

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Joseph and His Brothers”**

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“So Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come near to me, please.’ And they came near. And he said, ‘I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Gen. 45:4-5).

Old Jacob had many children – twelve of them, sons. We just know there’s trouble ahead when we read in Genesis 37, “Now Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children, because he was the son of his old age, and Jacob made for Joseph a long robe with sleeves” (v. 3) the coat of many colors.

Not surprisingly, young Joseph *feeds* on his father’s favoritism. He loves it. Who wouldn’t? But he’s not smart enough to be discreet. In fact, Joseph flaunts it in front of his older brothers. You see, he has these dreams in which his brothers are bowing and begging in front of him, and the next morning at the breakfast table he always recounts the dreams in sickening detail. Not surprisingly, Genesis says, “his brothers hated him all the more and could not speak a kind word to him.” Frederick Buechner writes, “Joseph was his father’s pet, and his brothers seethed at the sight of his many-colored coat he flaunted while they were running around in t-shirts and dirty jeans.”

And so, one day, father Jacob sends Joseph out to the far pasture to check up on his brothers who were hard at work tending the family livestock. That’s when the real trouble begins. My older brothers threatened fratricide; these brothers very nearly do it. They throw Joseph into a pit and talk it over. Seeing a trade caravan heading for Egypt, they decide to avoid the messy nuisance of murder, and instead, strip Joseph of his precious coat and sell their younger brother into slavery. They tear up the coat and dip it in the blood of a goat and tell Jacob a wild animal killed Joseph. And the old man is crushed, inconsolable.

The story of Joseph is a story of great evil done to him. In Egypt, he sinks even lower. Remember Potipher’s wife . . . and how she tried to seduce Joseph? He responds faithfully, obediently. “How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” As a reward for his faithfulness Joseph ends up in an Egyptian dungeon, where he would remain for years.

If anybody had reason to lose faith in God, Joseph did. He lost everything, multiple times. Joseph must have been tempted to renounce his faith and stop trusting in God, but he hangs in there. And to make a long story short, Joseph starts prospering again in Egypt. God gives him a good business acumen, *plus* the ability to interpret dreams. This ultimately lands him a job in Pharaoh’s palace where, after some time, he becomes essentially the business manager of all Egypt. Joseph is an astute businessman. Having successfully predicted a seven-year famine Joseph orders all of Egypt to warehouse grain in the years preceding, so when the famine hits business is very good for the Egyptians. From all around, people are paying top dollar for Egyptian grain. More importantly, because Joseph is at the right place and at the right time, many lives are saved, including those of his own family.

Incredibly, among the people who come to Egypt to buy grain are ten of the sons of Jacob, Joseph’s own brothers, the very ten who sold him into slavery. The ten do not recognize their younger brother. Obviously they could not have forgotten him, though many years had passed. But they couldn’t recognize him here – not in Pharaoh’s palace. Joseph stood at a distance, wearing Egyptian clothing, shaved his hair as the Egyptians did, spoke through an interpreter.

Joseph, on the other hand, immediately recognizes his brothers. And now all that long-nurtured anger and resentment begins to surface with Joseph, along with some hope for reconciliation. It’s a remarkable scene. Joseph sends everybody out of the room and weeps so loudly that the whole household hears him. When Joseph comes back into the palace, he reveals his identity. “I am Joseph. I am your brother.”

His brothers are scared to death and rightly so. Will Joseph treat them as they deserve? He has the authority and power to strike back. Will he settle the score? The scene is tense, potentially tragic. And my guess is you have sampled at least some of this pain, this estrangement, and tension. When yearning and hurt and deception and grief, and fright and anger and a little hope all come together, and what happens next could be anything.

There is only one way out of this—at least only one way out that will allow life to go on. It begins in the heart of the victim, the one who was most seriously wronged. Joseph has a choice. He can make a fist and strike back. Or he can open his hands and release the years of built-up anger, hurt and resentment. Joseph experiences a painful truth;

namely that in the midst of all his wealth, and power, and influence and comfort, none of that matters now. What he yearns for, what he really wants, what he needs is to be reconciled with his family, and that only he—the victim, the main casualty, can permit this reconciliation.

That is what he does. He lets go of the past and decides to live fully in the present and, hopefully, into the future. Joseph forgives his brothers, invites them to receive that forgiveness for themselves, arranges for them to bring his father to Egypt, and before you know it, they are all weeping—the tears of relief and joy and astonishment and reunion.

Obviously, then, one important part of this account is about forgiving; giving up your right to strike back, and essentially saying, “We can start over again if you like.” It’s certainly not easy, and a real danger is that instead of doing the difficult work of forgiving and reconciling, we begin to accommodate the animosity and accept it as just the way things are. It’s always easier to return anger and resentment and a chilling silence. It’s always easier to continue living in separation. It’s easier to be cold and quiet and passive, than it is to take the initiative and break the silence and offer the peace. Forgiving is not simple and it’s not without pain.

Nor does forgiveness mean that the sin was of no consequence. Though Joseph was able to forgive his brothers, that doesn’t make what his brother did to him any less evil. Kidnapping is kidnapping. Selling your brother as a slave and telling your father a pack of wolves devoured him and letting him live with that grief and pain is about as rotten as it gets. Yet God used that great evil to teach us something about His own forgiveness and reconciliation. After all, Joseph is many times over the great grandfather of Jesus. That is, behind this story is another story. God chose the hard path instead of the easy one. He did the hard work of forgiving and working reconciliation.

We believe that, in the fullness of time, the reconciling work that God did with this particular family was done in an ultimate way, a comprehensive way. We believe that Jesus Christ hanged on a cross to reconcile the world to God in heaven. He mended that great rift between God and man. Jesus assumed the burden of the relationship and died on a cross to forgive you and me. In Jesus, God has given up his right to strike back. For the sake of Christ, the Father chooses to love us instead, and says to us, “We can start over again if you like.” Day after day in our baptismal grace, God says we can start over again. Week after week in confession and absolution, in the Lord’s Supper, God forgives us and sends us out refreshed and strengthened. He does not accommodate broken relations with you and me as just the way things are and ever will be. He does not accept that. Instead, He offers forgiveness and peace.

So first there’s the forgiveness. But there’s another question being addressed in this ancient account. It’s a question every Christian faces if we live long enough – “Why did this terrible thing happen to me?” How can a good, loving, just and all-powerful God allow these horrible things to happen?

I’m going to say right now that there is no truly satisfactory answer this side of heaven. But faced with suffering, we can go on as Christians, not because we understand the thoughts and ways of God, but because we see the true heart of God in Jesus our Savior. In spite of the evil, we know and sometimes experience, we also know God is good, because we can see that in Jesus. We know He loves us, enough even to die for us. So as His people, we can ask another question. “What can God do with this evil?” “How can He use this terrible thing to bring about something new and good?”

In His good time, God blessed Joseph in many ways, but perhaps the greatest blessing is he allowed Joseph to see how He used the evil that happened to Him for the greater good. God pulled back the curtains and gave Joseph a peek at how his suffering was ultimately used by God to save many lives, including the lives of his family. Joseph told his brothers, “You meant it for evil, God meant it for good.”

The theology is obvious. God is in control – so much so, that He can even use *evil* to accomplish His purposes. That’s a remarkable point of this account. Our good and just God can even use evil to accomplish His purposes. In verse 8, Joseph tells his brothers, “So it was not you who sent me here, but God” for the saving of many lives.

God can bring good out of our own evils too. The evil we’ve done and the evil that has been done to us. We may not see how He can do this right now; we may never see it in this world. And that is hard. But in the end, it’s okay – because we know God’s true heart toward us, as we see it in the life, death, and resurrection of our dear Lord Jesus Christ. God is for us. He loves us. So, it’s going to be okay. We do not have to understand why evil was permitted to happen to us. We can trust that God will redeem all our evils. We can trust that if only we knew all the details, we would consent to the evils that happen to us, because God’s will for us and others is so good and perfect.

Joseph recognized God was working good through the evils that happened to him. The evil was real, but so is God’s redemption. That became the highlight of his life. More significant than his ability to interpret dreams or his capacity to administrate the affairs of Egypt, Joseph is able to see how God brought him out of the terrible crucible and was even able to work good through it. I trust that God does that for you and me too. Amen.