

The Joseph Story | Broken Family/Beautiful Plan

Looking for Bread and Humility

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Genesis 42.1-7, 18-24; 43.1-10

42 Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, "Why are you staring at one another?" ² And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die." ³ Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt. ⁴ But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "I am afraid that harm may befall him." ⁵ So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also. ⁶ Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. ⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly. And he said to them, "Where have you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food."

¹⁹ if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰ and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die." And they did so. ²¹ Then they said to one another, "Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us." ²² And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood." ²³ They did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them. ²⁴ And he turned away from them and wept. But when he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes.

43 Now the famine was severe in the land. ² So it came about when they had finished eating the grain which they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, "Go back, buy us a little food." ³ Judah spoke to him, however, saying, "The man solemnly warned us, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' ⁴ "If you send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. ⁵ "But if you do not send him, we will not go down; for the man said to us, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.'" ⁶ Then Israel said, "Why did you treat me so badly by telling the man whether you still had another brother?" ⁷ But they said, "The man questioned particularly about us and our relatives, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' So we answered his questions. Could we possibly know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down '?" ⁸ And Judah said to his father Israel, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, we as well as you and our little ones. ⁹ "I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame before you forever. ¹⁰ "For if we had not delayed, surely by now we could have returned twice."

When we left off last week, Joseph, who had dreamed of going up...but who INSTEAD went down, LAST WEEK Joseph did...at long last...GO UP...out of the dungeon and onto the throne of power!

The favored son of the Patriarch Jacob (a pampered son, a tattletale) he'd been given revelations from God... dreams that HE WOULD BE EXALTED OVER HIS FAMILY AND THAT HIS FAMILY WOULD BOW DOWN TO HIM. And then...because he was so talkative about these dreams... *he became even more despised by his brothers until they couldn't stand to see his face ...and plotted to kill him!*

But instead, the fourth oldest of the 12 brothers (Judas...I mean Judah) *saw a business opportunity – they could sell spoiled Joseph to some slave traders for a bag of silver.* And then Judah...the born leader, the class-president, proposed a story/lie they could tell Dad... "Say that Joseph was eaten by wolves and here's his bloody supervisor's uniform to prove it!"

And they told Dad, Jacob, that story and it was like water falling on the wicked witch – Jacob withered, right before their eyes and it was like his soul died and he was inconsolable. When Judah saw the damage he had done and these brutish animals that were his brothers...he packed up and moved away.

And Judah lived among the pagans and tried to forget his family...and became a ruthless, harsh, *sexually twisted thug who used prostitutes and did it on credit...*and that's when he was publically shamed and his sin was exposed...and he began to "own it", to repent and to change...The ugly caterpillar went into the cocoon and a metamorphosis began.

Now, we fast forward to when Joseph, in Egypt, is given the interpretations of Pharaoh's dreams – there will be seven years of bumper crops (surplus) and seven years of drought and famine. Joseph is made the Prime Minister and he stores grain to meet the shortages and now people are coming from all over the region to buy grain from Egypt and that's when Joseph recognizes "THEM"...the family he had tried to forget, the brutish brothers are back!

I want to *consider this long episode* (two whole chapters) and then look especially at the ideas of guilt, grace and transformation (Judah now emerges from the cocoon – transformed).

If you put the time references together, you learn that Joseph is about 39 years old now. The years of surplus are past and we're a couple years into the famine years. Starvation makes people desperate.

So, as we sometimes say, "it's easier to take a leap of faith when you're looking out the window of a burning building" – the house is on fire, the world is starving and Jacob (still vital and the head of this broken family) Jacob says, "I have looked into this I know there's bread in Egypt...but you have only looked at each other and you know NOTHING. Get going!"

So the brothers go into Egypt...but Jacob keeps his youngest son, not Joseph but the other son of his beloved Rachel, *he keeps Benjamin behind...*And off they go, the 10 sons head to Egypt to buy grain.

Joseph believed that God's promises were going to be fulfilled...*maybe* as he was now in charge and as people were coming from all over to buy bread, *maybe Joseph* was on the lookout for his family and ONE DAY...they showed up! And bow down!

Remember, last week, Joseph was trying to forget them but he couldn't and NOW it's clear, God will NEVER let Joseph forget his family...the church!

So, recognizing them...but not wanting to *BE recognized*, Joseph disguises himself and begins to question them...and he's tense... seems heartless!

And this unrecognized RULER OF ALL THE GRAIN... appears to be suspicious: "Are you spies?!"

For some reason, he's obsessed with their family: "Are there others?.. Where are the others?"

Secretly, Joseph wants to know about his younger brother, the OTHER son of Rachel... "Did they DO to Benjamin what they did to ME?"

"Where are the others?"..."One brother died," they say, "and the other, our youngest, is at home with Dad..." "Liars and spies!!" says Joseph, "Send one brother back to get this missing brother and bring him to me or you all die!...IN FACT, in the dungeon with ALL OF YOU! I'll give you three days to think about it...in the pit!"

And when they come out (3 days in the pit) he poses another plan... "Leave one brother here and the rest of you go and BRING ME THIS YOUNGEST BROTHER ...

And THAT'S when they hear the sound...the beating... of the Tell-Tale Heart – do you remember that story from your High School Literature Class? Edgar Allan Poe's story of the man who commits murder and meticulously hides the body...could never be caught ... But then, the police come *and confidently he invites them in for tea*...They have small-talk and THEN...*he begins to hear it*...the beating heart of the victim...HIS GUILT begins to mock him and it gets louder and louder and louder until he screams out and confesses the whole thing.

So the brothers...have a kind of corporate flashback as they all go down into the dungeon and out again and they feel what it must have been like...As they plead with the Prime Minister...they remember the pleadings of Joseph like a heartbeat...louder and louder, *their guilt is mocking them*...GOD IS MOCKING them...And then, the eldest, Reuben says, "I TOLD you guys we shouldn't do that to our own brother...I told you so! And now it's too late...now comes the reckoning for his blood!" ("bmp...bmb...bmp...")

And unbeknownst to them, the Prime Minister (who's really Joseph) he speaks their language...and hears EVERYTHING they're saying and sees their anguish and re-lives his own anguish...*and he runs out and weeps*...It's been 22 years and it's all coming back to him...overwhelming emotion!

Then, he returns and says, "Leave THIS one behind (i.e. the second born, Simeon) and GO...don't come back without the youngest brother...GO!"

And rather than keeping the head of the group, the eldest, Reuben...Joseph frees Reuben who once was in favor of freeing him... "Maybe Reuben will convince the group to repent."

When they get home and explain the situation to Jacob...the old man is distraught. HIS pain now returns as well! And he says, "*I can't do it! I can't go through with it – I can't endure losing another child (my only reminder of Rachel, my true love!).*"

But the building is burning; the house is on fire. We have to do something; the famine is severe (43.1) ...we'll starve!"

And THAT'S when *the butterfly emerges from the cocoon*...IT'S JUDAH, the born leader who *used* his gifts for evil, who abdicated his leadership, *who was sexually loose even while Joseph was resisting temptation from Mrs. Potiphar*...Judah, who once was like Judas, who betrayed his Brother for a bag of silver...Judah steps up and takes his place, "Dad! Send Benjamin...I myself will be the surety for him... I'll take full responsibility...I'll be the collateral ...I will bear the full blame...but, please, let's DO this!"

And off they go...when they get there, the Prime Minister is ...now ...really nice.

He feeds them and let's them bathe and yet at every turn...they're suspicious...and troubled and "he must be fattening us for the slaughter...he's caring for our donkeys so he can steal them"...And they can eat and drink as much as they want...but THEY are UNEASY and... Joseph... can't stop crying.

"The End"...well ...for this week.

Now, a few ideas we can't afford to miss: Guilt, Grace and Transformation.

Guilt: isn't it amazing how even after 22 years, these guys can't forget their moral failings. The story of the Tell-Tale Heart is Poe's depiction of insanity... but it's also a vivid picture of the guilty conscience.

And you THINK... "Well, God doesn't want us to remember our failings and our guilt" Well, yes and no... This whole long episode has God USING Joseph to help these brothers...to MAKE these brothers remember their sin. Joseph is God's instrument and Joseph is putting the brothers through the very experiences that he himself endured at their hands. And he's doing it NOT to get revenge...or to say, "See! How do you like it?!" No, he's helping them and even forcing them to vividly remember.

When he says, “leave one brother in Egypt” he wants them to have a kind of flashback to when THEY sent one brother into Egypt.

When (end of second paragraph) when he has Simeon tied up and carried down to the dungeon, the pit, “before their eyes” (42.24) , Joseph is pushing them to remember the moment they did the same thing with their brother. And it all makes Joseph weep...not because he feels sorry for himself (the whole big moral of the story, the ending, makes clear he does NOT feel sorry for himself!) but because he is facing the brokenness of his family. He’s not waving a magic wand and saying “Poof! Guilt be gone!” He knows that THIS family must face this stuff if they are going to be healed and restored.

It’s an amazingly complex and nuanced way of thinking about guilt...Guilt haunts us *until we face it with a kind of ruthless honesty.*

But this is not only a kind of depth psychology of guilt...there’s a sense that justice (or even that Karma if you like – though that’s a Hindu concept not a Christian word) but the cycle of justice is being INTERRUPTED in this passage. Grace is transecting karma.

Out of the parched ground of famine...and the dry, dusty, shriveled-up, broken, parched ground of this apparently loveless family GRACE shows up (Isa 53.2).

Judah speaks of being SURETY...being a substitute, a stand-in...taking responsibility. And it’s the ringing of a bell that will echo throughout the whole Bible...The Tribe of Judah will be the *SURETY TRIBE*...and eventually, a descendent of Judah will be *the collateral for all His brothers*...Jesus Christ is born from the Tribe of Judah, He’s the Lion of the Tribe of Judah...and *HE will take responsibility for everyone who trusts in Him. Will be Surety for us!*

The Bible is setting us up, right here for what’s to come...the whole idea that ONE can STAND IN for another... The priests will place their hands on the heads of animals and confess the GUILT of the people into the SURETY...into the stand-in or substitute...The Scapegoat will be driven into the wilderness...carrying the blame ...the responsibility, the guilt of those who confess and believe. *The Scapegoat will die and the believer will live.*

And eventually, Judah’s descendent, Jesus Christ will be the lamb who takes away the sins of the world...The Lion of Judah will be the Lamb that is Slain. He lives the obedient life IN MY PLACE and He dies under the weight of the justice MY GUILT deserves... IN MY PLACE.

In this family...*they didn’t see HOW it would all play out but they WERE coming to believe that IT WOULD ALL work out because God had graced this family (broken as they were) and had committed HIMSELF to them, not because they deserved it, but only because God delights to show this most beautiful aspect of His being – favor to the undeserving, grace for His enemies.*

And ultimately, unless we experience grace, (and these brothers were ONLY starting that experience, though Joseph was already far down that road) but until we experience what it is to

have Jesus Christ BE our surety and take our blame and GIVE HIS BEAUTY for our guilt and shame...until we believe and rest in this...confessing our sin and really facing our failings and badness is just a terrifying thing to be avoided at all costs. Only grace enables this kind of ruthless honesty that leads to healing and new life.

Finally, grace transforms us...Joseph wanted to see if it was indeed at work in his family and in his brothers and he did indeed see what he was hoping to see. He put his brothers through the paces – NOT so they could prove they were good people (he already knew they were not) but in order to see the fruit of God's transforming grace.

And when they returned with Benjamin and Joseph would eventually learn that ONLY because Judah the betrayer had become Judah the substitute – that's why they came back to Egypt with Benjamin – and when Joseph saw that he knew that grace of God was present in this family, that God was changing them.

Judah was chosen by God to be the line of Christ...and now, in a sense, Joseph's filling the role that Judah had abdicated was coming to an end. Judah was ready to be the King God had called him to be. (It's the Return of the King!)

In the same way...God says things about the Christian that JUST seem to be ...well...untrue. He is calling us great and holy and loving and good...before we are those things. As we repent and believe...as we continue to come in FAITH to the Lion of Judah who is the Lamb slain for sinners...we keep coming and little by little the transformation takes place. The bumpy, ugly caterpillar morphs into a Monarch and little by little we take the place to which God has destined and called us.

If this whole thing is a bit foreign to you...maybe totally foreign and if you want to learn more about becoming a believer in grace and in Jesus Christ – please come up after the service – I'd love to discuss more or set you up with someone who can.