

Joseph and his Brothers Reconciled

September 27, 2020

In our Bible Study this week, Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers. For the brothers, it is an unimaginable event; they never expected to see Joseph again. And now, when they are desperate for sustenance in the midst of famine, it turns out that Joseph was in control of the food resources that they so desperately needed. As far beyond expectation as that was, that he might have forgiven them was even harder to believe. They cannot conceive of grace being extended to them, given what they had done. But, Joseph makes it real. Even afterwards, they must have wondered if they could really be forgiven. In verse 50:20, after Jacob has died, they again fear that it might have only been the continued presence of their father that prevented Joseph from taking revenge earlier. Again, Joseph gives them assurance, and gives credit to God and His providence.

Many people have trouble accepting grace, whether from God or from fellow human beings. If we have wronged someone, we want to make it right, to pay back what we might have cost them. There are limits on what we can do though. A year ago I had an accident – in the darkness I sideswiped a parked car in a parking lot at Arby's in Kingston. In that case, insurance paid for the damages, but there was no way I could compensate the owner for the inconvenience and trouble of having to get repairs done, and even as repaired, things are sometimes never as good as they were. He was gracious about the whole matter, thankfully. I was able to accept his graciousness, and it was a reminder of how I am expected to deal with adversity when people make mistakes or do things that hurt me. This particular case was a small thing. But, what if a mistake results in someone killed, or badly injured, or a catastrophic financial loss? Can we accept grace, forgiveness, for things like that?

In a sense, failure to accept God's grace, or the forgiveness of others, is sort of a flip side of revenge. In revenge, we want to "get even" for something someone has done to us. We, as Christians, hear God when he says, "vengeance is mine." (Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12: 17-19). The idea is to let go of the need for us to personally take vengeance; leave it to God. That does risk that God will forgive, and the person will not be "paid back." (See Jonah 4:1-4). Are we willing to allow that? To trust God to deal with the matter? If not, if we insist on taking vengeance ourselves, how can we ever expect grace from God, as we pray in the Lord's prayer? (Jesus's parable of the unforgiving servant, Matt 18:18-35, comes to mind.) Similarly, we need to be able to accept grace in small things, or we will never be

able to accept needed grace, should we ever need it, for big things. Being able to accept grace makes it more possible to extend grace, forgiveness, to others, for wrongs we have suffered, and leave those things in God's hands.

Giving and accepting grace is not the way of the world. Reciprocity is more the way of things – repay evil for evil, good for good, and keep things even. If someone does something good for you, you need to repay in kind. And, of course, if someone does something bad.... Maybe allowance can be made for accidents. But any intentional hurt must be punished! In our modern secular culture, there seems no room for forgiveness or mercy. Anyone who has done something wrong must be called out! In past times it was possible for someone to escape such a sanction, say, by emigrating to the “New World,” where life was hard, but a new identity could be built. Or, one could move west to the frontier. In our modern world, the frontier is pretty much gone, and communications is so good, that any misdeed will catch up with someone eventually; there is no escape.

In the case of Joseph and his brothers and father, a new opportunity was granted. They and their families could live in Goshen, northern Egypt, the eastern part of the Nile delta where the land was regularly inundated. A flood zone is not a good place to build a city, but could be good for agriculture and livestock. Why this land was available is uncertain. Joseph warns them not to mention being shepherds; they are to say they are “keepers of livestock.” Apparently Pharaoh “abhors” shepherds (Gen 46:33-34). (Maybe it's the cattlemen versus sheep herders animosity from our Old West, predated four millenia.)

The lesson writer's main issue is the idea that this was God's Plan. In the first paragraph (p. 19), we find: “The idea that there is no order in life, that everything is simply the result of chance, does not sell well in Peoria. If there is no plan, there can be no purpose, and thus no reason to work for a better world.” Now, having read the whole lesson, this seems to be a straw argument, but it certainly inspired me to write, “No!” in the margin! Yes, there are times when people do rationalize some bad things that happen as, they must be part of “God's Plan.” This concept suggests that God's plan is like a train on rails; it can't go left and it can't go right; it is “deterministic” and certain bad things must happen for some good to be achieved. Yet, the world is, in fact, full of randomness, in things large and small. It is also obviously affected by human choices, large and small. How do we reconcile the idea that God is in control with this randomness? In the context of our story, how can Joseph say that his brothers selling him into slavery was a step that had to

happen for them to be saved? Did God force or inspire their treachery? Did God impose the famine (which no doubt killed many) for this same purpose? The lesson writer discusses “predestination” and what it might mean. I won’t go deeper on that.

I think the mistake we sometimes make is equating “plan” for an exact and predetermined sequence of events that has to happen. We humans plan. We make budgets. We chart courses to follow. We do this knowing that things don’t always go according to plan. There is a maxim in military planning, “No plan survives first contact with the enemy.” (This is a simplification of a quote from Helmuth von Moltke, 1800-1891.) The idea is that reality, those chance things that we do not anticipate, the randomness element, as well as the decisions and actions of a hostile power, do occur. An overly elaborate plan, that includes many explicit details that have to happen in order for the plan to work, will crumble into dust. A simple plan, backed with adequate resources, may succeed. It may need modification. Sometimes we have “contingency plans” for certain things that we think may come up. If the situation calls for it, one must re-plan, and possibly even change one’s objectives. That’s the reality of human life. Making plans is difficult. Making good plans, that are likely to be successfully carried out, is even more difficult. And, even the best plans can sometimes be frustrated. Does that mean we should give up and not plan? Not if there are things worth achieving, and there are.

But what of God’s plans? Joseph’s being in Egypt may not have been necessary to save Jacob’s family. Maybe Joseph was God’s “Plan B” after something else didn’t happen. Maybe, had Joseph been rescued as Reuben had planned, God had a “Plan C” ready to go. We just have no way to know. Humans made choices. As we have come to understand the forces of nature, there is indeed an element of randomness there. Things like famines and times of plenty do occur, for no particular reason that we can discern. Are they God’s doing? They could be, but not necessarily. Is God aware of them? Certainly; Joseph’s dreams tell us “yes.” In this particular case, though, the brothers chose to sell Joseph to the Midianites (Ishmaelites?) going to Egypt. God made that part of his plan. Suppose Potiphar had Joseph killed? Well, we don’t know. That didn’t happen. Our problem in asking questions like that is that the answers are unknowable. History only happens once. Joseph was there. He saw, in what happened with him, God’s purpose of saving his whole family. Who are we to argue with that?

Having said that “history only happens once”, there remains the fact that similar events can happen at a different time or place. The Biblical story, beyond

this amazing example with Joseph, is that God's providence has occurred over and over again, in different circumstances, at different times, as recorded in the Bible. Earlier, God appeared to Jacob and gave him guidance while he was on the run from Esau. Later, God rescued His people, the Children of Israel, in an amazing miracle at the Red Sea. A descendant of Jacob, Miriam, saw this and said (paraphrased), "No, it's not chance; it is God acting to save us." (The Song of Miriam, Exodus 15: 20-21; elaborated into the Song of Moses later in v. 1-18.) This is part of a pattern that weaves its way through the Bible, through many chance events, evil intentions, acts of nature, and despite mankind's sinful behavior. As Christians, we see that thread extend through the first century in the life and ministry of Jesus, who reaches out to us, and shows us how to live in the world, despite all the things that happen.

I'd like to pick up a different idea: what happened after Joseph's reconciliation, and moving the family to Goshen? The famine continued.

Genesis 47: ¹³ Now there was no food in all the land; for the famine was very severe, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished by reason of the famine. ¹⁴ And Joseph gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, for the grain which they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁵ And when the money was all spent in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, "Give us food; why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone." ¹⁶ And Joseph answered, "Give your cattle, and I will give you food in exchange for your cattle, if your money is gone." ¹⁷ So they brought their cattle to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the asses: and he supplied them with food in exchange for all their cattle that year. ¹⁸ And when that year was ended, they came to him the following year, and said to him, "We will not hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord's; there is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. ¹⁹ Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be slaves to Pharaoh; and give us seed, that we may live, and not die, and that the land may not be desolate."

²⁰ So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for all the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them. The land became Pharaoh's; ²¹ and as for the people, he made slaves of them^[a] from one end of

Egypt to the other. ²² Only the land of the priests he did not buy; for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh, and lived on the allowance which Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their land. ²³ Then Joseph said to the people, “Behold, I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh. Now here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. ²⁴ And at the harvests you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones.” ²⁵ And they said, “You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh.” ²⁶ So Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth; the land of the priests alone did not become Pharaoh’s.

So, Joseph caused all the people of Egypt, including his family, the Israelites, to become slaves to pharaoh. Joseph was still a slave to pharaoh, and now everybody else was too (except the priests). He fulfilled his duty to act in Pharaoh’s interest, and at the same time saved them all from starvation. Being slaves meant Pharaoh would take care of them. They could rely on him. After all, Joseph was actually in control. But, eventually,

Exodus 1:8 Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.

Now, slavery to Pharaoh was no longer a good thing. The Exodus story follows. But in that Exodus, there is no longer a sense of being different peoples, some carrying the Promise, and some not. They all are identified as “Children of Israel.” It is not just the sons of Joseph’s descendants that are the “Children of Joseph.” In Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers, the sequence of the Patriarchs ends at Israel. Joseph might have refused to reconcile, and hoarded the title of “Chosen” for himself and his sons, or maybe just one son (see 48:8-22). Would a people of God known as the “Children of Joseph,” or “Children of Ephraim,” have emerged? Or would fighting for the privileged position, the blessing, have been passed from generation to generation? We don’t know, but Joseph, in being a vessel for God’s mercy, changed things. For the better. May we can do the same.

Prayer: O God of our lives, we give you thanks and praise for granting us a sense of your purpose while still challenging us with important choices that we alone are called to make. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

May I add, “In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.” Under that grace, we live and act.