

“BEGINNINGS: Joseph Up”
from Genesis chapters 41, 42, 45, and 50 (selected verses)

Genesis 41

1 When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream:

He was standing by the Nile, **2** when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. **3** After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. **4** And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.

5 He fell asleep again and had a second dream:

Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. **6** After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and scorched by the east wind. **7** The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream.

8 In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.

14 So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon.

When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.

15 Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I had a dream, and no one can interpret it.

But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”

16 “I cannot do it,” Joseph replied to Pharaoh,
“but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

17 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile...

25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same.

God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.

26 The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; **27** The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine.

29 Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt,

30 but seven years of famine will follow them.

Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land.

41 So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.”

49 Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea;

it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure.

53 The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, **54** and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. **57** And all the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe everywhere.

Genesis 42

3 Then ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. **5** So Israel’s sons were among those who went to buy grain, for there was famine in the land of Canaan also.

6 Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph’s brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.

7 As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them.

Genesis 45

1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. **2** And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it.

3 Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. **4** Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! **5** And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.

15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them.

16 When the news reached Pharaoh’s palace that Joseph’s brothers had come, **17** Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Tell your brothers, ‘Do this: Load your animals and return to the land of Canaan, **18** and bring your father and your families back to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you can enjoy the fat of the land.’”

Genesis 50

18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said. **19** But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? **20** You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

21 So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. **22** Joseph stayed in Egypt, along with all his father’s family. **26** So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Introduction

“You meant it for evil, but God _____.” Fill in the blank. A group of elementary school children were asked to fill in the second half of well-known sayings. “Don’t bite the hand that _____ (looks dirty); No news is _____ (impossible). You can’t teach an old dog new _____ (math); Where there’s smoke there’s _____ (pollution); A penny saved is _____ not much; Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, cry and _____ (you have to blow your nose).”

As we come to the end of the book of Genesis with the end of the amazing Joseph story, we come to the gripping statement. “You meant it for evil but God meant it for good.” After these many years, Joseph meets his brothers, the ones who despised him in his youth, the ones who sold him into slavery bound for Egypt. He tells them, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

I. The Power of Dreams (chapter 41)

Genesis 41 begins, “When two full years had passed...” That’s how long Joseph had been in prison due to the false accusations from Mrs. Potiphar. From 17 years being the favorite son to the hatred and abandonment by his brothers to successful servant living high on the riches of Egypt to the destitute incarceration of prison: how in the world did Joseph manage to hold on to his faith in the Lord? Would he ever get off this roller coaster life?

Well, yes. God intervenes again with a couple of dreams; this time for Pharaoh. When his “magicians and wise men” had no clue (duh!), Pharaoh heard about Joseph’s dream abilities and summoned him from prison. Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I’ve heard that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” Immediately Joseph says, “I can’t do it... “but God

will give Pharaoh the answer He desires.” Joseph’s interpretation of the dreams makes imminent sense to the king and all his attendants. “God has revealed to Pharaoh what God is about to do.” And Joseph, now 30 years old, is appointed in charge of the plan for all of Egypt dealing with “seven years of great abundance” followed by “seven years of famine.”

Thankful for the resolution to his troubling dreams, Pharaoh gives Joseph a new name – Zaphenath-paneah. It means “the god speaks and lives.” And before the years of famine came, the Lord gave Joseph and his Egyptian wife (Joseph’s only wife) Asenath two sons. Manasseh, which means “forget.” God enabled Joseph to forget all the troubles of his past. And then came Ephraim. It means “twice fruitful,” the blessing of two sons.

We tend to want revenge on the Reubens and Judahs and Mrs. Potiphars from the past. Perhaps it’s time for you and me to ask the Lord to erase the stings in our memories. Ask God, “the God who speaks and lives” to “Manasseh” you: forget. And maybe it’s time for you and me to remember how the Lord has abundantly blessed us. Ask God to “Ephraim” you.

II. The Power of Reconciliation (chapters 45 and 50)

“So the seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food... Then ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt for there was famine in the land of Canaan also... When Joseph’s brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them.”

Can you imagine the emotions welling up in Joseph? His bearded Hebrew brothers didn’t recognize this clean-shaven prime minister of Egypt. But he recognized them. We’re told that Joseph had to leave the room so he could weep - tears that helped move Joseph toward God’s call for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Christianity Today asked several pastors, “What do you preach after a week like this?” Three American cities rocked by gun violence, the whole nation in contentious uproar. Donald Hunter, pastor of New Beginnings Church in Baton Rouge said, “When we endure such things as murder—whether it’s police officers or when we kill one another—the challenge we have is whether we’ll submit ourselves to God and allow that incident to cause something good to be born out of it. Yes, some in the congregation are angry. Some are patient because we’ve tried very hard to put all of this under the light of God.”

John Sommerville of City Church in Minneapolis said, “It’s really hard to even articulate our emotions and what we feel. Some are angry. Many of us feel very numb because this seems to come one tragedy on top of the other. It feels like, ‘When is this going to stop?’ I don’t think we know what to say.

We need to pursue God, ask him for wisdom and guidance, and intercede for the people who have been touched by these tragedies.”

So what will Joseph do now? In one of the greatest moments in the entire Old Testament, it says that “Joseph could no longer control himself... and said to his brothers (now speaking in Hebrew, not Egyptian), ‘I am Joseph! Is my father still living?’ But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.” They must have thought, “What’s going to happen to us? What is he going to do to us?”

Suddenly they saw this Egyptian official - second only to Pharaoh in power and importance - break into tears. Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” (One doesn’t come too close to a person of power and authority. But Joseph wants them to be close to him as the story unfolds). “When they had done so, he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.’ And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them.”

In one of the most moving passages in the Bible, Joseph shows a magnificent, God-directed attitude. He tells his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good... It was not you who sent me here, but God.” Two words that change everything – “but God.” God sent and God intended.

I don’t know what goes on inside your mind and heart: memories that haunt, pain you live with because of someone’s wrongdoing or manipulation, unfair treatment or rejection. We human beings do evil to one another. Joseph said it. “You meant it for evil.” There was nothing good in his brothers’ motives. “But God meant it for good!” Joseph allowed the Lord to eclipse his human emotions and bad memories.

Conclusion

From a high school English class, I remember Edgar Allan Poe’s short story *The Telltale Heart*. In it the murderer couldn’t sleep because he kept hearing the beating heart of his victim down in his basement. He wasn’t hearing the victim’s heart, of course; he was hearing his own heart, pounding in his head and chest. It led to the realization that he was indeed the murderer.

The sons of Israel, these sons of Jacob had been living with their guilt for some 20 years. But God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is a God of grace and mercy, a God of forgiveness and new life. It says, “When the news reached Pharaoh’s palace that Joseph’s brothers had come, Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Tell your brothers to bring your father and your families back to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt to enjoy.’

“Our Father who art in heaven... Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” With the deepest of forgiveness from the Lord and toward each other, you and I can also enjoy the best of the land.”