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# JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

*Genesis 50:20*

## *One Main Thing*

Grace entails forgiveness, and the story of Joseph shows us a human example of forgiveness despite terrible sin.

## *Introduction*

The story of Joseph is a vision of grace. The beginning of the story in Genesis 37 establishes the main characters: Joseph, his brothers, and their father, Jacob/Israel. This chapter also establishes the tension in the story, as the father obviously favors one child over the others, and makes sure everyone knows it (vv. 3–4), so that the other brothers grow resentful of the younger Joseph. Not only that, but Joseph has a couple of dreams (vv. 5–11), which he—perhaps unwisely—tells to his brothers and father. The clear interpretation of these dreams is that Joseph will rule over the other members of his family, and whether the brothers think that Joseph is simply

being arrogant or whether they secretly fear that his dreams will come true (after all, their father is clearly preparing Joseph for an exalted role), "they hated him even more because of his dream" (v. 8).

## *Going Deeper*

Joseph's brothers play an important part in this vision of grace. They become the antagonists of the whole story, even until the end. They tend to be disobedient to their father, which would probably strain the relationship. As the relationship unfolds in the story, they become, in a negative way, the reason that their entire race is saved.

Joseph, Israel's favorite son, receives the special coat from his father (Gen 37:3). Part of the reason Jacob favors Joseph is because Joseph is obedient. The other sons are disobedient, as the demonstrated by the negative report that Joseph brings their father about his brothers (v. 2). There is an obvious ill effect in the brothers' relationship with Joseph for this reason. They are mortified that the father loves Joseph more than them, but seem to be unwilling to be obedient to the father, to make the relationship closer. Hence, the brothers hate Joseph because of his relationship with their father to him. So, when Joseph has the two dreams, this solidifies the hate that will soon become very evident by the following stories.

To understand this story, you must understand the

concept of justice and mercy, because if you do not understand justice, you cannot remotely appreciate or fathom mercy. Justice is when you get what you deserve; it is the natural cause and effect ratio. Grace is the outward show of mercy. To have the proper vision of grace, one must also understand obedience to something other than himself. If there is no obedience, then justice rules. The created is subject to the Creator. If the Creator demands obedience, then justice is the outward show for disobedience. Forgiveness is what grace is all about, and without forgiveness there can never be reconciliation, only judgment. So, when we read the story of Joseph, we understand that Joseph's constant battle with forgiveness and his circumstance plays out for a larger purpose. It is no different with us, without forgiveness we can have no reconciliation either with our relationship with our Father in Heaven, or the people around us, even in our daily walk. While we look at the two greatest commands—love God and love each other—we see that will require much forgiveness from Him who is in heaven, or from each other as we tread on people daily.

The meat of Joseph's story begins when his father sends him to look for his brothers who are out tending the sheep (Gen 37:12–13). In his obedience, Joseph goes to look the brothers, and cannot find them in the place that their father has sent them (v. 16). This exacerbates

the story problem, because in his obedience, he finds disobedience among his brothers. His brothers were told to go to Shechem, but they are actually found in Dothan (v. 17). When Joseph catches up with them, they know that they have been caught in their disobedience. This is when they decide to throw him down the well, and allow him to die there (vv. 19–20). Reuben, the only one with a conscience, tries to save him from the hands of his brothers (vv. 22, 29). He is somewhat successful, but is unable to prevent the brothers from selling Joseph to the Midianites (vv. 25–28).

In an effort to cover up what they had done, they scatter the blood of a lamb on Joseph's coat that was given to him as a gift by their father, they concoct a story that Joseph has been killed (vv. 31–35). Sin has a way of doing this, as it will create more sin, in the effort to cover up the first sin. But this very act sets up the scene, so that Joseph can eventually be in Egypt, in a position to be able to save the very ones who had set out to kill him. The irony here, is that the very act of Joseph's death creates life for the brothers.

The Midianites sell Joseph to Egypt. In Gen 39 Joseph has been delivered to Potiphar, where he is put in charge of Potiphar's household. Then Potiphar's wife sets Joseph up to have an affair with her. Because of Joseph's obedience to Potiphar, it causes her to accuse Joseph of something he did not do. This causes him to receive a prison sentence. But this misery allows Joseph to be in the right place at the right time, when he can

interpret some dreams for a couple of people who know a very powerful person (Gen 40). And so, his faith is strong, and he endures, because God's hand is in his life. The dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker are interpreted by Joseph correctly. The baker lost his life, and the cupbearer was restored to his position. The only thing that Joseph asked for is that the cupbearer remember Joseph. Of course, he did not.

Now the big test is coming, because the Pharaoh himself has a couple dreams, that his wise men cannot interpret (Gen 41). The cupbearer finally remembers Joseph and how his own dreams were interpreted (vv. 9–13). The Pharaoh summons Joseph (v. 14). Joseph gives God the credit (v. 16). He tells the dream, as well as the meaning of the dream. And because of that he is put in charge of all of the Egyptian Kingdom (vv. 37–45). He has the express job to take the seven years of plenty and create storage so that they may prosper in the seven years of famine. This was the dream that Pharaoh had and that was interpreted and told by Joseph through God's power.

### *Application*

Joseph always remembers that God is the one who has given him everything, including his ability. He understands that there's a larger picture to be seen. I believe this allows him to have the ability, not only to serve the pharaoh, but be able to forgive those who have trespassed against him along the way. This

vision of grace seems to remain throughout Joseph's life. During the seven years of plenty, Joseph begins to plan, understanding that there will be seven years of famine. He diligently works to save the people. In the time of the famine, Joseph's father and brothers contemplate what to do for their own hunger (Gen 42:5). With starvation surely at hand, they hear that Egypt has grain. They decide to go to Egypt, where they have their first encounter, with Joseph. The emotions surely must have been strong for Joseph when he first saw the ones who actually left him for dead, and ultimately sold him into slavery to the Midianites. One could only imagine what that must have felt like. In his wisdom, he gives his brothers a chance to be saved. He asks about his father, and his younger brother Benjamin (42:13–16; 43:27–29; 45:3), who did not play a part in his demise. He uses his brothers to get to be with his father and his younger brother. The story unfolds, that he sends them back to their father with food, withholding one brother (42:24–26). This seems to be the down payment for him to get his family back to Egypt. All the while, Joseph must have a larger picture in place, as he strives to bring his family back together. At this point, his vision of grace must be at its strongest. His heavenly designation, coupled with his ability to forgive, is the grace that is needed to save Israel. When he finally reveals himself to his brothers, they are worried that he will take revenge on their actions against him. But in his vision of grace, "What you mend for evil, God mend for Good" (45:7; 50:20).

*Conclusion*

Joseph showed grace to his brothers, who had treated him terribly. His story serves as an example of God's grace and mercy toward us sinners, and as an example of the type of grace we should show toward others.

*Discussion*

1. Do you think Joseph's brothers felt guilty about what they had done to their brother?
2. How do you think Joseph felt when he first saw his brothers again, when they came to buy grain?
3. Do you think Joseph was ready to forgive his brothers immediately?
4. What parallels do you see between the story of Joseph and the story of Christ?