

Genesis 49:29-50:26 & Lord's Day 51 >> Joseph 7: A Gracious Transformation

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When we read the story of Joseph, we cannot help but talk about the change the sons of Jacob go through. The story begins with them hating their brother and living lives that are far from holy (*cf.* 37:4, 8, 11, 19, 26-27; 38:15-16, 26). But they mature to the point where they begin seeing God working in their lives and even beg for their brother Benjamin to be spared when his freedom is threatened (*cf.* 42:28; 44:16, 33-34) – a radical change from the heartless men who thought of killing Joseph before deciding to sell him to merchants on their way to Egypt. Joseph's brothers are indeed transformed – partly by guilt, partly by the series of tests Joseph puts them through, but mostly by God's grace and God's purposes being fulfilled in their lives.

We are so excited to see the radical change within the brothers that sometimes we neglect to see the changes within Joseph. When we first meet him in Genesis 37, he appears to be a tattletale, running to his father with bad news about his brothers, and being rewarded for his efforts with a coat fit for a king (*cf.* 37:2-3). Plain and simple, he's a brat at this point in his life. He's also not too good at keeping his big mouth shut when he should, bragging about his highfalutin dreams of one day ruling over his family (*cf.* 37:5-11).

Thankfully, by the time those dreams come true, Joseph has learned the attributes of perseverance and respect, and is even characterized as being more "discerning and wise" than anyone else in Egypt (41:39). Pharaoh says, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" (41:38).

I'm not sure too many people would characterize Joseph like that at the beginning of the story. However, by the end, there's no question of how the Holy Spirit is working in Joseph's life – in his grace-filled actions and words. We see this most clearly in today's reading, the conclusion of the book of Genesis. Here's how author Frederick Buechner describes and interprets the scene:

Generous and forgiving as Joseph had been [when he revealed who he really was to his brothers], his brothers [can't] avoid the nasty suspicion that once the old man [isn't] around anymore to put in a good word for them, Joseph might start thinking again about what it had felt like when they tossed him into that pit and decide to pay them back as they deserved. So they [go] to see him, [fall] down on their knees, and beg[] his pardon.

Joseph's answer rings out like a bell. 'Don't be scared. Of course you're pardoned,' he [says]. 'Do you think I'm God to grovel before me like that?' In the old days, of course, God was just [a bigger version of Joseph and his attitude], and the dreams where [his brothers] grovelled were his all time favourites.

Almost as much as it is the story of how Israel [is] saved from famine and extinction, it is the story of how Joseph [is] saved as a human being. It would be inter-

esting to know which of the two achievements cost God the greater effort and which [is] the one He [is] prouder of.¹

What brings a bigger smile to the face of God – that He provided for the nation of Israel during a hard time, or that He saved Joseph from (among other things) himself, transforming Joseph’s bratty-ness to grace?

Pain in the Text and our Lives

As Buechner notes, the occasion for Joseph’s final and great demonstration of grace comes on the heels of father Jacob’s death 17 years after moving to Egypt from Canaan. Jacob’s death and the events that immediately follow are in fact given a lot of attention in Genesis. There is a long period of mourning (*cf.* 50:3), in which the Egyptians grieve for Jacob as much as Jacob’s family grieves for him.² Jacob is embalmed (*cf.* 50:2), which “prepare[s] his corpse to make the extended journey to the Promise Land.”³ That journey is more like a royal procession with all the officials and dignitaries, chariots and horsemen (*cf.* 50:7, 9).

There is significance to this great hoopla, writes Bruce Waltke (one of my professors from Regent College) in his book about Genesis: “This grand funeral procession and this exaltation of Jacob as a king by the Egyptians foreshadows Israel’s exodus from [Egypt] and gives a foretaste of the time when the nations hail a Son of Jacob as King.”⁴

Joseph and his brothers do not realize all this, of course. They are caught up in their grief and mourning. Joseph especially is singled out as (again) filled with tears.⁵

Writing about Joseph’s pain, radio preacher Chuck Swindoll considers the grief he himself felt when his own father passed away. Here are his personal reflections:

Whoever has endured the loss of a loving and faithful father, as I have, knows only too well the grip that tightens itself around you. I can still remember feeling strangely orphaned and so alone, though I had the tenderness of my beloved wife, who wept beside me, as well as our four growing children, and my loving brother and sister. Nevertheless, there I was and there he lay, gone from this earth forever. To glory, yes, but from my earthly life. I could never again hear his voice, his laughter, his counsel, his prayers. I would never again share some happy moment with him or feel the touch of his strong hand on my arm or watch him sign his name in his beautiful handwriting. He would never again hold one of

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1979), 88.

² Terence E. Fretheim in “The Book of Genesis” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (vol. 1; L.E. Keck, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 669, suggests that the Egyptians mourn for Jacob even more than his own sons do. Bruce Waltke in *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 620, notes how it is appropriate for the whole nation to mourn the death of the father of their Hebrew saviour.

³ Waltke, 619.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 618. See also John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (vol. 2; F.E. Gæbelein, ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 282.

⁵ Genesis 50:1 speaks of how Joseph throws himself on his father and weeps over him. The *TNIV Study Bible* refers to Joseph as “both emotional and sensitive” (study note on 43:30), noting the numerous times Joseph weeps throughout the narrative (*cf.* 42:24; 43:30; 45:1-2, 14-15).

my children in his arms or wrap those arms around me in an embrace of affirmation and comfort. Do I understand Joseph's surge of grief? More than I can possibly describe.⁶

I know there are people here today who could have written the same words.

Grace in the Text

Funerals and periods of grief are interesting times for families (to put it mildly). A Calvin Seminary student I met on Twitter this past week blogged about a death in the church where he served his summer internship. The funeral for this person actually turned out to be an occasion where some dividing walls within this family were broken down. On the other end of the spectrum, I was at a funeral a while ago where the family was deeply divided as a result of the untimely death, and lawyers were involved in the acrimonious task of sorting through and distributing the estate.

In our Scripture reading today, Joseph's brothers fear what's going to happen to their family following their father Jacob's death, worried that things are going to turn ugly and that there's no one to defend them. As long as Jacob was alive, Joseph showed deference to him and, in extension, his family. But now that Jacob is gone, the brothers realize they are more vulnerable before their powerful brother, the prime minister of Egypt. "Had Joseph been kind to them only for their father's sake? Was that the reason he had not yet taken his revenge upon them?"⁷

So Joseph's brothers send him a message: "Your father left these instructions..." (There is no record, by the way, of Jacob leaving these instructions.⁸) "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father" (50:16-17). The original Hebrew words for *sins* and *wrongs* are actually "the strongest words for sin" in the Hebrew language.⁹ The brothers still have not rid themselves of all their guilt, and they continue to recognize how the wrong they did to Joseph was also sin committed against God. They beg for forgiveness, a word that's used twice in their message to their brother (*cf.* 50:17 for both occurrences)

At this Joseph weeps (*cf.* 50:17). Do they still not "get it?" "...After 17 years of kindness to them that reinforced his original forgiveness of them [in Genesis 45], they still misunderstand his goodness and think he will at last take his revenge."¹⁰ The brothers do not realize how they are forgiven – and not just now because of their begging, but already 17 years ago when Joseph first revealed himself to his brothers. As he said 17 years ago, Joseph affirms today that God was able to turn the brothers' evil intentions to kill Joseph into something good, something that ended up delivering many people from death. Joseph says, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place

⁶ Charles R. Swindoll, *Joseph: A Man of Integrity and Forgiveness* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 198-199.

⁷ Swindoll, 202.

⁸ Waltke, 622, asserts that these instructions are "probably a fabrication. The narrator connects their claim not to historical fact but to their fear."

⁹ Waltke, 622.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 622.

of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (50:19-20).

This may be “the finest expression of forgiveness we find anywhere, outside the words of Jesus Christ Himself... [Joseph] could have played ‘king of the [hill]’ and filled the role of God. ‘Grace killers’ do that sort of thing, you know. They exploit the power they have over others... [But] Joseph refuse[s] to do that. He didn’t do it earlier at their reunion, and he doesn’t do it now.”¹¹

“Joseph is not God,” says one writer, “thus [the brothers] can be assured that he will not behave as a pharaoh to them. He remains subject to God as the brothers are; they stand together under the authority of a divine [Lord] who works purposefully on behalf of them all.”¹²

What if we strived to look more like the Joseph of Genesis 45 and 50? This is how Chuck Swindoll describes him:

Joseph is led by grace.

He speaks by grace.

He forgives by grace.

He forgets by grace.

He loves by grace.

He remembers by grace.

[Do you hear a key word here?]

Because of grace, when his brothers bow[] before him, he [can] say, “Get on your feet! God meant it all for good.”¹³

The brothers are bowing before the wrong person. God “uses Joseph as an instrument of grace to bless and save his ... brothers.”¹⁴ So it’s God who deserves the credit, the honour, and the glory. *Bow before Him*, Joseph says in effect. *Recognize and celebrate His grace through all this.*

Grace in our Lives

As 21st century disciples of Jesus, we are called to be people of grace. We know grace even more fully than Joseph and his brothers do, for we have as our model not only Joseph, but Jesus, the very Son of God, who, “at just the right time, ...died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6) – that is, for you and for me. Jesus shows us what a grace-filled life looks like, even when it takes Him to the cross to reconcile us to God (*cf.* Rom 5:11). It’s already seen in the story of the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers; it’s even more clear in Jesus that “sin and its consequences are not allowed to have the last word. The people of God can trust that, [even] in the midst of sin and evil, God pursues his purposes for good.”¹⁵ In other words, even in the midst

¹¹ Swindoll, 203.

¹² Fretheim, 671-672.

¹³ Swindoll, 204. I changed Swindoll’s use of the past tense to the present tense.

¹⁴ Elaine A. Heath, “Grace” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (T.D. Alexander, et al, ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 373.

¹⁵ Fretheim, 673. Thinking in particular about the word *good*, Fretheim, 672, reflects on how “the theme of goodness in Genesis comes full circle here. In Genesis 1, God created everything ‘very good.’” At the close of Genesis, God ensures that goodness prevails. As Walter Brueggemann writes in *Genesis* (Interpretation;

of mistakes that we have made and that have been made against us, God is gracious. And by the power of His Holy Spirit, we can be filled with grace, too.

One profound way we overflow with God's grace is in our willingness and ability to forgive. I find it incredibly fascinating that the brothers never actually ask Joseph for forgiveness; the closest they get is passing along an alleged message from their father asking Joseph to forgive them. Nowhere do we hear the words "I'm sorry" on the lips of Joseph's brothers. Granted, their actions reveal their guilt and their longing for forgiveness, but Joseph does not wait for them to grovel and apologize before he shows grace to them. He's too busy rejoicing with his brothers in Genesis 45; he's too busy wiping away tears in Genesis 50 caused by the brothers not taking his grace seriously.

No, I'm *not* advocating that we throw away the words "I'm sorry" from our vocabulary. Asking for forgiveness when it's necessary remains a key factor in healthy relationships.

What I *am* advocating for is a transformation in the attitude of the one who is being asked for forgiveness: If someone has wronged you, and you're waiting for the apology, and you can hardly wait for them to beg and grovel in front of you so you can perhaps attach a list of conditions before you even hear them, you need to re-examine the amount of Joseph-like Holy Spirit-given grace in your heart.

Can you have a forgiving heart even *before* someone asks for forgiveness?

If your answer is 'No' – either by choice or because you haven't really thought about it – what happens if the apology *never* comes? What if the other person will never be convinced they have wronged you? What if the other person moves away or dies before being convicted of their wrong? Besides, will the other person *ever* be truly deserving of your forgiveness? Are you ever truly, completely, totally, 100% deserving of being forgiven?

Some of us have watched the movie *Fireproof*. There's a scene where Caleb is talking to his father about how frustrated he is with his wife, Catherine. Despite his attempts to improve their marriage, Caleb has not received any positive, encouraging signs from Catherine. Angrily, Caleb says to his father, "You'd think after I washed the car, I've changed the oil, done the dishes, cleaned the house, that she would try to show me a little bit of gratitude. But she doesn't! In fact, when I come home, she makes me like I'm – like I'm an enemy! I'm not even welcome in my own home, Dad. That is what really ticks me off!

"Dad, for the last three weeks, I have bent over backwards for her. I have tried to demonstrate that I still care about this relationship. I bought her flowers, which she threw away. I have taken her insults and her sarcasm, but last night was it. I made dinner for her. I did everything I could to demonstrate that I care about her, to show value for her, and she spat in my face!

"She does not deserve this, Dad. I'm not doing it anymore! How am I supposed to show love to somebody over and over and over who constantly rejects me?"

We could substitute this question at the end: *How am I supposed to show grace towards and forgive someone who doesn't ask for it nor deserve it?*

Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 377, "From the beginning (*cf.* 1:31) until the death of Joseph (*cf.* 50:20), the God of creation and of Israel has been about only one thing [*i.e.* bringing about goodness]. And God has used even the ways of Joseph's brothers to bring His creation to its rich fulfillment. That is God's overriding purpose."

After listening to Caleb's tirade, Caleb's dad touches and then leans against a cross. (They're walking through the grounds of a Christian camp.) And, with the cross clearly in sight, Caleb's dad says, "That's a good question."¹⁶

Romans 5:8 says:

God demonstrates His own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

In the verses that follow, the apostle Paul even refers to us (apart from Christ) as God's enemies. Yet, God always takes the first step: He takes the initiative in making us right with Him. That's grace.

That's the God who fills us with His Holy Spirit who makes us a little bit more like Joseph, extending forgiveness even before it's asked for. That's the God who gave His only Son as a ransom for our sin without our deserving or even asking for it first. As Joseph "reassure[s] his brothers] and [speaks] kindly to them" (50:21), so our loving Father reassures us that, in Christ, we are forgiven; in Christ, we hear the kind, grace-filled words of our God in our ears, in our lives.

We can pray with confidence the words of our catechism:

Because of Christ's blood,
do not hold against us, poor sinners that we are,
any of the sins that we do
or the evil that constantly clings to us. (Lord's Day 51, Q&A 126)

We can pray this with confidence because God is committed to providing for us (*cf.* 50:21) – for our daily needs and for our spiritual healing and wellbeing.

Then let His grace overflow from your life into the lives of those around you – here in this building, where you work, at home, at school, wherever. Continue the prayer as we find it in the catechism:

Forgive us just as we are fully determined,
as evidence of Your grace in us,
to forgive our neighbours. (Lord's Day 51, Q&A 126)

God transformed Joseph from being a selfish brat to being Christlike in his graciousness. He can do and wants to do the same for you and for me. Allow our Lord to make the same transformation in your life, being "graced" by Him and grace-filled to everyone you know and meet.

Sung response:

God's grace to us: "I Know Not Why God's Wondrous Grace" (Psalter Hymnal 495)

Our grace to each other: "Fill Thou My Life, O Lord, My God" (Psalter Hymnal 547)

¹⁶ Alex Kendrick, director, *Fireproof* (Samuel Goldwyn Films/Affirm Films, 2008).