter from Nazareth, the husband of Mary the mother of Jesus Himself a descendant of King David. He was a man of character, integrity and faith. A man who believed and obeyed God when an angel revealed to him God’s plan for the coming birth of the Savior. The man who raised the Son of God. Also, Joseph (or Joses) was one of the sons of Joseph and Mary (Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3).

Acts 4:36 tells of a man named Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, to whom the disciples gave the name Barnabas (son of encouragement). Throughout the rest of the New Testament, in the life of Paul and others, Barnabas played a significant role in the spread of the gospel and the strengthening of the church.

All four Gospels tell of a man named Joseph, a rich man from the town of Arimethea, who was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Council of the Jews, and a secret follower of Jesus. After the crucifixion of Jesus, Joseph went to Pilate and asked permission to take the body of Jesus and put it in a tomb which had never been used. With Pilate’s okay, that is what he did. But Jesus, we know, didn’t stay in that tomb, did He?

Then there was Joseph, the son of Jacob. He was Jacob’s eleventh son, born to Jacob in his old age (Genesis 37:3). His father Jacob loved him more than any of his other sons (or daughters, too, I would guess). Why? Joseph was the son of Rachel, the wife with whom he had fallen in love at first sight. And because Rachel was barren or childless for so many long years, the birth of Joseph was an occasion of great joy and relief.

Joseph is the leading character in the unfolding history of God’s people in Genesis 37-50. The story of Joseph occupies more space in the Book of Genesis than any other individual – more than Adam, more than Noah, more than Abraham or Isaac or even his own father Jacob.

Joseph was his father’s favorite son. He may have been son #11 in birth order, but he was #1 in his father’s heart. And everybody knew it. It was blatantly obvious from the special, preferential treatment Joseph received. Joseph even dressed differently from all his brothers, because his father had given him a special robe – “a richly ornamented robe” (37:3) to wear.

Joseph was favored by his father, but hated by his brothers. His brothers conspired to kill him, but then decided instead to sell him to Midianite traders who were on their way to Egypt.

It was Judah who persuaded his brothers not to kill Joseph. In Genesis 37:26-27 he said: “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.

Such compassion on display! “Since he’s our brother, maybe we shouldn’t kill him. But it’s okay to sell him into slavery and send him away where we’ll never see him again.”

The logic fails the test, but God’s sovereign hand was on Joseph. He was sold into slavery in Egypt. He was bought by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s royal guard (39:1). Notice what happened then. In Genesis 39:2-4 it says:

The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to (Joseph’s) care everything he owned.

But Joseph would meet trouble again when, after spurning the sexual advances of Potiphar’s wife, *she* accused *him* of attempting to violate her. Falsely accused, Joseph was thrown into prison for a crime he did not commit.

There God gave him the interpretation of the dreams of two fellow prisoners, one who had been Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer and the other Pharaoh’s chief baker. Both interpretations came true, but the king’s cupbearer, who was restored to his former position, forgot about Joseph. For two more years (41:1), Joseph languished in prison.

In all these things, Joseph’s faith and character were severely tested. But God was with him through that whole time. And God was preparing him and equipping him for an important role that would actually bring to fulfillment the dreams he dreamed as a 17-year-old in Genesis 37.

In Genesis 41, when Pharaoh himself had two dreams which no one else could interpret, God gave Joseph the interpretation – and Joseph gave God the credit. When Pharaoh said to Joseph (41:15), “I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it,” Joseph was quick to say to Pharaoh (41:16), “I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

After Joseph explained to Pharaoh the meaning of his dreams, warning him of seven years of famine following seven years of prosperity and surplus, and giving him wise council, Pharaoh took Joseph from the prison to the palace and put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt (41:41).

It had been thirteen years since his brothers sold him into slavery. Joseph had been through a lot in those thirteen years, but when he entered Pharaoh’s service, Joseph was only 30 years old (41:46). But God had prepared him. And God was with him.

You probably know the rest of the story. Because the famine had reached Canaan, Jacob sent his ten older sons to Egypt to get grain. Joseph recognized his brothers when he saw them, but they did not recognize him. And they never would have expected him to be the governor of all Egypt.

Joseph sent them back to Canaan to get their youngest brother, Benjamin, who, like Joseph, had been born to Rachel. After some intrigue, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers in an emotional reunion (Genesis 45). The brothers returned home to tell Jacob that the son he thought he had lost was still alive, and was the ruler of Egypt. “Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them,” the Bible says (45:26). But they convinced him, and all of Jacob’s family traveled to Egypt. Counting the sons born to Joseph in Egypt, the family of Jacob totaled 70 in all.

The descendents of Jacob, the people of Israel, would settle and flourish and increase and live in Egypt for 400 years, after which they would be enslaved in Egypt by a king (Pharaoh) who didn’t know about Joseph (Exodus 1:8). But God did not forget about His people, and sent Moses to be their deliverer, to lead them out of their bondage in Egypt to the land God had promised to give them. And God kept His promise.

But I don’t want to rush through the story too quickly. Though Joseph may be a familiar and common name, this Joseph was an uncommon man of dreams and destiny. He was not your average Joe. In the verses we read in Genesis 37, it says that when he was 17, Joseph had two dreams, each very similar to the other, and he told his brothers about both of them, which only made his brothers hate him more (37:8).

Joseph didn’t need to tell his brothers the dreams. It wasn’t the wisest move. Not the smartest thing he ever did. It was, I think, an act of youthful exuberance. I think Joseph fueled the fire of his brothers’ jealousy and envy and anger toward him by his own immaturity and boastfulness. He didn’t need to tell them or his father about the dreams. Talking about his dreams only added insult to injury. It only made things worse. He would have been smarter, I think, to keep the dreams between himself and God.

Self-confidence can be a good thing. Self-confidence rooted in God-confidence is a good thing. At that point in his life, when he was 17 and basking in the special treatment received from his father, Joseph was too full of himself. In Romans 12:3, Paul says: “By the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.” I think Joseph thought too highly of himself, and God orchestrated the circumstances of his life, especially the hard things – being rejected by his brothers and sold into slavery, cut off from his family and then unjustly imprisoned in Egypt – to temper him. To refine his character and his faith. To prepare him through pain and suffering and prison for the great purpose, the great mission of his life.

The dreams he dreamed as a young man, immature and unwise as he was to boast about them to his brothers, would be fulfilled in his life. In the providence of God, he did rule over his brothers, his father Jacob, and all of his father’s family. If you wonder why Joseph had two

dreams and not just one, Joseph himself gives the answer in Genesis 41:32, when he says to Pharaoh concerning the two dreams Pharaoh dreamed: “The reason the dream was given to (you) in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.” The second dream was a divine confirmation of the first.

Even though as a 17 year old, Joseph still had some serious growing up to do (which is true of us all at 17), God was serving notice that He had big plans for Joseph, and He was going to make it happen in Joseph’s life. But there would be a lot of pain, a lot of disappointment, a lot of setbacks, a lot of rejection, a lot of hardships along the way.

Through it all, Joseph learned an important life lesson. He learned that life doesn’t always turn out the way you expect or hope. Did the dreams of his youth eventually come true? Yes, they did. But I’m sure the journey Joseph took through life to get to the place was unlike anything he ever expected.

Life doesn’t always turn out the way we hope or expect. Has your life turned out the way you thought it would? Or hoped it would? Maybe your life has turned out better or harder than you expected. Or maybe it has turned out both better and harder. Has God allowed experiences of hardship and pain and loss in your life that you wish you could have avoided? That is true for many of us. Maybe all of us. It was true for Joseph. And, as was true in his life, it may be true for us as well that it is precisely the experiences of pain and suffering and loss, the times of hardship and heartache, that God uses to fit us for His service and to reveal the indispensable measure of His grace.

Joseph, for his part, learned to trust in God, not in himself. He learned to put his confidence in God, not in himself. He came to learn that his sufficiency was in God, not in himself. A valuable lesson for each one of us to learn.

Through all his troubles, Joseph never stopped believing that God was with him, and that God had a purpose for his life. Do you believe that? Do you believe God is with you? I’ll tell you this: If you belong to Christ by faith, if you have experienced His saving grace in your life, not only is God *with* you as He promised. The Bible says in Romans 8:31 that God is *for* you. And it says in Colossians 1:27 that Christ *in* you is the hope of glory. God is with you, for you and in you.

And He has a purpose for your life, a sovereign and gracious plan He is working out, even through the trials and troubles and hardships of your life. He may not put you in charge of Egypt, but He will not let your suffering or your life go to waste. You can count on it.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory or Your name. Amen.