

***Joseph: A Story About a Family* by Stephen V. Elliott** **Reflection/Discussion Questions**

Introduction

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you think you were shaped by the home life you had growing up?
How is it still shaping you?
2. In what ways have you noticed the connection between your relationship with God and your relationships with others? How do they affect one another?
3. Why do you think family life is often so difficult to navigate?
4. When you think of the story of Joseph, what themes or content initially come to mind?
5. Do you have any friends or siblings that remind you of Joseph's brothers?
How so?

Chapter 1 – Negatives Found in the Family Album

Discussion Questions:

1. Who is the normal one in *your* family?
2. What did dysfunction look like in your family when you were a kid? What has changed about it over the years? How does it affect relationships now?
3. Why do you think we are so tempted to portray our lives to the world as perfect or idyllic?
4. What experiences of jealousy have you sensed from your family or friends?
What were they jealous of? How did it play out in your relationship?
5. Why is it important that the Bible presents people as they are, flaws and mistakes and all, rather than “plastic, dashboard saints.”
6. What do you think are the effects of harboring secrets in the life of your family?
7. “God is on your side in rebuilding life.” Why is this, often times, so hard for us to believe?
8. How does knowing and believing the fact that “God is never limited by our failing choices or the choices others have recklessly imposed on us” alter the way we view our life as it is? How does it alter our view of God?
9. When have you seen it proven true that God “has the back of every brokenhearted parent struggling through the mess of family life?”
10. How does it change your perspective knowing that God covers for us despite what mistakes we make as parents?

Chapter 2 – When Dreams Become Nightmares

Discussion Questions:

1. As a child, what did *you* dream of becoming when you grew up?
2. What role does favoritism play in the story of Joseph? Where do we see it surfacing? What are the consequences?
3. Jacob projected his dreams for Joseph onto Joseph, much to his son's detriment. Have you experienced this in your life? Have you ever felt your parents imposed their expectations or dreams on you? How did you respond?
4. What are the similarities do you see between Jacob and Joseph?
5. What stands out to you about the story we find in Genesis 34? How do you think it impacts what is happening in chapter 37?
6. The role of deceit is a major theme in this story so far. What role has deceit played in *your* life? What role does it play in culture at large today?
7. We see a number of errors in judgement on Jacob's part. If you could have been there in the story, what counsel would you have given him? How would you approach someone in your circle of relationships who is making some "Jacob-like" judgements?
8. What are some benefits of parents spending *quality* and *quantity* time with their children?
9. "*And so I tell my kids: build your own tribe. Learn from my mistakes and build something better than we did.*" How are you building your own tribe? What are you doing differently in your family than how you were raised? What are you doing the same as what your parents did as you were growing up?
10. We see that Jacob suffered the loss of his mother Rachel when he was 15 and his grandfather Isaac when he was 16. What role do you think those events might have had to play in his behavior toward his brothers? Or do think he's simply arrogant? Or perhaps naive?

Chapter 3 – The Soap-Opera Life

Discussion Questions

1. In Genesis 35 we read about Ruben's betrayal of his father Jacob (Israel). What stands out to you about how Jacob responded? Why do you think it is significant?
2. Have you ever been betrayed by someone close to you? How did you respond?
3. Why are secrets so powerful? What makes them so?
4. When you consider why Ruben really tried to rescue Joseph, how does this change your understanding of the story?
5. What is the only way we can really unload our guilt and restore relationships?

6. The writer speaks of how Joseph's brothers developed "calluses." How do you think they developed these calluses? How do we develop them in our own lives?
7. How did Jacob respond when the brothers told him the news? How did the brothers react? What stands out to you about this exchange?
8. What makes the sin of envy so insidious? How have you experienced this in your own life?
9. What are the issues in your life and experience that make the act of forgiveness so difficult?
10. *"It is the little acts of virtue that make life work in a genuine, God-graced way."* How so? Who can you think of that warrants a 'little act of virtue' from you?

Chapter 4 – All the Right Choices, All the Wrong Results

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a situation you felt like you did everything right and things still turned out wrong or not as planned?
2. Five times in Genesis 39 the author writes that God was with Joseph in the hard places. What does this indicate about the nature of God?
3. Why do we so often expect immediate answers and results from God? Why is it so frustrating when God doesn't act as quick as we think He should?
4. Describe a time when you were waiting on God to act or to come through. How did you handle it? How did it end up?
5. What are some reasons you think God usually *doesn't* act on our timetable? What do you think such times are meant to develop in us?
6. Why do you think Joseph refused to give up on God? What could be the reasons for his steadfastness? Does it surprise you that he *didn't* lose faith in God?
7. What is the danger in making our needs turn into our rights?
8. What role did trust play in the episode of Joseph and Potiphar's wife?
9. How important is trust in our own day-to-day relationships?
10. According to this story found in Genesis 39 and the author's thoughts in this chapter, what could be the keys to trusting God and not succumbing to temptation? What simple strategies would you suggest for hanging on to trust and not giving in to temptation?

Chapter 5 – When a Dream Dies

Discussion Questions

1. What is one of the strangest dreams *you* have ever had?
2. How do you think Joseph's view on dreams changed from when he was a younger boy?
3. How have you seen in your life where your past trials have prepared you for what you're currently doing?
4. Have you experienced past trials that have actually led you to a much better place occupationally, spiritually, physically, etc?
5. *"Could it be the hard place you find yourself in is the very place God meant for you to be for purposes you cannot quite see yet?"* How does this resonate with you considering your own life experiences? What does this say about the nature and character of God?
6. *"No downward step or setback takes you out of the reach of God."* How does knowing and believing this alter the way you see and approach life?
7. When Joseph's dreams died, how did he respond? What then did he rely on? How do you think that would that work out in your own life?
8. Jacob walked with a limp after wrestling with God. What would this have signified to Jacob's son Joseph?
9. In what ways does God's favor and blessing look different than what we imagine?
10. What ultimately makes trust possible even in the hardest of circumstances?

Chapter 6 – When God Falls Silent

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on/describe a time when you felt an "awkward silence" in your life with God. What were you waiting for?
2. What did you learn about yourself and about God during the silence?
3. What does it mean to you that even John the Baptist had his "awkward silence" with God and even John the Baptist had questions?
4. What stands out to you about the way Joseph responded to Pharaoh's request to interpret his dreams? Why did he respond as he did?
5. Who let Joseph down throughout his life? What lesson did these continual disappointments teach Joseph?
6. *"When you and I quit counting on people to deliver that which only God can give us, we are on our way to a much healthier inner life."* Have you noticed this to be true in your life? In what ways were you healthier?
7. How would you describe the fine-line between trusting people and trusting God? What makes the distinction hard to nail down?
8. Why is it important to avoid harboring resentment and bitterness in our hearts?
9. What are the benefits of being confident in the faithfulness of God? How did this change Joseph?

10. To what do you attribute Joseph's seemingly sudden possession of great wisdom?

Chapter 7 – The Man Who Could Do No Wrong

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you cried out desperately for God to intervene.
2. *“The Bible has plenty of stories of people God took from nowhere significant and brought to somewhere magnificent.”* What Bible story resonates most to you? Why?
3. *“Don’t lose your taste for hot dogs.”* What is the meaning of this saying and why is it an important principle to remember?
4. How did Joseph become a “blessing carrier?” How can we be blessing carriers in our own circles of influence?
5. What did Joseph discover regarding the meaning of life? How can we tell what *we* really live for, where we find *our* meaning?
6. The names of Joseph's sons have a significant meaning. What does this say to you regarding the meaning and importance of names and what we call people?
7. Why do you think it is so easy to forget God when we get out of trouble and things are back to normal again?
8. What choices are you making in your life that could lead to making God unforgettable?
9. What is the significance of Jesus telling us to remember Him at the communion table?
10. When we forget God, what are the implications?

Chapter 8 – The Not-So-Glad Reunion

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on/describe a time when you were reluctant to do something even though you know you needed to do it. What was the result?
2. Compare Joseph with his brothers? How have they changed? How have they stayed the same?
3. Elliott cites the comparison of our conscience being like a sundial. What does this mean? Does this comparison ring true in your experience?
4. Why is it so difficult to leave behind our “yesterdays?” What are some of the reasons our yesterdays follow us like they do?
5. Reflect on/discuss this: how have your yesterdays affected your view of the character and nature of God?

6. Elliott cites Psalm 106 where David sings about a “leanness of the soul.” Have you ever experienced a time of “famine” or “leanness?” How did you handle it? What was the result?
7. *“Could it be that God has brought a famine into your life and mine so that we will finally deal with a yesterday we thought we’d never have to deal with again?”* What do you think is God’s role in the famines of our lives? Do you think he directly causes them?
8. Joseph’s brothers came face to face with their past and acknowledged the sin they all committed so long ago. Why is it important we face our past in the light of day and acknowledge it for what it is? What does this bring about in us?
9. What are some of the positive outcomes from being in a personal time of famine or prison? What can/does God do in us during these times? What has he done in *you* during these times?
10. Where do we find the grace showing up in this chapter in the story of Joseph? Where do we find the grace of God in our own lives, and how do we respond?

Chapter 9 – Are You Sure You Want Alone Time with God?

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on/discuss a time when you’ve prayed the “Bargainer’s Prayer.” How did this play out in your life?
2. Why is it so often difficult to give up control of our situation?
3. Put yourself in the shoes of Joseph’s brothers. How would *you* have reacted upon the discovery of silver in your bags?
4. What is the danger in taking the perspective of self-pity? What did Jacob miss? What can we miss when all we see is self-pity?
5. Reflect on/discuss a time when you ignored a situation rather than addressed it head-on?
6. *“Why did [Jacob] fight so hard to hold on to Benjamin? Why did he resist what God was doing?”* What does the author suggest is the answer to these questions? What do you think?
7. What is the significance of Jacob calling God *El Shaddai* (God Almighty)? Where else has this name been used? Why is it significant that this name is used here?
8. Discuss the times when Jacob was alone with God. What happened? What is the pattern that can be found? What did Jacob learn from these times?
9. Reflect on/discuss a time where you had no other option other than to turn to God or you were truly “alone with God.” What did you learn? What was your experience? When was the last time you found yourself there?
10. As the author states, it takes pain to change the future for Jacob. In times of pain, can you/have you sensed God’s presence?

Chapter 10 – The Message Hanging over Your Life

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on/discuss a time when what someone said (or didn't say) had a lasting negative impact on your life? How have you handled it?
2. *"If you tell the truth about your mistakes, they become part of your past. If you try to hide the truth, they become a part of your future."* Reflect on/describe a time this has proven true in your own life.
3. Have you ever experienced favoritism, from either your parents or someone else? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
4. The author describes repentance as "less of an instant response [but] more of a continual process that results in lasting change." How does this understanding alter your view of sin and repentance?
5. Reflect on/discuss a time when you were suspicious of or didn't think you deserved grace offered to you. How did you respond/react?
6. The author states that the message found in this text is the message of Life, that we matter to Him. Do you agree? What does the message of this text say to you about the nature and character of God?
7. Reflect on/discuss a time when someone spoke a meaningful word of blessing over your life. Why was it meaningful? What did it impart to you?
8. *"Life and death is in the power of the tongue."* Why do you think we so often take for granted the words we speak over ourselves and others?
9. What are some helpful ways in which we can be more intentional about the words we speak?
10. How does understanding that our identity is not in our mistakes, but in Him affect our view of and relationship to God. How does it affect our relationship with others?

Chapter 11 – Repentance an Inch at a Time

Discussion Questions

1. *"Full repentance is life-giving and not life-shaming; it's transforming and not humiliating."* How does this line up with *your* original idea of repentance? Does this definition of repentance change your idea of it at all?
2. What do you notice about the response of the brothers in Genesis 44:1-34? What stands out to you regarding what they said to Joseph?
3. How do you think the brothers felt when confronted by Joseph? What could have been going through their minds?
4. What does it say about the brother's hearts that they came back for Benjamin?
5. Reflect on/discuss a time you came back for or stood up for someone at your own expense. What was that experience like?

6. Reflect on/discuss a time when someone stood up for you at their own expense. How did that make you feel?
7. Compare the two speeches Judah made regarding his brothers Joseph and Benjamin. What might have been going through Joseph's mind as he heard Judah pleading for Benjamin at his own expense?
8. Why is it so easy for us to, often times, lord our power or authority over someone else? Where might this tendency come from?
9. One scholar states that Judah's pleading for Benjamin to Joseph is the most moving address in the Bible. What strikes you about this address?
10. Reflect on/consider those in your life who you love despite their contradictions and imperfections. How have you reconciled to love them anyway?

Chapter 12 – Is There Any Chance for a Better Tomorrow?

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on/discuss a time when you thought you had forgiven someone or let go of an offense, but due to a reminder or a certain confrontation you realized you still harbored pain or an offense. How did you respond?
2. In your experience, what are the dangers of calling an offense “water under the bridge” rather than doing the work of forgiveness?
3. Elliott writes, *“The offense we are least likely to forgive in others is often the one we are most likely to commit ourselves.”* Does this ring true in your experience? Why or why not?
4. In your experience, why is it easier to hold on to hurts and offenses rather than to forgive?
5. How does believing that God takes our hurt, offenses, and betrayal seriously alter your view of forgiveness?
6. How does understanding that Jesus paid the costly price of justice on the cross to enable our forgiveness change your view of other's need for *your* forgiveness?
7. In your experience, how has pride blocked you from forgiving someone or experiencing forgiveness?
8. How specifically does being confident in our Father's love free us to forgive? How confident are *you* in the Father's love?
9. Reflect on/describe how you felt when you *truly* forgave someone. What happened in you?
10. *“Forgiveness offers the chance at the grace of honest reconciliation, an opportunity at life together rather than death together.”* In your life, is there forgiveness that needs to happen in *your* heart? What steps do you need to take to make it happen?