

“Joseph and His Brothers”

Genesis 45:1-15, 50:15-21

Every story has a climax. That moment has arrived for Joseph and his brothers.



Abraham was the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who was the father of twelve sons, from whom God would grow the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph was the long-awaited first child of Rachel, Jacob’s true love. If you’ve seen the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, you know the basics of the story.

Joseph’s life begins with great hope. He has a gift for dreams that reveal much. He is his father’s favorite. Jacob gives him a beautiful coat to wear and frees him from the hard work assigned to his eleven brothers. But there is a darkness present as well. Jacob’s favoritism and Joseph’s dreams create an explosive family situation.

The brothers’ envy and anger eventually boil over. They consider killing the boy, who is perhaps seventeen or so. Instead, they sell him to some passing Ishmaelite traders which is nonetheless tantamount to killing him. Indeed, the brothers make up a story about his violent death for their heart-stricken father, even using Joseph’s beautiful coat.

Joseph ends up in Egypt, a servant to the captain of Pharaoh’s guard, Potiphar. Joseph has to reject the sexual advances of Potiphar’s wife, who accuses Joseph of trying to rape her and has him tossed into prison. Joseph’s gift for interpreting dreams gets him out of prison and, remarkably, he rises to become chief administrator of Pharaoh’s empire.

Joseph’s dreams reveal to him that there will soon be a lengthy famine in Egypt. Armed with this foresight, Joseph saves Egypt from starvation. When the famine threatens Canaan, Jacob’s sons make their way to Egypt to buy food. There, they stand before Pharaoh’s right-hand man . . . Joseph! The brothers don’t recognize him, but Joseph sure recognizes them. He accuses them of being spies and says he will sell them grain, but they must bring the missing brother (for they have traveled without Benjamin¹) to show that they have told the truth. Joseph hangs on to Simeon to ensure their return. But, of course, the question is whether they will return? Or will they abandon Simeon as they “abandoned” Joseph?

Though it will become clear that Joseph wants to heal the breach with his brothers, it is understandable that he would set things up so that he can observe his brothers and see what comes of it all. The brothers claim to be “honest” but are they? Have they learned anything since their sale of the young Joseph? Also, by his questions, Joseph is able to learn about the family circumstances.

There are many twists and turns in the story, and Joseph has a lot of trouble keeping control of his emotions through it all. It is a well-told tale and I hope you’ll grab a copy of Peterson’s *The Message* and read the whole thing (Genesis 37-50). It might even be a little hard for you to remember that you are reading the Bible!

At last, the truth

The brothers do return to Egypt to buy more grain and, in the end, too overcome with emotion to go on with the deception, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers. Can you imagine the shock of the brothers when the “prime minister” reveals himself?! Their shock quickly gives way to fear. The brothers have every reason to expect that Joseph will exact revenge for their evil deed, that their family’s cycle of treachery and hostility will roll on.

¹ Benjamin is the youngest of the brothers and is Joseph’s only full brother, having been born to Rachel, Jacob’s lifelong love. She died during Benjamin’s birth

But the brothers do not know what we, the readers, know. God has been with Joseph in all things and Joseph knows it. Upon the births of his own sons, Manasseh and Ephraim,² Joseph said “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house³ . . . For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortune” (41:51-52). And now, with everything out in the open, Jacob’s whole family will move down to Egypt, where they will live under the protection of Pharaoh and Joseph.⁴

God’s grace and God’s work

Joseph’s forgiveness of his brothers is God’s amazing grace at work in their lives and relationships. It is God who is able to break the cycle of deceit in their family. It is God alone who can enable us to set aside our pride, to overlook the wrongs committed against us. It is God who empowers us to embrace and to forgive, time and again if need be, those in our family we love and those we must learn to love.

And through all these stories of Jacob and his sons, through all the deceit and treachery, God was moving events and people forward toward the covenant that God had made with Abraham, Jacob’s grandfather.

So often, our own confidence in God is tested by the difficulties that plague our lives and our world. We wonder where God is in it all. Yet, stories such as Joseph remind us that God is God, able to work all things toward God’s good. This doesn’t make our evil acts less evil, nor our tragedies less tragic. It just means that God can do what God promises to do.

We affirm with Paul that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). How can Paul be so confident? Well, that would again take us to the meaning and implications of Jesus’, birth, life, death, and resurrection. All roads lead not to Rome, but to Calvary!

Finally -- understanding “providence”

“Providence” is one of those old words that we don’t use much anymore. It speaks to the belief that God provides for his people’s needs. Many theological debates swirl around the question of just how God provides for his people. In today’s story, Joseph tells his brothers that what they intended for evil (selling Joseph into slavery), God intended for good. In other words, God took the brothers’ evil act and ensured that good would come from it, that God’s purposes would be accomplished through it all.

Here is a classical definition of “providence” from the Tyndale Bible Dictionary:

Providence is basically God’s provision for the needs of the [his] people. . . The classic statement is found in Abraham’s confession of faith in his life’s most difficult test. He was under the duress of God’s command to provide something he could not afford—his son in sacrifice. He struggled with the dilemma of losing his son or losing God’s friendship. In answer to Isaac’s question about a sacrifice for God, Abraham exclaimed, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (Gen 22:8, niv). The word “providence” means literally “to see before,” and therefore by implication to do something about the situation. In this case, there was already upon Mt Moriah a suitable sacrifice, “a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns” (v 13). The unbelieving analysis of that situation would understand only that through an ordinary process an animal had become entangled in dense underbrush, and coincidentally Abraham and Isaac happened to arrive on the scene. But to believing Abraham, who was led for three days toward that one point in time and space in desperate need of a divine provision, it was altogether clear to him that God, by whatever process, had stationed the ram at the place of sacrifice for his use. “Provision” and “providence” are coordinately related to their verbal root, “provide,” and are essentially and etymologically the same. However, they are

² Joseph takes a Egyptian wife. Before his death, Jacob adopts the two sons as his own and Joseph’s tribal allotment goes to his sons. Thus, in the lists of tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh are included. The books of the prophets can often be confusing because they frequently use the name of one the tribes to stand in for all Israel. Thus, the prophets will address Dan or Judah or Ephraim, for example, when they are bringing God’s word to the people of God.

³ Joseph means that he has forgotten the cycles of deceit and envy in which he was raised

⁴ But another shock lies ahead, for the family’s descendants become enslaved by later Pharaohs

theologically distinguished in usage by providence having come to mean divine provision on the basis of foresight.

The great text on providence in the NT is also set in a context of sacrifice pleasing to God. Paul had reason to commend the Philippians' sacrificial support of his missionary work. To them he stated his unbounded confidence in the providential care of God: "This same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19, nlt). The sacrifice of Christ Jesus for us confirms the doctrine of providence with a most reasonable certitude. What God initially required of Abraham but did not ultimately require (the sacrifice of his son), he required of himself and did fulfill two millennia later. It is God's nature to supply, to foresee man's need and to provide for him.

Joseph's statement to his brothers is one of the classic biblical texts on God's providence. Two others are from Jeremiah and Paul:

- "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). This word is brought to the people as they live in exile following the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.
- "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

In none of these passages, are we told exactly how God accomplishes the good his people, but are simply reassured that God is always working, always moving his purposes forward, always seeking and crafting the good of his people.

You wouldn't think that there would be much left to talk about around a topic like this, yet the most heated debates among evangelical theologians in recent years have been about God and the future. We tend to always say that God knows the future, but is it knowable? Can even God know that which can't be known? Has God created a cosmos in which randomness and free will constrain even God? What does the Bible say? How much of what we believe about God and the future is more indebted to Plato than to Scripture? But if the future isn't knowable, how can we really trust that God can do what God says he will do? . . . I think you can see that there is still plenty to talk about!