

36. I am Joseph

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What constitute as heroes of the Bible characters? A great warrior? Or a man who could perform miracles? Or a man with a great theological mind who writes tremendously deep epistles? Or a man who prophesied the future?

No one who does a serious study of Joseph's life would deny that he was a great man. But he never accomplished, any of the things I've mentioned. He was just your typical boy next door, who grew up in a very troubled and dysfunctional family.

So what made Joseph great? Why does God devote so much space in the Book of Genesis to his story? One reason is Joseph's attitude, how he responded in faith to difficult circumstances.

His brothers, though, still haven't presented much evidence to show that they share Joseph's perspective. But that will slowly change, with a little help through Joseph from God.

A. THE ENTRAPMENT

Genesis 44:1-5 And he commanded the steward of his house, saying, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack. 2 Also put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his grain money." So he did according to the word that Joseph had spoken. 3 As soon as the morning dawned, the men were sent away, they and their donkeys. 4 When they had gone out of the city, and were not yet far off, Joseph said to his steward, "Get up, follow the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid evil for good? 5 Is not this the one from which my lord drinks, and with which he indeed practices divination? You have done evil in so doing.'"

The brothers left Egypt in high spirits. They were treated well, had their sacks full of grain, and Simeon was out of prison. Their father's fear of something horrible happening to Benjamin would not be fulfilled.

However, Joseph is guided by the hand of God, testing the hearts of his brothers, and bringing them to complete repentance.

Some people use v5 as their basis for practicing divination. Did Joseph use the cup for divination? We know from other sources that ancient people did use sacred cups as divination devices. It is possible Joseph did also, because there was not yet specific command from the Ten Commandments that such a practice was forbidden. Now we know that we are not supposed to practice divination. It is against God's Word.

Genesis 44:6-13 So he overtook them, and he spoke to them these same words. 7 And they said to him, "Why does my lord say these words? Far be it from us that your servants should do such a thing. 8 Look, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan the money which we found in the mouth of our sacks. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord's house? 9 With whomever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord's slaves." 10 And he said, "Now also let it be according to your words; he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and you shall be blame-

less.” 11 Then each man speedily let down his sack to the ground, and each opened his sack. 12 So he searched. He began with the oldest and left off with the youngest; and the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. 13 Then they tore their clothes, and each man loaded his donkey and returned to the city. According to the steward’s bargain, only Benjamin has to return to Egypt. But, note this, all the brothers return to offer any help and defense they can. This decision on their part speaks volumes about the change in character that had taken place in their the past two decades.

Genesis 44:14-17 So Judah and his brothers came to Joseph’s house, and he was still there; and they fell before him on the ground. 15 And Joseph said to them, “What deed is this you have done? Did you not know that such a man as I can certainly practice divination?” 16 Then Judah said, “What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; here we are, my lord’s slaves, both we and he also with whom the cup was found.” 17 But he said, “Far be it from me that I should do so; the man in whose hand the cup was found, he shall be my slave. And as for you, go up in peace to your father.”

On the surface, Joseph is testing his brothers, seeing if they will still try to save their skin at any cost or if they will respond with concern and compassion for Benjamin. At the same time, he is also testing their love for their father Jacob.

In Judah’s mind, the brothers are now destined to live the rest of their lives as slaves in Egypt because they sold Joseph as a slave 22 years before. The brothers were innocent of the sin of stealing the cup but were guilty of far greater sins.

In the same way, we can pride ourselves because we are innocent of some sin or another, yet we are guilty of far greater. We can’t hide from our sins. Time does not erase the guilt of our sins, it only numbs it from our hearts. Only the blood of Jesus can.

B. A HEARTFELT PLEA BY JUDAH

Genesis 44:18 Then Judah came near to him and said: “O my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord’s hearing, and do not let your anger burn against your servant; for you are even like Pharaoh.

We are going to skip from v19 to v32 since we already know what happened at Jacob’s home.

Genesis 44:33 Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. 34 For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me, lest perhaps I see the evil that would come upon my father?”

A great Bible expositor Donald Barnhouse called Judah’s plea as “the most moving address by a man in all the Word of God.” And I agree with him. Because it was coming from his heart with the love for his father and kid brother.

C. TRUE IDENTITY OF THE PRIME MINISTER

Genesis 45:1-3 Then Joseph could not restrain himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Make everyone go out from me!” So no one stood with him while Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept aloud, and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard it. 3 Then Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph; does my father still live?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed in his presence.

Overwhelmed by the proof that these are not the same brothers who sold him into bondage years ago, that their hearts are right and repentance has done its work, Joseph finally feels that he can disclose his true identity and embrace his family.

Imagine the confusion of the brothers. First the prime minister clears the room. They probably thought in panic, "What's he going to do to us?" Then he begins sobbing uncontrollably.

The scene quickly deteriorates into a strange and uncomfortable one. The brothers look at each other, their questioning eyes full of fear: 'Will the Egyptians think we have harmed their Prime minister? But no one dares move or say a word to this man of great power who has frightened and confused them since the day of their first visit. They even are thinking that he is going to kill all of them by himself.

Eventually, the brothers can tell that the prime minister wants to say something. But who will understand him He doesn't speak Hebrew, and none of the brothers know Egyptian. Yet, when the prime minister cries out, he speaks two words in Hebrew, "Aaa-nee Yo-saphe" that all the brothers understand – and they wish they didn't.

Outside of his brothers, no one but Joseph could have possibly known that terrible truth of selling. Before, the brothers feared Pharaoh. Now, their hearts melt at the announcement that the prime minister is none other than Joseph, the brother they sold into slavery. Literally, they were struck speechless with terror. They are thinking that Joseph is going to take twenty two years old revenge on them. All they can say is, "We are so dead."

The day is coming when the Lord Jesus Christ is going to make Himself known unto His brethren, the Jews. When He came the first time, in fact, they delivered Him up to be crucified.

John 1:11 He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.

But when He comes the second time, He will make Himself known to His own people.

Zechariah 13:6 And one will say to him, 'What are these wounds between your arms?' Then he will answer, 'Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.'

Christ will make Himself known to His brethren.

Zechariah 12:10 And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.

D. GRACE TO THE GUILTY

Genesis 45:4-15 And Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come near to me." So they came near. Then he said: "I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For these two years the famine has been in the land, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. 7 And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. 8 So now it was not you who sent me here, but God;

and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. 9 Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph: "God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not tarry. 10 You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near to me, you and your children, your children's children, your flocks and your herds, and all that you have. 11 There I will provide for you, lest you and your household, and all that you have, come to poverty; for there are still five years of famine." ' 12 And behold, your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my mouth that speaks to you. 13 So you shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt, and of all that you have seen; and you shall hurry and bring my father down here." 14 Then he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. 15 Moreover he kissed all his brothers and wept over them, and after that his brothers talked with him.

Joseph knows what they're thinking, how grieved and afraid they are, and he immediately tries to comfort them. Had we been Joseph, the first thing many of us would want to talk about is how they had wronged us and how difficult and painful our life had been as a result. But not Joseph. His first concerns are compassion and grace to them. How was that possible? Because God trained and molded the heart of Joseph into His. He started to be more like his God than himself in over two decades long training.

In addition to showing compassion and grace to his brothers, Joseph also generously offers to share the benefits of the position God has placed him in.

What a stunning scene of complete forgiveness! Joseph wasn't born with a godly attitude, it was something that he, like everyone else, had to cultivate.

Joseph did not diminish what the brothers did. Yet he saw that God's purpose in it all was greater than the evil of the brothers. Joseph was a victim of men, but God turned it around for His glory. None of it was for a loss.

True forgiveness is not ignoring or diminishing the evil that happened, but it is overcoming evil with the grace of God.

Several years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a remarkably wide-selling book titled 'When Bad Things Happen to Good People'. It sold more than a half a million copies before going to paperback and was on the New York Times best-seller list for a whole year. The whole point of his book is to say God is all loving but not all powerful, that God is good, but not sovereign. So, when bad things happen to good people, it is because events are out of God's control. Kushner advises his readers to "learn to love God and forgive him despite his limitations." There is a great Hebrew word that I've learned from Israel for that kind of theology – "Hogwash!"

E. BRING THE FAMILY TO EGYPT

Genesis 45:16-24 Now the report of it was heard in Pharaoh's house, saying, "Joseph's brothers have come." So it pleased Pharaoh and his servants well. 17 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Say to your brothers, 'Do this: Load your animals and depart; go to the land of Canaan. 18 Bring your father and your households and come to me; I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you will eat the fat of the land. 19 Now you are commanded--do this: Take carts out of the land of Egypt for your little ones and your wives; bring your father and come. 20 Also do not be concerned about your goods, for the best

of all the land of Egypt is yours.’ “ 21 Then the sons of Israel did so; and Joseph gave them carts, according to the command of Pharaoh, and he gave them provisions for the journey. 22 He gave to all of them, to each man, changes of garments; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five changes of garments. 23 And he sent to his father these things: ten donkeys loaded with the good things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and food for his father for the journey. 24 So he sent his brothers away, and they departed; and he said to them, “See that you do not become troubled along the way.”

By divine providence, Pharaoh not only endorses Joseph’s plan to bring his family to Egypt, he also graciously supplies the wagons that will speed the return of Joseph’s aging father.

“See that you do not become troubled along the way,” – the Hebrew term Joseph uses is ‘ragaz’, meaning “to be agitated,” and it often refers to the last stage before a fight breaks out. Even though his brothers have just repented and feel close to one another, Joseph knows what sudden wealth can do to a family. He also knows the awful power of jealousy firsthand.

To return to Canaan with ‘carts from Egypt’ was the cultural equivalent of landing a 747 jumbo jet in the area of an primitive African village.

F. JACOB’S RESPONSE

Genesis 45:25-28 Then they went up out of Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan to Jacob their father. 26 And they told him, saying, “Joseph is still alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt.” And Jacob’s heart stood still, because he did not believe them. 27 But when they told him all the words which Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived. 28 Then Israel said, “It is enough. Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.”

With the hope Jacob had buried long ago now resurrected. So Jacob and his family pull up their tent pegs and move. This is when you hear the background music by Willie Nelson’s “On the road again”.

The reunion of Jacob and Joseph is only one of several mentioned in Scripture, each of which foreshadows the greatest reunion of all.

1 Thess 4:16-17 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Only the Father knows the exact day and time the festivities will begin.

God sent His Son, Jesus, to personally deliver an invitation with your name on it. Have you RSVP’d yet? Know how? Some say your good deeds must outweigh your bad. Others believe that you must belong to a certain denomination. Still others have elaborate rituals you must perform. But what does the Bible say? Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved. That’s how you reserve a seat at the banquet table in heaven for the greatest family reunion of all time.

If you haven't RSVP'd by faith in Jesus, it's still not too late.

But if you choose to ignore this invitation again, consider yourself have been warned.

G. APPLICATIONS

1) The true greatness of our godliness is not revealed in miraculous actions, but in our daily attitudes and responses that have been shaped according to God's perspective and compassion.

For it is of who we are that what we do will flow. So many of us strive to achieve that one great accomplishment, sacrificing everything, the loved ones around us and even ourselves, in the pursuit. We do, do, do, all the while starving character and our souls.

2) True forgiveness is not ignoring or diminishing the evil that happened, but it is overcoming evil with the grace of God.