



# Back to the Beginning

## Week 7: Joseph

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We begin today's message a little differently, we are going to start with scripture. Please turn to Genesis 50:15-21 as we will talk about Joseph. The words will be on the screen, and you can also turn to page 47 in the red pew Bible. Hear these words:

**<sup>15</sup> Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' <sup>16</sup> So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup> "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. <sup>21</sup> So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking**

**kindly to them.**

**- Genesis 50:15-21**

Bless the reading of this scripture.

Today we conclude our Back to the Beginning series in Genesis. The last few Sundays we have focused on the family of Abraham, who God selected to work through to ultimately bless all the families of the world as written in Genesis 12:3.

But this is one, really messed up family. I mean Grade-A quality daytime soap opera material. <show the Bible Project image of the family>. You have the patriarch Abraham who often turned away from God's timing, placed his wife in danger, and was deceitful. His son, Isaac, favored his son Esau over Jacob, actively defied God's plans, and was deceitful. Jacob was known as the 'deceiver' as Brian discussed last week, often fighting against God's plans as well. Yet God can, and does, direct humanity to positive outcomes, despite the deceitful, immoral, or unethical actions of human beings.

It's good to remind ourselves of this fact, but it is really hard to watch. Just read Genesis—it's easy to get frustrated with the folly of poor decisions or blatantly unethical actions seen from Abraham's family. Then, toward the end of Genesis, Joseph bursts onto the scene. He's virtuous in nature and provides a counter example on how to live. Scholars note that before the story of Joseph, God often interacts directly within the story, such as Jacob wrestling with God, seeing the face of God, and yet being spared as written in Genesis 32:30. But during the story of Joseph, God is working with the circumstances at hand, and it is written in scripture that God is 'with' Joseph; just as God is 'with' all of us everyday.

I think this is important to note when reading or reviewing the story of Joseph, because he is an example for us in daily life. Dr. Fred Craddock,

famous pastor from the Disciples of Christ denomination, noted that Joseph was an early example of forgiveness. In his sermon notes, Dr. Craddock wrote forgiveness is one of the most difficult things to do in life: it is hard to give, it is hard to receive, and it is hard to ask for. We're human. We do dumb things, sometimes we do horrible things - in both cases forgiveness is central to what is needed in this life, and this message can be found in the story of Joseph. A story that comes in as a breath of fresh air after the deceit and shenanigans of several preceding stories in Genesis leading up to Joseph. So with this backdrop, let's dig into the story of Joseph.

Joseph was the 11th of the 12 sons under Jacob; and the favorite son of Jacob. When Joseph was a teenager, Jacob presented him a coat with long sleeves; translations differ if it was colorful, or embroidered, but there is no doubt this coat represented a preferred status—it's kind of like dad buying your little brother a Lamborghini while you had to work to own a used Toyota Corolla (which, I love Corollas by the way). What's worse is the coat was apparently given to Joseph after he had given a bad report to Jacob on how some of his older brothers were tending their flocks. So the kid brother is in pretty bad standing with his older siblings.

Then Joseph starts having dreams—and God tells him that some day his parents and brothers are going to bow down to him. So what does a 17-year-old teenager do when God tells him he's going to be great? Why naturally, go tell everyone!! When I read this story it seems Joseph had a lot of confidence and zero tact—but he was also 17—so a little grace may be warranted!!

But do you think Joseph's brothers showed grace? How do you think Joseph's brothers reacted when little bro, who had ratted out his brothers for poor work performance, rolls up on them in his long-sleeved special coat from daddy and says—"Hey, guess what? You

will be bowing to me someday! I know because of these crazy dreams I have. Let me give you all the details.” Joseph is sharing a message that was likely meant to be private between him and God.

Joseph’s brothers are so incensed now they plot to kill him. But Reuben, the first-born son, comes up with a plan to save Joseph. Of course, instead of just taking charge of the situation and telling his brothers to knock it off, his plan involves deceit—it’s a long family tradition by this point. But while Reuben is away, Judah, the fourth son, sees an opportunity to make some cash. He convinces the remaining brothers to sell Joseph for 20 pieces of silver to a caravan of Ishmaelites headed to Egypt—which they do. They later tell Jacob that Joseph was killed and devoured by a wild animal. Fun fact: The name Judas is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Judah. Keep that in mind for a little later.

Over the next few years several key events occur in Joseph’s life. He is sold to an official of Pharaoh named Potiphar. Joseph makes a name for himself as an excellent leader and manager of Potiphar’s household. He then takes a moral stand and rebuffs the advances of Potiphar’s wife, but is thrown in prison when she falsely accuses him of attacking her in retaliation. After a couple years Joseph is released from prison and finds himself serving Pharaoh directly because he can interpret dreams. Joseph foresees seven years of bumper crops for Egypt followed by seven years of devastating famine. Pharaoh places Joseph in charge of national operations to stockpile food for seven years and then use the stockpile to appropriately save the nation from hunger the following seven years.

Joseph’s family is still living in the Land of Canaan, and they are hit hard by the famine. Desperate for food, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to procure food. Scripture reads:

**<sup>5</sup> Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan.**

**<sup>6</sup> Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground.**

**- Genesis 42:5-6**

Boom! There it is—dream fulfilled! How do you think Joseph could have acted? This could have been his mic drop moment, his “I told you so moment”, his “look at me now” moment, this could have been all about Joseph, and an opportunity to gloat.

While Joseph recognised his family bowing before him, they did not recognise him. Instead, Joseph treated them like strangers, and while scripture says he spoke to them harshly, pretty quickly you see Joseph setting up a couple tests for his brothers. This culminates with the demand that they leave the youngest brother Benjamin as collateral while taking food back for Jacob's family.

Benjamin is actually Joseph's only full brother—both were born to Rachel. Knowing that leaving Benjamin will crush Jacob, for fear of losing Benjamin too, Judah—yes, 20-pieces-of-silver Judah, pleads with Joseph to be held captive instead, and to let Benjamin free. When Joseph sees Judah's act of redemption, he can no longer hide his identity. Joseph is weeping, Benjamin is weeping, and the other brothers—well, they are dismayed. Scripture does not say they were weeping, or joyful; but they are definitely stunned. Joseph keeps reiterating to his brothers this message in Genesis 45:5 and 7:

**<sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to**

**preserve life ... <sup>7</sup> God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.**

Jacob does bring his entire family to Egypt to ride out another five years of famine. Pharaoh even lets them settle in one of the most fertile lands of Egypt.

Upon his death Jacob requested to be buried in his homeland, which Joseph and his brothers honored. Then they returned to Egypt, as read in today's scripture. And what do we see? His brothers are still freaking out, expecting Joseph to lay down the hammer, to get his revenge, to annihilate their tribes. I mean, since Cain and Abel this seems to be a primary pattern in Genesis when one has power to exercise over another.

So what do they do? They of course lie. They resort to the hammer they know—deceit. Trying to play on the heart strings of Joseph, they share a supposed final message to him from Jacob, 17 "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph knew this was a lie. But virtuous Joseph does not hold it against them. Instead, he shows them, and us, a new way to act. Joseph responded with 19 ... 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.'" Joseph not only forgave his brothers but also committed to taking care of their families too—and the brothers are weeping together.

I want to be abundantly clear on this next point. Do I think God specifically directed Joseph's brothers to abuse him, to make his life miserable, to sell him into slavery so that he would end up in Egypt—as

if this was the only path Joseph had to Egypt? No. And that is an empathic no.

The actions of Joseph's brothers were of their own free will. Just like the actions of us are of our own free will. Now, do I believe God can help direct positive outcomes despite the often deceitful, immoral, and unethical actions of human beings? Yes.

Forgiveness can be hard to give, can be hard to receive, and can be hard to ask for. But we can help God immensely, and reflect the image of God through forgiveness, just as he has forgiven us. I recognise that forgiveness takes many different forms for different situations. But forgiving someone can still be freeing, even if the one being forgiven does not reciprocate. But when they do, beautiful things can happen as this moment is written here in Genesis.

I believe the story of Joseph is an early reflection of Jesus Christ for readers of the Old Testament to aspire to. Dr. Brant Pitre is a prominent Catholic theologian who I reference a lot. When discussing how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Suffering Servant, Dr. Pitre notes Judas betraying Jesus was not the first time a righteous innocent man was betrayed for silver. Joseph is rescued from the pit his brothers originally placed him in to die, and rises to become second in command to Pharaoh over all of Egypt. Dr. Pitre contends that Jesus is not just the new Moses, or the new Adam, he is also the new Joseph.

Which is why I recommend you take time to read the story of Joseph on your own. It's one of the longer continuous stories in the Bible, and there is much more we could unpack than discussed today. Last week Brian pointed out it was ok to wrestle with God, in fact, he invited you to wrestle with God like Joseph's father Jacob did; but Joseph teaches us how God wants us to live and wrestle with life—through embracing forgiveness and resisting evil. And that's my challenge to each of us

today: Sit quietly, embracing the forgiveness necessary in your life, and then go out into the world and resist evil, however it presents itself in your path.