

The Life of Joseph

(26) A Summary of the Joseph Story

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We have come to the end of the Joseph story which is also the end of the book of Genesis. The verses that we are going to look at this morning tell of the fear of the brothers of Joseph that he would punish them now that their father was no longer alive, and it tells of Joseph's reassurance to his brothers that he had no intention of harming them. As part of this interaction Joseph speaks words that sum up one of the major themes of the whole Joseph story. Genesis 50:20, "But as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for God, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Then we have the account of the death of Joseph and his request that his bones be carried back to the land of Canaan in the future when God will bring the people of the promise back to the land that he had promised to them.

Now as the last verses of the book of Genesis, these verses are best understood not only as the conclusion of the Joseph story, but as the conclusion of the whole book of Genesis and I would like to consider them with you in that light this morning. The whole Bible is a story that tells the story of God and man from creation to the new creation. The Bible answers the deepest questions of human existence and the book of Genesis is a foundational part of that message.

The book of Genesis begins by telling us the story of creation. It tells us that the heavens and the earth were created by God and as the story unfolds we learn more and more about this God who created everything. We learn about the creation of man in the image of God. We learn that God made man to rule the rest of the creation on his behalf. Man's calling was to live in fellowship with God and to serve God by meeting his own needs by managing and developing the creation.

But then man disobeyed God and everything changed. The early chapters of Genesis tell the story of the entrance of sin into the world and how, because of that disobedience, the relationship between God and man was broken and how, the result of that was death and all the misery that is in the world. One of the key truths that the Bible teaches is that life and blessing and wellbeing come from obedience to God and death and misery and brokenness come from disobedience to God.

We see the effect of sin in chapters 3-11 of Genesis. Cain kills his brother Abel. A man named Lamech brags about killing a man who had wounded him. Genesis 6:5 says “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

But there is not only sin in the early chapters of Genesis. The history of salvation begins as well. The story begins of how God is going to fix what has happened because of sin. Genesis tells the opening chapters of that story. It lays the foundation for everything that is to follow. It begins to tell of God’s plan that will be completed when Jesus Christ returns and banishes sin from the earth and brings into existence new heavens and a new earth.

One important way of describing this plan is in terms of God establishing his kingdom on the earth. God is the King over all. Mankind has rebelled against him. The story that the Bible tells is about the King reclaiming his kingdom. And he begins that process through a chosen people. He is going to set up a kingdom on earth made up of people who obey him and through the witness of that kingdom he is going to eventually bring all the nations under his rule which is the way of blessing and wellbeing. This is what the Bible is about, and the book of Genesis tells of the opening moves of God’s plan.

God calls a man named Abram and he tells him that he is going to make a great nation out of his offspring and then through that offspring he is going to bless the whole world. And remember that blessing in the Bible always happens in connection with obedience to God and a relationship with God, and cursing and misery always is the result of sin. Through the offspring of Abraham, God is going to bring blessing to the world. That means that through the offspring of Abraham, God is going to deal with

the curse of sin. This is always in the background as the story proceeds. The great problem in the world is sin against God. God's plan for the renewal has to do with dealing with the problem of sin.

The offspring of Abraham are the people through whom he is going to do this. These people are the chosen people of God. These people are the people through whom God is going to save the world. God is going to do that through making this people into a great nation. A great nation will need a land and so that is one of the key promises that God makes to Abraham. He is going to make his offspring into a great nation and he is going to give them the land of Canaan and all of this is part of God's plan to deal with the problem of sin and set up his kingdom on earth where people serve him and are blessed in doing so.

Between Genesis 12-50 we have the story of the first three generations of the offspring of Abraham – this special people of promise. It turns out that while they have been chosen by God to be his people, and while as God's people there is some degree of obedience in their lives, there is still a lot of sin and that sin threatens God's plans again and again. The story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the story of how God keeps his chosen people from self-destructing and all along the line the issue is how is this family going to survive so that God can fulfill his purposes of saving the world from sin through them. There is an important verse in Genesis 18 which shows how important the obedience of Abraham and his offspring is for the fulfillment of God's promises. In Genesis 18:19 God says of Abraham, "For I have chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."

God has tied his plan to the offspring of Abraham and he has also tied his plan to the obedience of the offspring of Abraham. If they turn away from the Lord and become just another wicked people, God's plan cannot proceed. And in the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, there are many instances in which God's plan is threatened by the weakness and sinfulness of Abraham and his offspring. So, God intervenes again and again in the lives of this family to keep them from going off the rails completely. Through various circumstances in their lives he brings about

spiritual change and growth so that they will continue to serve him, albeit imperfectly, so that the plan can continue and so that they can continue to be the people of promise. The book of Genesis has a lot to do with the preservation of the people of promise as the people of promise so that the promise can continue to make its way through history.

This, you see, is what the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the story of Joseph are all about. There are all the ups and downs and twists and turns, but driving the whole story is God's plan to save the world from sin through this people. This people is the kingdom of God on earth and one day that kingdom will fill the whole earth and it will be populated by a people delivered from their sins. Eventually the story will lead to Jesus Christ and his death on the cross and he will be the ultimate seed of Abraham through whom the nations will be blessed.

And so, we come to the Joseph story. The first threat to the continued existence of the people of promise as the people of promise in the Joseph story is the strife and hatred that is tearing the family apart. Jacob favors Joseph over his brothers. Joseph is a spoilt teenage kid who is arrogant and insensitive to what his brothers are thinking. This family does not look much like the people through whom God is going to save the world. This family is looking very much like the rest of the world with its hatred and its jealousy and its conflict. It gets worse when Joseph has a pair of dreams, sent from God, that indicate that one day his parents and his brothers will bow down to him. Instead of being sensitive to the tensions in the family, Joseph tells everyone about his dreams and the seething hatred overflows. Joseph visits his brothers far away from home and the brothers decide to kill him. They throw him into a pit where presumably he will be left to die. Some traders come by and the brothers change their mind and instead sell Joseph into slavery.

This is the family through whom God was planning to save the world! This is the family who represented God's kingdom on earth and through whom God was going to establish his kingdom over all the earth! The plan was for them to be models of obedience to God before the world. And they are living just like the world. But through the events that transpire over the next 20 years or so, God is at work behind the scenes

changing these men so that they become more like the people God is calling them to be. We see Joseph growing as a follower of God through the many hardships he endures. And as the story proceeds we see the brothers changing as well.

A key part of the story is the great famine that threatens to be the end of the people that God has chosen to be his kingdom and bring salvation to the world. Joseph is exalted to second-in-command in Egypt because by God's enabling he is able to predict a terrible famine that will threaten all the people of that area of the world and give wise advice as to how total disaster may be averted. As second-in-command in Egypt he saves massive amounts food of during 7 bountiful years so that the people may eat during 7 years of famine that follow.

During this period Joseph and his brothers meet. By this time, the brothers have changed and regret what they had done to Joseph and Joseph forgives them for what they had done to him. So, the family is reconciled. There has been confession and forgiveness. The family looks much more like the people of God who will be the people of promise in their generation and pass on their faith and the promise to the next generation. And the family survives the famine because God through that whole sad story of Joseph being sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt has been working behind the scenes so that Joseph will be the means of saving his family from starvation in the famine.

Again, the point of all this is God's plan to overcome the curse of sin through this people whom he has chosen. For the promise to be realized this family must survive through the ages until finally Jesus Christ will be born of them and finally defeat the curse of sin on the cross. That is the point of this story and we are meant to see how God is at work in this history in preserving this family from becoming just another godless family that is absorbed into the world of humanity in rebellion against God. God does it in the Joseph story by bringing the brothers to repentance and by bringing reconciliation through forgiveness on Joseph's part. And he preserves this family by this 20-year scheme of using the sin of Joseph's brothers to eventually position Joseph as a mighty governor in Egypt through whom God saves that

part of world and most importantly, the family of promise in that terrible 7-year famine.

It is in the light of all this that we have to understand these last verses of the book of Genesis. The overarching theme is God's plan to establish his kingdom on earth through this family and the nation that it will become. In order for that plan to come to fruition, the family must live as God's people in the midst of the rest of the world. They must live lives that are distinct from the sinful lives of the people around them. And they must survive. The point of this passage is that God has brought them through the dangers that threatened to destroy them, and the text looks forward to the future and the further unfolding of God's plan through the generations of this same family that will follow.

And so, we come to these final verses of the book of Genesis. Jacob has died and has been buried in Canaan. And the brothers of Joseph are afraid that Joseph will get his vengeance on them now that their father is no longer in the picture to restrain him.

There are a number of points about sin that these verses make. The getting of vengeance is a common occurrence in a sinful world. Before Adam and Eve sinned, there was peace between them and God and between themselves. As soon as sin entered the picture you have hatred and killing and vengeance. Think of all the hatred and killing and vengeance that has characterized human history and is still so much a part of our world today. This is the result of sin. This is what God is working to overcome in his plan to establish his kingdom. And here in this passage we have a little foreshadowing of what God is working towards through his people of promise.

The brothers are afraid that Joseph will now exact vengeance upon them for what they had done to him. So, they approach Joseph. They say that Jacob had given this command before he died that Joseph should forgive the brothers for the evil that they had done to him. And they themselves ask for forgiveness. "And now please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father."

Now Joseph had already forgiven them. We read of that earlier in the story. But the brothers are afraid that he had only done it because Jacob

had then still been alive. They are afraid. They feel guilty. They feel vulnerable.

This gives another insight into the destructive nature of sin. Here it is many, many years after the brothers had committed that sin against Joseph. Joseph has already forgiven them. But still they are afraid and still they are weighed down by their guilt. This shows us how troubling sin can be even many years after it has been committed and even after it has been forgiven. This shows us the long-term consequences of sin not only on others, but also on our sense of peace and security. Think of what we read in Psalm 25:7 where the poet prays to God, "Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions."

As Christians, we glory in the fact that there is forgiveness for our sins through Jesus and his salvation. That is the most precious possible truth. But yet, it is hard for us to forget what we have done, and our sins can still cause us fear and guilt many years after they have been forgiven. They are forgiven, if we are trusting in Christ, but that does not mean that they will never more trouble us. The point is that sin is destructive in so many ways and the consequences can last a lifetime. Thank God there is forgiveness! But let this picture of these brothers of Joseph, still feeling guilty and fearful many years after they committed their sin, impress upon us how terrible sin is and impress upon us the need to pursue holiness which is life-giving rather than sin which is so destructive in so many ways.

But then we have Joseph's response. First of all, he says, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?" The words, "do not fear" are words of grace and forgiveness. Sin causes fear because we instinctively know that sin deserves punishment. When Adam and Eve sinned, the first thing that happened is that they were afraid, and they tried to hide from God. But the words, "do not fear" are words of forgiveness and mercy. These wonderful words are found again and again in Scripture because God's grace and mercy is such an important part of the story. As sinners we have reason to fear because there are consequences for sin, but again and again, in Scripture, God invites sinners to turn from their sins and to turn to him for forgiveness and part of that message is, "do not fear."

And so, Joseph is reflecting God in this story where he assures his brothers that he has forgiven them. The biblical story is largely about how God is going to pay the penalty of sin in Jesus so that forgiveness can be offered to all who will confess their sins and turn to God believing in Jesus. The message of the angels at the birth of Jesus reflect this same theme. "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord." This is what God is working toward in this story of Joseph and his brothers. And we see how Joseph reflects God in granting forgiveness to his brothers.

It is also important to see how Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers makes possible the kind of community that is able to be the people of God who will be a blessing to the world. Behind scenes God has been working to bring about peace and reconciliation in this family. For the people of God to fulfill their destiny they must be a community of peace and harmony that witnesses to the world the rightness and the blessedness of God's ways. We see it in the confession of the brothers. But we also see it in the forgiveness that Joseph extends.

And Joseph's words show us how we must think about ourselves in order to be able to forgive others. For the people of God to be witnesses to God in the world they must learn to forgive one another as they themselves have been forgiven. Joseph shows us how. He asks, "[A]m I in the place of God?" Adam and Eve fell into sin because they wanted to be like God. Joseph shows us the way of blessing when he acknowledges that he is not in the place of God. God is the judge. Not us. God will make all things right. God will see that justice is done. One of the ways to forgive others is to realize that we are not God and God is the one who will see that justice is done. In that light we can forgive others.

But there is something else here. Joseph is also able to forgive because he realizes that all the suffering that he has endured has been part of God's plan for the salvation of many people from the famine. Genesis 50:20, "As for you, you meant it evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Joseph understands that even though it was evil for his brother

to do what they did, yet God was working in and through that evil to bring about a good end – in this case the deliverance of many people from a terrible famine.

That put all the suffering that he had gone through into perspective. It was evil on the part of his brothers. But for Joseph it was the path that God had called him to walk in order to accomplish something wonderful and good. Thinking of this also made it possible for Joseph to forgive his brothers.

Now this idea of God overriding evil and bringing good out of evil is a very important theme in the Bible. In God's plan for the salvation of the world he is going to do that again and again. He uses evil in many ways to bring good as he did with Joseph and his brothers. The most important instance of this idea is the death of Jesus. Those who killed Jesus meant evil. The death of Jesus was a monstrous injustice. And yet it was also part of God's plan for the salvation of his people and the renewal of the whole creation. Of Jesus' death it is also true that his enemies meant it for evil, but God meant it for good for the salvation of many people.

It is this great principle that gives us hope. We live in a world of great evil. We see it all around us. We see it in our own lives. But the Joseph story is part of the larger story which describes what God is doing as he unfolds his plan for the defeat of sin. It tells of how God was working through his chosen people to establish his kingdom on earth. The Joseph story is a wonderful story which demonstrates how God works through even through sin and evil to bring about good ends. That is a fundamental part of the way that God works. And that is what gives us hope as we think of God's continuing unfolding of his plan in our time as he works toward the final resolution of all things.

In the final few verses, Joseph requests that his bones be carried to Canaan when God will fulfill his promise to give his people the land of Canaan. "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." And so, the book of Genesis ends. It ends on a note of hope. Joseph expresses his faith that God will do all that he has promised to do and so, he wants his bones to be taken to Canaan in the future when God will fulfill that part of his promise.

And the way that the book of Genesis ends is also the way the whole Bible ends – with the people of God looking forward to the complete fulfillment of his promises to make an end of sin and make all things new. At the very end of the Bible, Jesus says, “Surely I am coming soon.” And the church responds, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

This is our story if we belong to Jesus Christ through faith and repentance. It is the story of hope for the world and for every follower of Jesus. And we participate in that story by trusting in Jesus, but also by being the kind of community that witnesses to the world that the life of obedience to God is the way of blessing and peace and comprehensive wellbeing. When we love and serve God and one another. When we forgive one-another and live together in peace and harmony. When we live holy lives. We are part of the work that God is doing to bring about the renewal of all things. And we participate, by way of anticipation, in the life of the world to come.