

Genesis 45:1-28

Joseph Reveals Himself

Judah had made his plea, and now all the brothers waited for the response. Benjamin was being held as a thief, and the “lord of the land” had pronounced the sentence. He had demanded that Benjamin be reduced to slavery. As for the other brothers, he had graciously permitted them to return home. But Judah could not bear it. He could not leave Benjamin behind. Judah had assured his aging father that his favorite remaining son, the last child of his beloved Rachel, would be under his personal protection as the brothers traveled to Egypt to buy food. Judah simply could not return without him. He could not bear to tell his father the news that the last of Rachel’s sons was lost forever.

We are all, by now, familiar with the backstory. How Joseph had been sold into slavery by his wicked brothers. How God had caused him to prosper in the house of Potiphar. How Potiphar’s wife had tried to seduce him. How, despite resisting her temptations, Joseph had been sent to prison. How God had continued to prosper him there. How Joseph had interpreted the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker, only to be disappointed again. How, finally, Pharaoh had had a dream and the cupbearer, remembering Joseph, had brought him to Pharaoh’s attention. How, having interpreted the dreams and offering a plan for Egypt to survive the upcoming famine, Pharaoh had made him second only to himself in all the land of Egypt.

We saw how Joseph had seen his brothers the first time, as they came to buy food to help the family survive the famine that had spread to Canaan. How he had intimidated, accused, and threatened them. How he gave them food but kept Simeon in prison until his youngest brother was brought into Egypt. How the older brothers, and the lack of food, had finally convinced Jacob to allow Benjamin to undertake the journey. How the men had been welcomed, feasted, given provisions, and sent on their way home. How the steward had placed Joseph’s cup in the bag of Benjamin, so he could confront them as thieves. How Judah, in his finest hour, had stepped forward and offered to take Benjamin’s place as Joseph’s slave.

But all of this had been planned. It had been planned by Joseph and it had been planned by God. And now, as Judah concluded his plea for Benjamin, God’s plan reached its climax. It has been a long climb, but we have finally reached the summit of the Joseph narrative.

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As Judah finished his speech, with the unexpected offer of taking Benjamin’s place as Joseph’s slave, Joseph’s ability to control his emotions had run its course. His eyes filling with tears, he realized he could not allow his courtiers and servants to see him in such a state. He “could not control himself in front of everyone standing before him, and he shouted, ‘have everyone leave me!’” (v. 1). But unlike the last time Joseph sought some privacy, he did not want to gain control of his feelings, this time he wanted to express them. Perhaps unsure of how the Egyptians would react, he wanted to be certain that “there was no one with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers” (v. 1).

As the last puzzled servant left the room, Joseph gave vent. “He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard about it” (v. 2). Joseph had not waited long enough for his

servants to be out of earshot. Whether the rooms Joseph occupied in the palace were near to those of Pharaoh, or if some concerned servant reported what he was overhearing, news quickly spread that something was wrong.

But back within his audience chamber, Joseph did not hesitate to tell his, undoubtedly, confused brothers what was the cause of his emotional outburst. “Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?’” (v. 3). By stating who he really was, Joseph was finally relinquishing some of the power he had over his brothers. But that did not matter. He was ready to forgive and did not need to conceal his identity in order to have an advantage over his brothers. We see that in the way he focused on his father. Joseph did not talk about himself, or lash out against his brothers for their treatment of him many years before. Instead, he wondered if his father still survived the famine back in Canaan. Though he had already asked that question during the interview, perhaps Joseph had wondered if his brothers had been completely honest with him. Maybe they had pretended Jacob was alive to evoke sympathy from the “lord of the land” of Egypt. Now, having revealed himself, Joseph wanted to know the truth. Was his father still alive?

Though Joseph had said “my father” and not “your father” the brothers, it seemed, had not heard the question. All they had heard was that the brother they had tried to murder and then sold into slavery was standing before them, second in command of all Egypt and in the power to do with them whatever he chose. Naturally, then, “his brothers could not answer him, for they were terrified in his presence” (v. 3). We cannot imagine their feelings. Did they immediately believe him? Did they wonder if this “lord of the land” who practiced divination had supernaturally discerned their sin and was using it to frighten them yet again? Did they wonder if this extraordinary revelation was another ruse, like the replaced silver and the ‘stolen’ cup?

No doubt sensing their confusion and anxiety, “Joseph said to his brothers, ‘please come closer to me.’ And they came closer. And he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold to Egypt’” (v. 4). They brothers had been shrinking away. So Joseph bridged the gap and gave them information that only Joseph and the brothers knew. He was the one “whom you sold to Egypt” (v. 4). They must have simply stared at him, speechless.

Joseph sensed their rising anxiety. The dawning light of recognition must have been appearing on their faces. They were realizing that this really was Joseph. This was not a trick. This was not a test. So, again, it was Joseph who stepped forward to try to relieve their fears. He said,

“⁵Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me ahead of you to save lives. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. ⁷So God sent me ahead of you to ensure for you a remnant on the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. ⁸Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household, and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (v. 5-8).

Joseph realized that he had terrified his brothers, so now he tried to calm their frayed nerves. He encouraged them to “not be grieved or angry with yourselves” (v. 5). He tried to convince them that he understood the theology behind all that had happened, “God sent me ahead of you to save lives” (v. 5).

All that had happened had been an act of God. And it had been necessary because “the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting” (v. 6). Joseph knew that things would get worse from an environmental perspective. For the first two years of the famine, it seems, agricultural production had proceeded as normal, but with little result. Now the land would be so devastated, that farmers would not even bother to try to grow crops.

Joseph also acknowledged that it was God Who had revealed to Joseph His purposes. “God sent me ahead of you to ensure for you a remnant on the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance” (v. 7). It is not likely that Joseph understood all this when a slave in Potiphar’s house, or in prison. God rarely works like that. His plans are revealed slowly, offering us the opportunity to trust in Him. And so He had done with Joseph. But now, as the plan of God came to its fruition, Joseph understood, and he wanted his brothers to understand, and be comforted in this, as well.

Joseph was clear that this had all transpired to preserve the family. God had given no guarantee that all in Canaan would be saved from the famine. This had been done “to keep you alive” (v. 7). God was preserving His chosen line, the ‘remnant.’ The understanding of the word ‘remnant’ in the Old Testament reflects not merely survivors, but those survivors of the chosen line/people who bear the promise of God that through them, “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). God’s plan was going forward despite the natural disaster of the famine. God’s plan had proved itself greater than human actions (as we have seen with Abraham’s lying and Jacob’s trickery). Now God was proving that His plan was greater than a natural disaster.

His brothers must have still stood in amazement, for they made no attempt either to try to justify their actions (how could they?) or to plead with Joseph for their lives. They simply stood dumbfounded as Joseph again repeated, “it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household, and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (v. 8). Joseph was not absolving his brothers from guilt. They had understood their personal responsibility for what they had done to Joseph (Genesis 42:21, 44:16). But Joseph was recognizing a higher purpose in what had happened to him over the past twenty years. As New Testament writers would put it,

“²Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-3).

“⁶In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which perishes though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Humbly, we see that Joseph had spoken more of God than himself. Only at the end of this speech did he detail to his brothers what they already understood in part. He was “a father to Pharaoh,” a phrase referring to someone who, because of his wisdom and ability, had taken a position of counselor. He was “lord of all his household,” that is, he had control over state affairs and finances. Finally, he was “ruler over all the land of Egypt” meaning that his will could not be contradicted. Judah had said it best,

himself, when he claimed that “you are equal to Pharaoh” (Genesis 44:18). It all must have been very impressive to his, still shocked, brothers.

Joseph’s Message to His Father

Having revealed himself, and perhaps having calmed his brothers to a certain extent, he then addressed them with a command.

“⁹Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, ‘this is what your son Joseph says: “God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰For you shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your grandchildren, and your flocks and your herds and all that you have. ¹¹There I will also provide for you, for there are still five years of famine to come, and you and your household and all that you have would be impoverished”” (v. 9-11).

As he began his instructions, he continued to give proper place to God. It was God Who had “made me lord of all Egypt” (v. 9). Joseph made no claim to rising to the pinnacle of power in Egypt because of his own wit and hard work. It was all God’s doing. Joseph knew he had been helpless. He had been a slave and a prisoner. He had no connections, no financial resources, and no hope, other than his trust in God. It was God Who had brought him to where he was in life, and Joseph knew it.

His instructions were straightforward. His brothers were to tell their father that he was to go to Egypt. And he was not to go there for a visit. He was to emigrate to the land of Goshen. This was an area on the eastern edge of the Nile delta and was known in Egyptian records as Wadi Tumilat. It was a favorite area for herdsmen of the Sinai, as can be seen from historical records from the 13th century when one of Pharaoh Merneptah’s officials gave bedouin tribes from Edom the right to settle there. It must have been a significantly large territory, since the patriarch's family made their living by shepherding.

Jacob was to be told to do this quickly. He was not to wait, as he had done when the brothers told him to send Benjamin with them to Egypt. Jacob was to bring his “children and your grandchildren, and your flocks and your herds and all that you have” (v. 10). But Joseph also wanted to assure his father that this significant change in life was not taken thoughtlessly. They would be provided for, Joseph assured them. And this provision would be necessary, since “there are still five years of famine to come, and you and your household and all that you have would be impoverished” (v. 11). Jacob’s family, which had been scratching out a living trying to herd their flocks in the famine-ridden land of Canaan, would now be sustained by provisions from the second in command of all Egypt.

Joseph likely assumed that Jacob would not believe the story his brothers were to tell him. So he emphasized to his still awestruck brothers, “¹²behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth which is speaking to you. ¹³Now you must tell my father of all my splendor in Egypt, and all that you have seen; and you must hurry and bring my father down here” (v. 12-13). The brothers were to be not only messengers, but witnesses of what they had seen. And yet, one still gets the impression that Joseph was not convinced that his brothers believed it was him. “Your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see” (v. 12) seems to sound as if Joseph is still trying to persuade them that it is him. He is even speaking in their own language; there is no interpreter; it is “my mouth which is speaking to you” (v. 12). More than twenty years in Egypt clearly had its effects on Joseph. He looked,

spoke, and even ate like an Egyptian. Especially to Benjamin, who was barely a teenager when Joseph had been sold, the man before them was unrecognizable as their brother.

Only after begging to see his father, did Joseph turn his attention to Benjamin. ¹⁴“Then he fell on his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept on them, and afterward his brothers talked with him” (v. 14-15). His message complete, and his emotions more under control, Joseph fell into the arms of first, his beloved Benjamin. The other brothers must have looked on with mixed feelings, for they still doubted Joseph's intentions. We know that later on, after Jacob’s death, Scripture records that

“¹⁵When Joseph’s brothers had seen that their father was dead, they said, ‘what if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrongs which we did to him!’ ¹⁶So they sent instructions to Joseph, saying, ‘your father commanded us before he died, saying, ¹⁷“this is what you shall say to Joseph: ‘please forgive, I beg you, the offense of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.’” And now, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.’ And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, ‘behold, we are your servants’” (Genesis 50:15-18).

Ignoring, or perhaps unaware of their hesitation, Joseph “kissed all his brothers and wept on them” though Scripture makes no mention of the brothers responding in kind (v. 15). It simply says that they “talked with him” (v. 15). We can only wonder what they talked about.

Pharaoh’s Affirmation

As the brothers reunited, the location of the biblical narrative changes to Pharaoh's palace. The servants overhearing Joseph's weeping and, perhaps, listening at the door to hear what all the commotion was about, reported to Pharaoh that Joseph’s brothers had come to Egypt. We have no idea how much Joseph had told Pharaoh about his personal history, or how much information the servants had picked up as they listened to Joseph’s interviews with his brothers while they attended to him, but “when the news was heard in Pharaoh’s house that Joseph’s brothers had come, it pleased Pharaoh and his servants” (v. 16). Whether Pharaoh was pleased that Joseph had been reconciled with his brothers is unknown, but more likely Pharaoh was so thankful for Joseph having saved Egypt from the famine that whatever was pleasing to Joseph was pleasing to Pharaoh.

That Joseph continued to be referred to in Scripture by his Semitic, rather than Egyptian, name reminds us that however Egyptianized Joseph had become during his lengthy stay in Egypt, he was never fully assimilated into Egyptian culture. That is, as much as Joseph might have appeared Egyptian to his brothers, despite the fact that he had an Egyptian wife, Egyptian children, spoke Egyptian, ate Egyptian food, and served in Pharaoh’s court, he was still considered an outsider to Egyptians. This was not uncommon in most cultures then, and even today.

Whether Pharaoh had heard of Joseph’s offer to have his family relocate to Egypt, or whether he initiated it on his own,

“¹⁷Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘say to your brothers, “do this: load your livestock and go to the land of Canaan, ¹⁸and take your father and your households and come to me; and I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you will eat the fat of the land.’” ¹⁹Now you are ordered, ‘do this:

take wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father and come. ²⁰And do not concern yourselves with your property, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours” (v. 17-20).

This offer was even more generous than that made by Joseph. While the entire family was invited and they were promised the best in the land (though Pharaoh did not specifically mention Goshen), Pharaoh also supplied wagons so the women and children would not have to make the journey (more than 200 miles) on foot. Pharaoh also insisted that there was no need to bring all their possessions, for “all the best of the land” would be at their disposal (v. 20). At this point in their history, the Hebrews were not slaves, but honored guests of the throne.

The Story told in Canaan

The brothers must have been told that Pharaoh had approved, and even elaborated upon, Joseph’s plan. Recognizing that their future lay in Egypt, the brothers prepared for their journey home.

“²¹Joseph gave them wagons according to the command of Pharaoh, and gave them provisions for the journey. ²²To each of them he gave changes of garments, but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five changes of garments. ²³And to his father he sent the following: ten male donkeys loaded with the best things of Egypt, ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and sustenance for his father on the journey” (v. 21-23).

Each brother received not only supplies but fresh garments to wear for the return journey as well. Remember that these people came from a land that was impoverished. It had likely been some time since they had enjoyed such an extravagance. We can also see that Benjamin, naturally, received more than he needed, as well as three hundred pieces of silver. This was a sign of Joseph’s favoritism (had he learned nothing from his father’s, and his own woes, from such behavior?). Again his brothers could not have been pleased, but perhaps the changing circumstances allowed them to take this sign of favoritism with more patience than usual.

There were also gifts for his father. Joseph reciprocated the indulgence he had been shown as a young boy. The “ten male donkeys loaded with the best things of Egypt, ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and sustenance for his father” (v.23) was clearly more than Jacob needed if he was to return quickly with the family to Egypt. A donkey generally weighs about 500 pounds and can carry one-quarter of its body weight. That means that each donkey carried about 125 pounds of grain, bread, and other products. Twenty donkeys meant more than one ton of supplies (2500 pounds approximately) made its way with the brothers to Canaan. Such a load was intended as an affirmation of the story Joseph wanted his brothers to relate. If Jacob did not believe his sons, and remember that he often had reason not to, the evidence provided by this caravan of goods would, perhaps, persuade him.

But before Joseph allowed his brothers to depart for the homeland of Canaan, he had one final admonition. Knowing his brother's capacity for quarrelling, when “he sent his brothers away, and as they departed, he said to them, ‘do not quarrel on the journey’” (v. 24). What, exactly, was Joseph thinking they would quarrel about? Perhaps he was concerned that his actions of benevolence toward Benjamin had not been well received. Perhaps he thought they might begin to quarrel among themselves about the respective roles they had played in the selling of Joseph into slavery. We can recall Reuben’s “I told you

so” (Genesis 42:22) when they had first been in Egypt and things had begun to unravel. It is also likely that Joseph realized that the only way for them to tell the story of what had happened in Egypt involved the brothers admitting their own guilt to their father about selling Joseph into slavery and then deceiving him about his death. This unpleasant prospect might have induced the brothers to do away with Benjamin and then blame his loss on the “lord of the land” of Egypt. The last witness to their sin would be gone and the cover up could continue.

The journey home is passed over without comment from the sacred historian.

“²⁵Then they went up from Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan, to their father Jacob. ²⁶And they told him, saying, ‘Joseph is still alive, and indeed he is ruler over all the land of Egypt.’ But he was stunned, for he did not believe them. ²⁷When they told him all the words of Joseph that he had spoken to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, then the spirit of their father Jacob revived. ²⁸Then Israel said, ‘it is enough; my son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die’” (v. 25-28).

Instead the narrative moves ahead to the confession of the brothers that “Joseph is still alive” (v. 26). No further details are given. Perhaps the brothers followed Joseph’s advice and did not blame one another for what had happened, but simply related the story and confessed their guilt. As we might expect, Jacob “was stunned, for he did not believe them” (v. 26). His son had been dead to him for more than twenty years. He had seen and touched the bloodied garment himself. It is impossible to think he could have so quickly accepted the story the brothers told.

And Jacob had to believe that not only was Joseph alive, quite impossible in itself, but that his Hebrew son was “ruler over all the land of Egypt” (v. 26). This statement was too absurd to be taken seriously. But the brothers persisted. They gave him a detailed account of their conversations with Joseph. They “told him all the words of Joseph that he had spoken to them” (v. 27). But even this was insufficient, it seems. Only when Jacob “saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, then the spirit of their father Jacob revived” (v. 27).

Scripture clearly emphasizes that the focus of the account in Canaan is the fact that Jacob knows that Joseph is still living. The additional food, the animals, the money for Benjamin, the offer of a life-saving relocation to Egypt are all nothing compared to the fact that Joseph, the firstborn of Jacob’s beloved Rachel, was back from the dead. It was sufficient. Jacob only hoped now to see Joseph again before he died. There would be no hesitation, no holding back, this time. There was nothing left to do now but organize the family for their journey into Egypt.

Takeaways

Curiously, when Joseph dreamed as an adolescent, he saw his authority over his family expressed in terms of submission and domination. He saw his brothers, and even his parents bowing in submission to him. And though that had finally come to fruition, his authority now was framed in terms of forgiveness and grace.

But I think as we come to an end of this part of the Joseph narrative, we must appreciate how difficult it is for any child of God to accept His plan as always the best plan. In our minds, we know that God's ways are best. We know that

“⁸My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord.
⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

So, too, we know that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). But when those seasons of life come upon us that we wish would not, then it is difficult to live according to those truths we can so confidently proclaim when all is well.

We must remember that if we are walking with God whatever path down which the Lord leads us, direct us to His presence. We never pray so fervently as when we are faced with a tragedy. But we must also remember that the ‘good’ which God promises will come in His time. Remember that Joseph was a slave and imprisoned for thirteen years. The ‘good’ will also come in His way. That is, the ‘good’ may not be seen in this lifetime but in eternity. Let us pray that these truths, which we can affirm here and now, will also be truths for us when God is at work using the things we wish would not happen to grow us in our faith and draw us closer to Him.