

We are continuing our study through the book of Genesis this week and picking up in the second half of Joseph's life. Last week, we saw all the difficult situations Joseph endured. He was betrayed and sold into slavery by his brothers. As a slave, he rose to prominence in his household, but then when he rejected the romantic advances of his master's wife, he was falsely accused and thrown into prison. In prison he helped one of Pharaoh's officials, who promised that when he got out, he would remember Joseph and work to set him free. But then he forgot and Joseph was in prison for two more years. Here is a man who was assaulted, accused, and abandoned, who spent thirteen years of his life as a slave or as a prisoner. He kept finding himself in a pit. What we learned is that even when we are in a pit, we cannot forget that God is good, that he is faithful, and that he is near. God was with Joseph in all his suffering, in every difficulty, and we are going to see today how so much of what he endured was turned around for the good!

As the narrative arc of his story begins to turn, rather than making it all about himself, rather than trying to be the hero or pursuing revenge, Joseph allowed God to be the author of the story. At every critical juncture of his life, Joseph kept handing the pen to God—and God wrote a far better story than Joseph ever could.

A Story of Elevation Rather Than of Self-Promotion

We see this in three ways, the first of which is in Joseph's deliverance from prison. Genesis 41:1-7 tells us that two years after Joseph had been forgotten about, Pharaoh had two dreams:

- Seven fat cows swallowed by seven gaunt cows.
- Seven healthy heads of grain swallowed by seven thin heads of grain.

Pharaoh was greatly troubled by these dreams. He knew they had a spiritual, supernatural meaning, but no one in his court could give him an interpretation. Then the cupbearer remembered Joseph, the man who interpreted his dream in prison, the man he promised to help but then forgot about. He told Pharaoh Joseph could tell him what his dreams meant.

So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." (Genesis 41:14-15)

Pharaoh told Joseph he had talents and abilities that made him the only person in the kingdom who could tell him what his dream meant. But instead of drawing attention to himself, Joseph said, "I cannot do it, Joseph replied to Pharaoh, 'but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires'" (Genesis 41:16). In other words, "If your hopes rest on me, you are going to be incredibly disappointed; I can't do that for you. But there is a God for whom all things are possible!"

Joseph went on to tell Pharaoh what the dreams meant. They both had the same meaning: Egypt was going to have seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. Joseph told Pharaoh, "You need to be wise and judicious in the first seven years, to store up when there is plenty and have

all that's needed when famine strikes." Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph that he said, "Because you had the wisdom to interpret these dreams, you'll have the wisdom to put it into practice."

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you...I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." (Genesis 41:39-41)

This is the most outsized reversal of fortunes anyone could possibly imagine! From the prison to the palace, from locked inside a cell to running the entire empire. It didn't happen by random luck or fortuitous circumstances. God was intimately involved in Joseph's story, and Joseph allowed God to be the center and the author of his story. When Joseph was brought before Pharaoh, he could have focused on himself and his personal story—the dreams he had as a kid, the injustice done to him, his unique ability, subtly working in how he led so well at Potiphar's house, how even as a prisoner he was promoted to leadership in the jail. He could have made it about himself, but he directed all the attention to God. He said, "You've heard that I can help you. I can't give you what you need. But there is a God who can." Rather than writing a story of self-promotion, Joseph handed the pen to God, who wrote a story of elevation.

This is the path God would have every one of us take. When the spotlight is on us, when we have the microphone and a chance to shine, when we have an opportunity to draw attention to ourselves and our unique talents, abilities, and hard work, will we try to leave people thinking highly of us, or leave people thinking highly of God? David Green, the founder and chairman of Hobby Lobby, a store worth nearly ten billion dollars was asked about his company's success. He could have talked about his planning, his ingenuity, his hard work, and the risks he was willing to take, but in an interview earlier this year he said: "God gave me the vision and the resources. We've tried our best to honor him." Dan Cathy, the CEO of Chick-Fil-A, a fifty-billion-dollar restaurant chain, when asked by Forbes about the success of his family's company didn't talk about himself, his long hours, or his unique contributions. Instead, he said, "Our success isn't from clever marketing—it's from God." Peter and John healed a man who had been lame, and then that man, who everyone knew, was running and leaping and all the people wanted to know how it happened, and what sort of power Peter and John had. The people asked, "How did you do it?" Peter and John said, "Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?... It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see" (Acts 3:12, 16).

What would it look like for you to do that in your life?

- How is your marriage so strong? Would you talk about your romance, your communication pattern, your distribution of labor, etc., or would you say, "Let me tell you what God has done"?
- How did you raise such wonderful kids? Would you talk about your parenting techniques, your avenue of education, etc., or would you say, "Let me tell you what God has done"?
- How did you find such success at work? "Let me tell you what God has done."
- How did you overcome that addiction in your life? "Let me tell you what God has done."
- How do you still have joy when you've been so sick? "Let me tell you what God has done."
- How did you find such financial success? "Let me tell you what God has done."

And could you say it not in a trite or dismissive way, but in a deeply sincere, heart-felt conviction way? “This was not from me; I couldn’t do this. It is all from God!” What I have found throughout my life is that taking the credit through self-promotion feels good for about four seconds, but it shows that I fundamentally misunderstand (1) who is really in control and (2) what people really need to hear. No one needs to walk away from a conversation with us thinking how great we are. We want them to think about how great God is. You aren’t the hero. God is. And counter-intuitively, it’s often when we elevate God that God elevates us. Remember what Jesus said in Luke 18:14: “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

A Story of Reconciliation Rather Than of Revenge

Joseph became ruler over Egypt, overseeing the accumulation of resources for seven years, and then, when famine struck, people not only from Egypt, but from hundreds and hundreds of miles all around, had to come to him for food. Famine struck Joseph’s homeland, the promised land of Canaan, and Joseph’s father sent most of his sons, Joseph’s brothers, down to Egypt for seed. They were brought before Joseph, and of course Joseph recognized them, but they thought their brother was dead. They hadn’t seen him in twenty years, and he was going by his Egyptian name. Joseph, still incognito, asked his brothers questions about his family, and he created a scenario in which they had to bring all his brothers back to Egypt. Once all the brothers were finally there, Joseph convinced them that his younger brother, Benjamin, was going to become his slave. Judah spoke up, and in a moment of sacrificial love, said, “It would break our father’s heart and cause so much grief he’d die. Let me take my brother’s place so he can go free.”

For a moment we pull up from this story and realize this is the gospel story in the book of Genesis. It’s a pre-embodiment of the story of Jesus—an older brother sees his younger brother under an insurmountable debt. He knows it will break his father’s heart, so the older brother says, “I’ll take his place. I’ll pay his debt with my life, so he can be restored to his father.”

This act of sacrificial love caused Joseph to bring an end to the charade. He sent all the Egyptians out of the room and said: “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!” (Genesis 45:4). Given that they ripped Joseph from his family, sold him into Egypt, stole thirteen years of his life, and afflicted him with untold misery, and now Joseph has all the power in the world, “His brothers were terrified at his presence” (Genesis 45:3). The brothers harmed Joseph in inexcusable, irreparable ways, and they assumed he’d been harboring anger and revenge in his heart all these years. They assumed fate was going to strike back, and that what they did to him he would do to them. That’s what most people would have done! But Joseph said, “Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (Genesis 45:5). Rather making his brothers grovel, rather than heaping on the shame, rather than making them feel his wrath, Joseph chose forgiveness and grace. Rather than writing a story of revenge, Joseph handed the pen to God, who wrote a story of reconciliation.

Revenge writes the ending everybody expects. Reconciliation writes the ending only God can imagine. Think of the anticipated headlines: “Victim gets even with his abusers,” or “Joseph finally vindicated; brothers finally punished,” or “Justice served.” Rather than getting even or distributing justice, Joseph allowed God to write a far greater story, a story of a brother who forgave, a brother who extended grace, a brother who told those who harmed him, “Don’t beat yourself up. Don’t be distressed over the mistake you made. God used it for good.” Rather than slamming the hammer of punishment or dropping the gavel of judgment, Joseph extended the olive branch of peace.

Joseph did for his brothers what God has done for all of us! Jesus was sold for the price of a slave, betrayed, beaten, and then hung on a cross. But while hanging there, what did he say? “Father judge them for their sin”? No; he said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” We have all wronged God ten thousand times, yet he frees us from the condemnation we deserve.

What Joseph did for his brothers is not only what God has done for all of us, but it is also what we are called to do for one another. Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). God wants the story of forgiveness and reconciliation to be told again and again and again.

- Imagine the spouse who discovers an affair and could write a story of shaming the other spouse publicly and making them pay the ultimate price but rather hands the pen to God and pursues counseling, mentorship, grace, and a second chance.
- Imagine the employee who was treated unfairly by her boss, but now that employee has leapfrogged her boss and is the person in charge. She could turn the tables and make her former boss’s life miserable. She could write a story of sweet revenge, or she could hand the pen to God, showing what it looks like to be a great boss, to treat an employee with integrity, honor, and class.
- Imagine the neighbor who sued you because of a change you wanted to make to your property. Now he is making an appeal for changes to his property that you could try to block and the power is in your hands.

There will inevitably be times in your life when a person who has been treating you unfairly, a person who has harmed you or dishonored you, is now at your mercy. The tables will be turned, the roles will be reversed, and you will be in control. That is the moment that reveals the character of a person. Will you take the pen and write a story of revenge, or will you allow God the opportunity to write a story of reconciliation and redemption? Corrie Ten Boom was a victim in the Nazi concentration camps. She spent four months in solitary confinement. Her body was riddled with fleas. Her sister died. Three years after the war was over, she was at a church service, and one of the guards from that camp was also there. He approached her and begged for forgiveness. Justice would have been for that man to go to the chambers. She said she didn’t have the strength or ability to forgive him, but she prayed and God gave her strength. That was the gospel in action. Two months ago, Charlie Kirk was shot by an extremist. Days later, at his memorial service, his widow stood up and said, “I forgive that young man.” Tens of millions of people watched that service. They heard the gospel on display.

A Story of Providence Rather Than a Story of Victimhood

As we turn the page on Joseph’s story, we see that he encouraged his entire family to move to Egypt. He set them up with the best land and they had all they needed. Eventually his father died and the brothers thought that Joseph’s stored-up wrath would come out against them. They assumed that Joseph was being kind only to make dad happy. With their dad gone, they thought Joseph would come after them. They were desperate. “His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. ‘We are your slaves,’ they said” (Genesis 50:18). They just didn’t want to be killed. But look at Joseph’s response: “Joseph said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place 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’” (Genesis 50:19-20). Joseph didn’t deny or cover up what they did. He named it—you intended to harm me. He spoke the truth about the offense, which is a very important part of reconciliation.

True reconciliation can only come after the wrong has been completely and accurately named. Joseph spoke the truth about the offense, but then he looked beyond the offense to the goodness of God. He said to his brothers, “You were filled with envy, jealousy, and hatred. But even in your sin, God was at work. God intended it for good. God commandeered the situation and used it not only for my good, but also for your good, for the good of our family, for the good of the world.”

Rather than writing a story of victimhood, Joseph handed the pen to God, who wrote a story of providence. By any measure, Joseph had an airtight case to play the victim for the rest of his life—and nobody could have blamed him. He was sold by his own brothers before he was old enough to shave, falsely accused and imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, forgotten in a dungeon for years by someone who gave him his word. Almost anyone listening to his story would say to him, “You have every right to be angry, bitter, and stuck.” But Jacob had too much faith in the goodness and sovereignty of God to do that. This is huge, because so many people today have something difficult happen to them, and then the dominant narrative of their life is about being a victim. What my parents did to me was unfair; what my ex-spouse did to me was unfair; what my employer did to me was unfair; what my church did to me was unfair. The central theme of their life is about everything unfair that happened to them.

Psychologists have done a lot of research on people who internalize victimhood:

- They continuously rehearse the offense.
- They connect identity to the offense.

They regularly ruminate on the injustice that was done to them. Their understanding of themselves is caught up in being the victim of injustice. Joseph could have done that! Joseph could have stayed in that mental and emotional rut his entire life. He could have felt pity for himself and found friends to commiserate with him and tell him his victim mentality was entirely justified. But rather than staying in that rut, rather than handing the pen to his jealous brothers and letting them set the narrative for his life, or handing the pen to his false accuser and letting her set the narrative for his life, or handing the pen to the man who forgot him and letting him set the narrative for his life, he handed the pen to the Lord and said, “God gets to determine the narrative of my life. You meant harm, but God turned it for good.”

Joseph shows a pathway to overcoming rather than internalizing victimhood:

- Rather than continuously rehearsing the offense, continually rehearse the faithfulness of God.
- Rather than connecting identity to the offense, connect identity to the faithfulness of God.

Joseph could have played the victim card his entire life. Instead, he set his focus not on the wrong that was done to him, but on the faithfulness of God. God’s faithfulness became his story!

What would that look like for you: for the absentee parent not to become the central part of your story, for the abuse not to be the central part of your story, for the injustice not to be the central part of your story—but for your story to be centered around the faithfulness of God and how he continues to work all things together for the good? This week, when the old tape starts playing in your mind—“They did this to me. Life isn’t fair. I’ll never get past this.”—pause, open your hands, and say, “God,

they intended it for harm, but I hand you the pen. Write something good.” Then watch in amazement at what the Author of resurrection does next.

I want to end today by asking you to think about your life as an unfolding story. Whatever section of the story you are in today, what would it look like for you to release the grip, place the pen in God’s hand, and say, “God, write the story of my life the way YOU want”?