

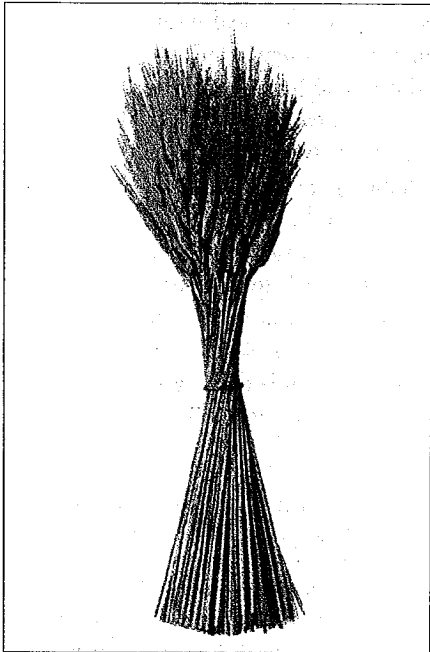
Joseph Makes Himself Known; The Reconciliation of Jacob's Sons

It all starts with a dream.

The dream is of God, as Genesis dreams are. It was given to a boy, then spoken by this boy to his older brothers. It is a curious dream that sets in motion the entire narrative of Genesis 37–50.

As the narrative begins, Joseph is not particularly likable, and the content of the dream increases our hunch that being around him was an unpleasant experience. His father already dotes on him too much for his own good. If this dream is to be believed, he will become the one to whom all will fall down. He will have power. This power is of God. Truly, God's ways are not our ways if this spoiled, insensitive boy is the recipient of such a vision.

We can see him running to his brothers after his long night's sleep. They are up early, doing chores, being good, working the fields. His brilliantly colored coat is flapping and he is beaming with the news. Energetically, he calls them to come listen: their sheaves in the field bowed down to his sheaf (37:7), then later the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him (37:9). The dream is a doublet, which means it is doubly sure to happen. It is doubly odious to the brothers.



"A sheaf of wheat"

The Plot to Get Rid of Joseph

It is not at all surprising that the brothers find no comfort in his report. All are sons of Jacob, but by four different mothers, and they know their father's favorite wife was Rachel. Joseph is the child of Jacob's old age, and his mother, Rachel, is dead. The triangle between Joseph, his brothers, and Jacob is already loaded with tension. The dream electrifies this tension and ignites the brothers' plan.

Their plotting involves some discussion. The brothers' first plan is to kill him, next to throw him in a pit. Finally they take advantage of a caravan traveling their way and sell Joseph to the traders. As the caravan makes its way to Egypt, the brothers callously show the blood-stained coat to their father. Henceforth Jacob is broken-hearted and inconsolable (37:34, 35). His grief is shocking and immense, so great that no doubt the brothers would retrace their steps if they could. But the evil deed has been done.

The Godly Dreamer

Meanwhile Joseph is sold into slavery, where by fits and starts he rises to power as second-in-command to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Taken from home as a teenager, Joseph is thirty when he is put in charge of a huge famine relief program. In the interim he has been falsely accused of attempted rape, imprisoned on that charge, and confined for some time.

It is a gift from God, the ability to interpret dreams, that accounts for his rise to power. In prison Joseph's gift is made known first to his fellow prisoners, then eventually to Pharaoh. Not only does he predict a great famine in the land, he shrewdly devises steps to protect the population and nullify its effects. The narrator makes it clear that "the LORD was with him, and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper" (39:23). Through adversity the spoiled teenager grows into a wise, successful, and highly moral man. When framed by Potiphar's wife, he asks, "How could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (39:9)

The Reunion

The horror of the brothers' vengeance lingers at home, with their father in perpetual misery. To this horror is added the distress of famine in Canaan. Meanwhile Egypt enjoys storehouses of grain built

up under Joseph's command. It has been twenty-two years since the dream. Sent by Jacob to buy grain, the brothers find themselves face to face with this foreigner, who looks and speaks Egyptian, and they bow down (42:6). The dream is enacted as they unwittingly prostrate themselves before Joseph.

Joseph recognizes them of course. He treats them like strangers and speaks harshly, through an interpreter, accusing them of espionage and then throwing them in prison for a few days. After releasing the brothers, Joseph keeps Simeon in Egypt as hostage. He sends the rest home to Canaan with instructions to return with young Benjamin, Joseph's only full brother. Again they make the journey to Egypt, again they are tried, and this time Benjamin is held hostage. The situation parallels the one with Joseph years ago. Will Benjamin likewise be lost to Jacob forever? Can the brothers possibly leave Benjamin behind? Can they tell their father that he has now lost both of Rachel's sons?

It is at this point (44:18) that Judah steps up and delivers one of the finest speeches in all of scripture. He quickly tells this foreign lord a history both know all too well. Judah's focus is on the father, for it is a sure thing that Jacob cannot survive yet another loss. The brother's plan many years ago pushed Jacob to the edge; if Benjamin doesn't return to Canaan, their father will fall into the abyss. Judah offers himself as a slave in Benjamin's place (44:33). The father's well-being is paramount.

Everything in this carefully crafted narrative leads up to chapter 45. The tale reads so well that we forget we are still in the book of Genesis; up to this point of disclosure we are hardly aware that this story is indeed God's story. The plot flows from dreams in Canaan to dream interpretation in Egypt, from brother banished to littlest brother entrapped, from calculating and deadly plots to impulsive and life-giving speech. The narrator reminds us from time to time that the Lord's hand is in all this, but the players are unaware. At times the brothers ponder: "What is this that God has done to us?" (42:28) after being framed, and "God has found out [our] guilt" (44:16) after Benjamin is held hostage. But the hand of God is not apparent to them, or Joseph, until now.

Joseph is deeply moved by Judah's speech; inside him something shifts. He clears out the Egyptian bodyguards, weeps so loudly they

"He who had first suggested selling Joseph into slavery was now willing to become a slave himself in order that Benjamin might be set free to return to his father."—Page H. Kelley, *Journey to the Land of Promise: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1997), 58.

hear him anyway, and declares, "I am Joseph" (45:3). The news is stunning. The brother they thought was dead is very much alive. Just as the disciples were terrified at the end of Mark's Gospel (16:8), so are the brothers shocked by the disclosure. They would expect the worst from this news. Here they are, far from home, face to face with the one whom they betrayed. The guilt they thought would never go away, that they had lived with for all these years, is finally exposed. Only the death of their father could be more awful than this.

"The family is suddenly set in a new context. Their presumed world has been irreversibly shattered."—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 344.

By the Hand of God

Joseph's speech in 45:4–13 is majestic, regal. It is the speech of one who has power and the wisdom to use it well. He comforts the brothers (v. 5), then gives them the real news, news that makes his self-disclosure minor in comparison. He pulls the curtain to reveal not only his identity, but the hand of God:

"God sent me before you to preserve life" (v. 5)

"God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth" (v. 7)

"It was not you who sent me here, but God" (v. 8)

"God has made me lord of all Egypt" (v. 9)

This announcement is an inspired speech. While the narrator and the reader both know that God's plan has always been at work, neither Joseph nor his brothers know this until now. The words well up from deep inside. He is no longer detached. Joseph can no longer look dispassionately on his brothers, trick them, play them like chess pieces. Nor can he continue to shove his father's grief to the back of his mind (why has he not contacted Jacob after all these years?). His speech is masterful, clear, and full of passion. It has all been worth it, it has all come to this moment, and the awareness breaks in on all the brothers (including Joseph) with astonishing lucidity.

God is purposeful, involved, active, engaged. The brothers plotted; God

"Almost as much as it is the story of how Israel was saved from famine and extinction, it is the story of how Joseph was saved as a human being."—Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 79.

planned. Joseph trapped and tricked his brothers; God touched hearts and stirred history. God works in spite of human effort and through events that appear to have their own rules and logic. The story, up until now, is a Horatio Alger “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” account. It could be a success chronicle out of an Egyptian or American history book. But what is suddenly made clear to both Joseph and the

“The purposes of God have been at work ‘in, with, and under’ these sordid human actions.”—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 346.

rest of us is that mundane matters are not what they seem. Behind the appearance is the reality of the will of God.

Even Things Not Seen

God’s sovereignty is the issue here. If the rule of God is understood as compulsion, we miss the point: God’s omnipotence is then coercive and tyrannical, while humans are automatons programmed to do “God’s will” as if this were set in stone (or hard-wired into us). But other models for sovereignty and power are made available to us through the biblical text, and Joseph’s speech makes this clear. God’s rule allows for free human agency. The will of God does not force itself on creation. Instead, as in Genesis 1, God calls and coaxes creation into being.

“You sold me here” is true; “God sent me before you” is also true. God’s sovereignty is known through God’s lovingkindness, which draws the family together (“Come closer to me”) and makes the disclosure possible. It does not compel; it invites. The freedom of humans to respond to God’s sovereignty or not is maintained. But their actions have been drawn into God’s larger purpose for the good. The loving will of God makes use of all human action.

The earlier chapters of Genesis tell us of the God who appears and speaks, who intervenes and intrudes. God is up front and center in the great sweep of primeval history, certainly, and in the narrower arena of patriarchal history. God visits Abraham repeatedly and haggles with him over the fate of Sodom. God appears to Jacob in a dream, then later comes as the dark angel to wrestle with him in the night. But the Joseph story has none of these elements.

In Joseph’s world, which feels so much like our own, dramatic religious elements are absent. There is no call of God, no discussion with God, no appearance of God. Nothing is direct or explicit here

at all. Our culture resonates with the world of Joseph-in-Egypt, a profane and secular world where it seems “obvious” that God no longer addresses us with direct speech and extraordinary promises. There is no plea for faith or response to God in the Joseph narrative. But there is, finally and fully in chapter 45, the amazed affirmation that this narrative has been God’s story, in and through and despite human activity.

It was God acting in this family, beginning with the dream, then moving through and past the brothers’ gruesome plot. God propelled the rise to power, giving Joseph the uncanny knack of interpreting dreams. It was God stirring the heart of Judah to his famous speech. Looking back through the lens of faith, the past is made clear. Joseph is able to see his story for what it truly is: “So it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” (RSV)

Thy Will Be Done

For Pharaoh and the Egyptian empire, such an affirmation cannot be made. This shrewd foreigner has saved them all from famine. They do not know that they have been blessed through Abraham’s family by God (Gen. 12:3: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”). For Pharaoh and his household, what has just happened is simply a happy coincidence. They are pleased (v. 16), and they act with hospitality and magnanimity toward this foreign family. There is no recognition on their part of the sovereignty of God or providence at work. Pharaoh’s graciousness is his own. And yet, it is God’s as well.

It is God who will act in the future by preserving life and by keeping a remnant on earth. This theme is echoed in Isaiah when centuries later, God promises that after destruction of Israel a remnant will return from exile (Isa. 10:21). The agent of the return will be, like Pharaoh, a foreigner. Cyrus of Persia will be the Lord’s anointed, and his right hand will be guided by God. Incredibly, the Lord says of Cyrus: “I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me” (Isa. 45:4). Whether or not Pharaoh, Cyrus, or we today know it is so, God’s purposes will grow to fruition. “God’s will be done,” we pray, and we do well to acknowledge that such is in fact going on as we speak.

The psalmist acknowledges that God's will is done:

The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
 he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
 The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
 the thoughts of his heart to all generations.
 (Ps. 33:10-11)

The wisdom literature of Proverbs likewise acknowledges this truth:

The human mind may devise many plans,
 but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established.
 (Prov. 19:21)

The Joseph story is an enactment of this conviction.

For the immediate future, Jacob and his large family will settle in Goshen, a fertile land in Egypt's Delta, and prosper. The grief of the father will end. Joseph fills the role of provider and comforter, but now they all know that the real provider is God.

The Brothers Plot Again

The scene shifts to chapter 50. Seventeen years have passed. The family has settled in Egypt, where they are richly blessed. As God intended in Genesis 1:28, they are fruitful and they "multiply exceedingly" (47:27). Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, are adopted by Jacob. Finally, after a long and eventful

life, Jacob blesses his children on his deathbed. A huge entourage takes his body back to Abraham's cave at Machpelah, where Jacob is laid to rest.

With Jacob's death comes a major shift in the family dynamic. The guilt of the brothers, buried for years, wells back up. What if? What if their powerful brother has buried his resentment for all these years? What if their betrayal of Joseph still defines the family relationship? What if the commanding father, now dead, was their only security?

As it always is with guilt, the past looms larger than life. They suppose that the past, *their* past, is the only reality. Revenge is Joseph's to wreak, and he holds all the cards.

Once again they make a plan. They gather in anxiety to discuss the new situation, now one without the patriarch to protect them. They approach Joseph (50:16; the NIV has it more indirectly: "they sent word to him"). They report their father's wishes, which were unknown until this moment, that Joseph forgive them the crime of long ago. Whether this message is a fabrication or not, the timing is significant. Joseph does not know the message, and he weeps when he hears it. And the dream of chapter 37, enacted in 42:6, 43:26, 44:14, recurs once again and for the last time. His brothers throw themselves down before him and cry, "We are . . . your slaves" (50:18).

The Transforming Power of God

The relationship between them is exactly what was foretold by Joseph in chapter 37. And this time, the dream is not what Joseph wants at all. The shock of seeing his prostrated brothers (who should bow to no one but God!) impels him to claim once again the recognition of chapter 45: "God intended it for good." In spite of the brothers' evil intent, good has been done. Faith understands this. The designs of humans can really be for evil, their actions can really be free, and yet the intent of God will prevail. In the twentieth century, when war and genocide seem to have had the last word, the biblical witness takes our breath away. It seems too good to be true; it is too good not to be true.

"This 'believing' is no simplistic notion that the evil we see in the world is not truly evil, but some form of hidden good. Rather, it is the stubborn faith that there is no evil dark enough that God somehow, someway, sometime cannot redeem."—H. Stephen Shoemaker, *GodStories: New Narratives from Sacred Texts* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1998), 67.

Give God the glory! Fall down, not in front of a human being, but before God! Joseph cannot utter the words of forgiveness because they are not his to give. Forgiveness is the Lord's, as Joseph reminds them: "Am I in the place of God?" From Joseph's perspective the wrong they have done him years ago has vanished, leaving him in a position of power. Or better, the wrong has been transformed, giving Joseph the ability to save the lives of many. Faith looks at God's work in the past and says, "As incredible as it sounds, I wouldn't have had it any other way."



Want to Know More?

About Joseph's coat? See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, revised ed., Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 351.

About the use of garments in the Joseph stories? See Page H. Kelley, *Journey to the Land of Promise: Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1997), 53-54.

About famine? See Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 303.

About the sovereignty of God? See Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, revised ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 166-91.

Instead Joseph gives them what they really need from him, and these are words of comfort. “Do not be afraid! . . . Have no fear.” He speaks to them kindly, moving the family into the future. Joseph the powerful one will continue to provide for them and theirs, even to the third generation of great-grandchildren. The family stands together under the protection of God, and reconciliation has occurred.

When it is his time to die (50:24), Joseph asks one and only one thing. The brothers must swear to bury him back in the land promised to their great-grandfather Abraham. Genesis ends with their oath (50:25). They will carry his bones back home. Joshua 24:32 confirms that four centuries later, the oath was remembered and his request was honored.

And God Saw That It Was Good

It all started with a dream, planned first in the mind of God. It ends with the dream fulfilled and a whole new orientation: the brothers’ long-buried guilt is uprooted and aired, the spoiled son becomes one who uses his power for the greater good. Intentional evil is transformed into the deliberate blessing of Egypt, the family, and the future nation of Israel. The plan of God is on the side of life and always for good.

With the end of Genesis we are brought back to the beginning: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (1:31). We come full circle and look at creation anew. The

intent of all creation is not perfection but goodness, not a static unchanging ideal but growth into maturity. What has begun will grow to fruition. This is what God has been doing all along, both overtly (with Abraham and Jacob) and discreetly, covertly, powerfully (in the Joseph story). At our best,

we participate with God in that pursuit of goodness. Yet, thanks be to God, God’s purposes do not cease even in the face of human failure and frailty. The Genesis story is that of God’s consistent, overriding purpose from beginning to end: that there be life, and it be good.

“The narrative now comes to a conclusion. But Genesis is not an ending. It is a beginning.”—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation, 369.

? Questions for Reflection

1. Joseph has a tremendous gift—the ability to foretell the future and the ability to interpret dreams. Unfortunately, his impetuous revelation of his gift to his brothers nearly gets him killed. What are some gifts you recognize in others? What are some ways that gifts can be misused?
2. The interplay between brothers in Genesis is interesting. Think back over the units of this study. How many of them involve the relationship of brothers? What are the different situations and common themes among the stories?
3. Joseph forgives his brothers twice (as if the brothers don’t believe it the first time). How often does the message of forgiveness need to be given so that it is heard and believed? Why?
4. “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good” is a compelling conclusion to the Joseph story, and the story of Genesis. What began on the first day of creation, continues on now into the exodus. Looking back on all the events of Genesis, what does it mean to “be good”?