

## A Life of Wisdom (Genesis 37-50)

Series: *Becoming Wise*

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Faith Evangelical Free Church | 10.23.22

I want to begin this morning by asking you all to consider the question: *What does the life of a wise person look like?*

- What is it about someone who, when you look at them and consider the way they live, the things they do, maybe even the way they appear, it makes you think “that person is so wise! They have it all together! They understand so much more than I do.”

Perhaps a wise person is someone who always seems to make good decisions. Their life seems full of success, abundance, and blessing.

The Collins English Dictionary, as part of its entry for “wisdom” says,

*“A wise person is able to use their experience and knowledge in order to make sensible decisions and judgments.”*

Collins English Dictionary

So perhaps we’d know a wise person by the measure of their sound judgment and the quality of their life experience.

Out of curiosity I googled the question “what does a wise person look like”, and this was the first image that popped up:



For those of you who are unaware, this bearded sage is actor Sir Ian McKellen as “Gandalf the Grey”, from Peter Jackson’s adaptation of JRR Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings*. I am not sure if his image being #1 from this search says more about our culture’s perception of who is wise, or reveals how often I’ve been searching for plot summaries of The Silmarillion while watching the new Lord of the Rings series, *The Rings of Power*.

A comforting definition and a kindly old wizard fit very well with the world’s perception of who is counted among the wise. But as Christians, we believe that wisdom must be characterized by something greater than our experiences and stronger than even our most favorite fictional wizards.

Over the past few weeks we have spent time in the books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Daniel, and in every single one we were reminded that **“the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge”**, and that true wisdom is ultimately about **having a right relationship with and reverent attitude toward God.**

With this in mind, I want to take some time today to consider the question, “*what does the life of a wise person look like*”, by examining the biblical account of a man named Joseph. His story, found in Genesis 37-50, has a great deal to say on the subject of wisdom. There are examples of both very wise and extremely foolish people – with Joseph himself being a bit of both from time to time.

There are many insights we can gain from Joseph’s story, but today I want to focus on three that help us grasp what a life of wisdom might – and might not – look like. As we survey these 14 chapters, we’ll see:

- A life that lacks wisdom creates disaster
- A life committed to wisdom produces perseverance
- A life full of wisdom makes it possible to trust the plans of God.

### **A Life That Lacks Wisdom Creates Disaster**

You would never know, after reading the beginning of Joseph’s story in Genesis 37, that you were being introduced to someone regarded as one of the wisest men in all of Scripture. Joseph’s story gets off to a rough start:

*2 This is the account of Jacob’s family line. 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. 3 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 an ornate robe for him. 4 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.*

Genesis 37

Joseph is first introduced as a 17 year old tattle-tale and snitch. In v2 when it says Joseph brought his father, Jacob (also called Israel), a “bad report” about his brothers, the Hebrew word translated as “bad report” was also used to describe slanted or even slanderous gossip. We’re not told what the brothers were up to, but even if Joseph is technically reporting the truth, he is very much doing it in a way that casts his brothers in the worst possible light. He’s tattling to score brownie points with his dad.

How many of you have siblings? And where are all my fellow youngest siblings at? Be honest now...you know this move, right? You’ve run this playbook before. And so you know that while it might work to improve your short term status with a parent...it almost always creates long term problems and conflict with your sibling. As we will see, this will be true for Joseph.

Jacob, Joseph’s father, apparently “loved Joseph more than any of his other sons”, and made this favoritism obvious by giving Joseph “an ornate robe”. And whether it was just a finely made garment or a technicolor dreamcoat, it had one very ominous effect: “*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.*”

Pretty bad, right? Just wait...it gets worse.

5 Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. 6 He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: 7 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." 8 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.

Genesis 37

Joseph tells his brothers all about a dream he had that seems to indicate that one day he will be in charge. It did not exactly do anything to improve their feelings towards him (After a second similar dream, he once again tells his brothers and they once again are said to be angry, hateful, and jealous). Nor does it do too much to build up his character in our own estimation. As one commentator noted, Joseph might be introduced as morally good, but he's also an immature, tattletelling, braggish, spoiled brat.

Joseph's poor character eventually catches up with him. The rest of Genesis 37 goes on to tell of how one day he's sent by his father into the grazing fields to bring back a report on his brothers. As he approaches – while wearing his fancy robe in an unbelievable display of audacity and insensitivity – his brothers jump him, strip him of his robe, throw him into a cistern (probably like a dried out well), and even consider killing him. They instead sell him into slavery, and tell Jacob that his precious favored son was mauled to death by wild animals (they even dip the ornate robe in goats blood for added effect). The news devastates Jacob and negatively impacts the family for decades to come.

Here's what I want you to notice about the beginning of Joseph's story: there is a complete and utter **lack of wisdom** from everyone involved. No one in this story seems particularly close to or in right relationship with God. In fact, God isn't even mentioned! No prayers are offered, no counsel is sought for the interpretation of Joseph's dream, and no one has anything even remotely close to compassion or consideration for another.

And it is the total **lack of wisdom that creates disaster**. It destroys this family. The fear of the Lord is nowhere to be seen in Genesis 37, and the consequences of that absence are devastating.

In just a moment we'll see how things turn around for Joseph and his family, but first I want to sit with and really consider what we see happen here at the start of his story. It is tragically comical how easy it would be to sit down with the Book of Proverbs and tick off how many ways Joseph, Jacob, and all the brothers fail to pursue the ways of wisdom. For example:

2 When pride comes, then comes disgrace,  
but with humility comes wisdom.  
3 The integrity of the upright guides them,  
but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

Proverbs 11

Which parts of verses 2-3 sound like Joseph and his family? Their pride led them to disgrace. Their unfaithfulness and duplicity toward each other, and perhaps even toward God, destroyed them. **Because a life that lacks wisdom creates disaster.**

We ignore our need for a good relationship with God at our own peril. Because make no mistake, the difference between you and me and Joseph and his family is not very large. We can all blow up our lives just as quickly with our own pride and selfishness and sin.

Now, be sure to hear me clearly: ***Not every disaster that comes our way is caused by a lack of wisdom*** (sometimes life is just hard, ask Job!). But when we experience life crashing down around us, when things get so hard and we feel alone or lost or hurt...we should take a moment and honestly ask ourselves these questions:

*Is what I am experiencing a result of my lacking wisdom?*

*Am I in the situation I am in right now because I have failed to fear the Lord?*

*What is my relationship with God like today?*

An honest assessment like this could make the difference between creating waves of disaster throughout our life and the lives of those around us...or identifying our need to draw close to God and seek his ways.

Because when we do that, things work out a little differently. It may take time, but ultimately, a life of wisdom derived from our fear of the Lord will produce what we truly want and need: a life better connected to and blessed by God.

### **A Life Committed To Wisdom Produces Perseverance**

The next time we catch up with Joseph, we learn that he's been taken to Egypt and sold to a man named Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Things go pretty well for Joseph in the house of his new master. Genesis 39 tells us,

*2 The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, 4 Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. 5 From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.*

Genesis 39

Joseph is seemingly maturing before our eyes. When he was the favored son in Jacob's home, we didn't read anything about his work ethic or skills of administration and leadership. But, in Egypt and as a slave, he made the most of his circumstances. He goes about his labor, accepts his lot, and enjoys what he can for as long as he can as a blessing from the LORD. And, all things considered, it works out well for him.

And then...along comes Potiphar's wife. She becomes lustfully smitten with Joseph, and repeatedly invites him to her bed. Joseph refuses her every time, but in vv8-10 we learn that his reason he's so committed to saying "no":

*8 But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. 9 No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. **How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"** 10 And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.*

Genesis 39

Joseph grounds his refusal to sleep with Potiphar's wife in one very important truth: **doing so would be a "wicked thing" and a "sin against God"**. Joseph's motivation was obedience to God. His fear of the Lord – his commitment to maintaining a right relationship and reverent attitude toward God – kept him clear from the dangers of an adulterous woman. No matter how hard she tried, she could not get Joseph to compromise his faith or abandon his wisdom. His commitment to wisdom produced the perseverance necessary to flee from sin and remain righteous.

That perseverance was then put to an even greater test. After yet another attempt to get Joseph to sleep with her, Potiphar's wife turns against him and falsely accuses him of sexual assault. Potiphar responds by throwing Joseph into prison. That could have been the end of Joseph's story, but once again we see him rally to make the most of his circumstances. At the end of Genesis 39 we find Joseph trusted by the prison warden, even to the point of being put in charge of *"all that was done there."* Once again, 39:23 tells us, *"the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did."*

Thanks to the perseverance instilled in him by his wisdom and his fear of the Lord, in chapters 40-41 Joseph will maintain his faith in God even while enduring years of being forgotten in prison. Eventually, Joseph is given the opportunity to interpret the dreams of the Pharaoh of Egypt. After his interpretation gives Pharaoh the insight necessary to enjoy 7 years of blessing followed by 7 years of terrible famine in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh declares,

*39 "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."*

Genesis 41

We often think about wisdom and its relationship to blessing. We want it to be simple: when I am wise, I get blessed. And sometimes it does work out that way...but it's not guaranteed. We still live in a world that is full of sin and is, to be blunt about it, often cruel and unfair. Fearing the Lord does not always put you on the best of terms with the world around you. People will not always understand the choices you make. They may even be angered by what appears to them to be foolishness. But it is always, always better to seem a fool to the world while walking on the right path of a godly, righteous life.

Look for the wisdom of God to build up not only your blessings, but your perseverance as well. Take the counsel of Proverbs 4 seriously:

*5 Get wisdom, get understanding;*

*do not forget my words or turn away from them.*  
6 *Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;*  
*love her, and she will watch over you.*  
7 *The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.*  
*Though it cost all you have, get understanding.*

Proverbs 4

The wisdom of the Lord is worth the cost. And that cost may be very great indeed. So before you assume you are wise because of the good things that fill your life, ask yourself this:

- *Is your relationship with God dependent on His blessings...or is its foundation on God Himself?*
- *Are you wise because, for now, things seem to be going well?*
- *Or are you wise because you know, no matter what, God is with you and you are with God?*

A life committed to wisdom produces the perseverance necessary to remain in right relationship with God, no matter what. And, ultimately, that perseverance will lead to the incredible gift of better understanding and trusting the plans of God.

### **A Life Full of Wisdom Makes It Possible To Trust the Plans of God**

The next phase of Joseph's story is really quite beautiful. Our time does not allow me to go into all the details. But in 42-49, Joseph rises to power, becoming second only to Pharaoh himself. He saves the land from the famine he wisely discerned was coming from Pharaoh's dream. And then is confronted with the challenge of reconciling with his family. Joseph ends up forgiving his brothers, being reunited with his father, living with his family to the good old age of 110.

But there is one more story we should look at to complete the profile of Joseph's life and walk of wisdom. After Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers start to get worried. What if Joseph is still made about that whole "beat you up and sold you into slavery" thing from way back when? Now that Jacob is gone, what is to stop Joseph from turning vengeful and using his power to crush those who hurt him so badly?

They decide to go to Joseph and literally throw himself at the feet of his mercy. But Joseph isn't after their subordination. He's lived a life that has taught him to use his power in order to serve people. The vengeance his brothers are so afraid of isn't something Joseph wants. Instead, he delivers one of the most powerful statements of wisdom and forgiveness in all of Scripture:

*18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. 19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 **You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.**" And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.*

Genesis 50 (NIV)

You intended to harm me. But God intended it for good. Look at all that has been accomplished. Look at all the lives that have been saved. Don't be afraid. God's plan was better than any of us could have imagined, all along.

***A life full of wisdom makes it possible to trust the plans of God.***

*A life full of wisdom makes it possible to see and celebrate and trust the plans of God.*

So much of what we do, collectively as the human race and individually in our everyday relationships together, is plagued by the motivation to harm one another. To get ahead. To win at any cost. To control as many outcomes as possible, even if it means causing collateral damage in the lives of people along the way. So much of the world is consumed with the idols of power, control, and desire.

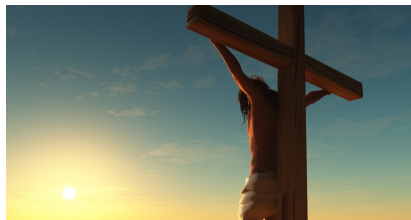
We know that people intend to harm us.

And we know, if we are honest, that there are times when we intend to harm others as well.

The beauty of God's sovereignty is that our intentions – good or evil – cannot stop His plans for redemption, reconciliation, and salvation. If we are wise, we can look at the world around us, acknowledge that it is full of pain and sorrow and sin, and still say “what God intends to do is good, and it will be accomplished.”

It has, in fact, been accomplished already. Is there any greater example of the whole hearted belief in the statement “***You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives,***” than that of Jesus Christ on the cross? Looking out on a world absolutely determined to harm him, and yet knowing that every moment of pain and anguish and innocent, unjust suffering he experienced was going to be radically transformed into something good, for the eternal saving of many lives, through the power of the resurrection.

I can't make it make sense. But here's the truth: the answer to “what does a wise person look like” isn't a powerful, magical being. It's a suffering king, hanging on a cross, dying so you and I might live:



A life full of wisdom – full of a closeness to and deep longing for God – was part of what gave Jesus the strength and courage to do what he did for you and for me.

A life full of wisdom makes it possible for us to trust the plans of God and surely as Christ did from Calvary, to the grave, to his Resurrection Day.

Wisdom makes the gospel accessible and alive and real. Fear of the Lord, rightly relating to and thinking about and understanding God, allows us to celebrate and proclaim all that God intends for good, all that He has accomplished in Christ, and all He will accomplish at Christ's return.

Ask yourself this:

- Are you more like Joseph's brothers, afraid of the harm you've done to others and the harm you believe is sure to come your way in such a harsh and broken world?

- Or are you more like Joseph, willing to trust that no matter what harm comes to you (or what harm you need to repent of doing), God will work all things for the Good of those who love him?

I know this world is a hard place to live. But trust in the good plan of the Good God. Take heart, for he has overcome the world. May your wisdom fill you with perseverance, and your perseverance lead you to trusting in the goodness of God.