

## Genesis 45:1-15 “The Reunion”

Last week we started a series on the origins of Israel. We didn't go all the way back to Abraham but we touched on Abraham's son Jacob and mentioned how God changed Jacob's name to Israel. We started with the story of Jacob's two wives, two handmaidens and the twelve sons he had by them and how ridiculously dysfunctional they were. Jealousy had a big hold on that family and it led to eleven of Jacob's sons ganging up on Joseph and selling him to slave-traders who took him to Egypt.

Here's something you need to know about these stories, and you're going to wonder why in the world I'm telling you this, but it's important to know this if we're going to understand the big picture and how we fit in. These stories about Israel's origins were part of a larger work called the “Torah” which we know as the first five books of the Bible. Most scholars believe these books were produced during what we call the “Babylonian Captivity” which is when most of Israel's religious and civil leaders were hauled off to Babylon around 600 years before Christ. All of these ancient stories about creation and the history of Israel were part of an oral and written history that went back many-many generations before the Israelites wound up in Babylon. All these stories were brought together in one volume during the 60 years they were held captive there. So why were these religious and civil leaders being held captive in Babylon? Because that's how the Babylonian rulers kept peace in the Empire. If you take the leaders out of their land, they're less likely to cause trouble and rise up against the Empire. The funny thing is that the Babylonians did everything they could to wine and dine these Israelite leaders so that they'd say, “Wow ... we have it better here in Babylon than we *ever* did back in Israel!” and maybe they wouldn't want to go back. But leave it to the faithful religious leaders and the prophets to challenge folks who get a little too comfortable and start forgetting their faith heritage. That's why we have the Torah. To remind people who they are.

So here's the tie-in. The passage we read last week and the passage we read this morning sets us up for *the* defining event in Israel's history. This is the prelude to Israel being enslaved by Egypt. Not just captive like the folks who are reading this, but *enslaved*. And it all started with eleven brothers who sold their seventeen year old sibling into slavery because he was daddy's favorite. What the brothers didn't factor in was that Joseph was one of these people who could fall into a bucket of sludge and come out smelling like a rose. So even though he started out as a slave in Egypt, and even though he had a traumatic experience in the first household he served as a slave, Joseph eventually earned the trust of some powerful leaders in Egypt because he was gifted when it came to interpreting dreams. By the time Joseph was thirty, the Pharaoh trusted him so much that he let Joseph govern all of Egypt.

And as it turns out, Joseph was a pretty savvy leader. He dreamed about a famine that would hit that part of the world, so he started storing up grain in Egypt to make it through the famine. So when the surrounding territories got hit by the famine, they went to Egypt to see if they could get some of this stored-up grain. Canaan, the land where Papa Jacob and the twelve brothers lived, was hit especially hard by the famine. So Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt to see if they could rustle up some grain. Jacob kept Benjamin with him because he was concerned for his safety and wanted to make sure that he had at least *one* son left in case something bad happened in Egypt. So the other brothers set out for Egypt to ask the governor of the land if they could buy some grain. See where this story is headed? When they got there, they didn't recognize that the governor was their brother Joseph! They hadn't seen him since he was seventeen. But Joseph recognized *them*! So he accused them of being spies, threw them in jail and said, "I'm not going to let you out until one of you goes back to Canaan and brings your youngest brother here." The brothers freaked out over this and pleaded with Joseph to at least let them have grain to feed their families. So Joseph let them cook in jail for a few days and said, "Okay, listen up. I'll let you take some grain back to Canaan, but I'm keeping one of you here until you bring back your youngest brother." They agreed to this, and went back to get

Benjamin. They brought Benjamin back, and Joseph threw him in jail too because he was mad. But he also started feeling some sympathy too because he overheard Reuben, the oldest brother, tell the others, “You know why this is happening don’t you? It’s because of what we did to poor Joseph.” So where we pick up this morning is when Joseph finally cracks and reveals his identity.

Can you imagine how the brothers must have felt? They were speechless and scared. So ... did Joseph order his imperial guard to kill the brothers on the spot? Nope. Did he have the brothers thrown in jail so they could rot there? Nope. He forgave them. On top of that, he said, “Listen, don’t feel bad about what happened. Had you not sold me into slavery, I wouldn’t be here in a position of power to help you through this famine. All of this has occurred so that lives can be saved. This is a God thing and we can be thankful for everything that’s happened so far. Even the bad things.” Talk about someone who could make lemonade out of lemons!

I think this story is about God’s faithfulness to Joseph. When you go back and read his story from the beginning, you can see how this faithfulness is woven throughout the events of his life. And this particular part of Joseph’s story is especially important because this is when the lightbulb turns on for him. He’s been through all sorts of terrible, unspeakable things ... he was separated from his parents, sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, accused of adultery in the first house he served as a slave, thrown in jail and abused. But in all of the craziness that happened, God had a hand on Joseph.

I don’t believe God ever *causes* bad things to happen. Read Job and Ecclesiastes for a commentary on that issue. I do believe that God works really hard in our *hearts* to help us recognize the good even in bad situations. So in this moment when Joseph finally faces his brothers he realizes, “Oh! I see how God has been working here! God led me here so I can save my brothers’ lives!” It’s a brilliant moment of realization. He recognizes that even though his brothers did this terrible thing to

him, he has an opportunity for reconciliation standing right in front of him. He has the opportunity to save them even though they tried to kill him. He's been given this chance to show his brothers and everyone else what God's forgiveness looks like. Verse 8 is probably the most quoted verse from this passage. Joseph says to his brothers –

“So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”

I think sometimes we can use a verse like this to justify the idea that, “God *made* this happen to Joseph and God *made* his brothers sell Joseph into slavery and God *caused* all these terrible things to happen so we can learn a lesson.” I honestly don't think God works that way. Was God at work in this story though? Oh, absolutely. Every step of the way. See, we can look at this situation from two different angles: We can say, “I thank God because He placed this door in front of me ... me alone because I'm so special ... because I've been so good and so faithful.” But we've got to be careful here because that's how those health and wealth TV preachers get your money. “If you do all these things ... if you don't drink, smoke or chew or hang out with those who do ... and if you give (*x*) percent of your income ... God will move heaven and earth and *cause* all sorts of great things to happen for you. And if you put just a little extra in the plate and support this particular social issue or this particular candidate, then God will put an extra hedge of protection around you from all the bad things that might otherwise come your way.” See how this can be problematic? What about the person who has been taught this all their lives who has done all the “right” things but still faces tragedy? How are they going to feel? *Or* we could look at it from a different angle. We can acknowledge that we live in a cause and effect world where sometimes bad stuff happens to good people and good stuff happen to bad people. But God's work happens *in us* when we can recognize and be thankful for the blessings that come our way rather than believing that somehow God has suspended the laws of

nature just for us and our benefit ... to heck with anyone else who might be negatively affected from said suspension.

So when we look at verse 8, it's not like Joseph is telling his brothers, "Awww ... don't worry, *you* didn't send me here and *you're* not responsible for your actions, it was all God." No. The brothers did a bad thing. I think what Joseph *is* saying is, "You know, you guys had no idea that I was going to end up here when you sold me into slavery ... you had no idea that I was going to become a ruler in Egypt. But isn't it peculiar ... isn't it *good* that this worked out the way it did? Thank God for that. Thank God for leading all of us to this moment in time where repentance and reconciliation can take place and lives can be saved.

So can you see how this story could be a comfort to those Jews who were being held captive in Babylon? "Don't despair. God is with us in all circumstances. It was true during the very earliest chapters of our history, and it's true now. God is faithful." This story can be a comfort and an assurance to us too. We are, after all, descendants in faith ... part of the same crazy dysfunctional family of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. I know a lot of people are feeling captive right now like the exiles in Babylon. A lot of us are reluctant to even turn on the news anymore. We ask, "Why is God doing this to us?" and we're coming up with all sorts of weird theories about why. I don't think God is "doing" anything "to" us. But God is present *in* us and *among* us, and God can and will work through people's hearts so that repentance and reconciliation can take place and lives can be saved.