

## **“MAKING OF A PEOPLE: THE DREAM DISCLOSED”**

Genesis 44:1 - 45:15

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Joseph was ruthless. I use to think that Joseph was just “messaging” with his brothers when he has the silver cup hidden among Benjamin’s things... that he’d intended to reveal himself to his brothers from the beginning. I changed my mind about that a few years ago when I looked more closely at the last chapters of Genesis.

At this point in the story, Egypt and Canaan are two years into the predicted famine and there are five more years to come. Most people don’t know what Joseph does in those five years because for us, his story ends right here with the glad reunion, with forgiveness and reconciliation.

Remember Joseph is the architect of the Egyptian economy and to this point, he has acquired for Pharaoh the only asset that matters in a famine: food. Shrewd investor that he is, he will multiply Pharaoh’s assets by selling this food to the highest bidder. The result: by the end of the famine, Pharaoh will own all the livestock, all the land, and all food produced by the land. Joseph’s is in good shape, but a large segment of the Egyptian population is reduced to servitude. The famine and Joseph’s management have made Pharaoh rich and powerful beyond his dreams. The Egypt that we encounter in Moses’ day is thanks to Joseph’s ruthless management. The irony here is that Joseph who was sold into slavery has laid the groundwork for Israel’s slavery a few centuries later.

So I don’t think Joseph intended to reveal himself to his brothers at all. He had the silver cup hidden amongst Benjamin’s things because he wanted Benjamin, the only other son of Rachel, Joseph’s mother. Joseph is actually only half-brother to the others. I think he enjoyed the thought of sending his brothers back to Jacob without Benjamin. Did he see it as poetic justice for their abuse many years ago or as vengeance? We don’t know whether he plays this trick on them from hatred, bitterness, or retribution. Whatever the motivation, he was deadly serious... ruthless.

But then Judah steps forward and tells Joseph about their father who had already lost one son born of a woman for whom he had given fourteen years of service in order to make her his wife. Rachel was the woman loved by Jacob and Benjamin was all he had left from that relationship. Joseph hasn’t heard about his father’s grief to this point and I imagine his heart softening at this point.

But that’s not all Judah does. He offers himself as a substitute for Benjamin. Does that make Joseph see his brothers differently? Remember, it’s Judah who actually saves Joseph’s life by suggesting the alternative of selling him, but Joseph doesn’t know that. He doesn’t know that Judah’s offer is consistent with his character, with his understanding of his role in the family. Again, I imagine Joseph’s hardness melting at Judah’s proposed sacrifice.

What happens next? Joseph loses his composure. He dismisses everyone so that he can be alone with his brothers, and the minute he's alone with them he reveals his identity and weeps. And with that revelation, the brothers know the depth of their dilemma. They're confused and they're afraid.

Just imagine for a moment how you would feel if you ran into someone you'd caused great harm to and now that person has authority over you. This is not just embarrassing. It's dangerous. And it might have ended badly without Judah's story and sacrifice.

We aren't given insight into Joseph's thought process, but think that Judah's commitment to the family, his concern for his father, Jacob, and his brother Benjamin must have contributed to the reconciliation that follows. Surely one factor in healing this broken family was Judah's commitment to the welfare of others, even at great cost to himself. Faithfulness to one another makes a family strong, brings a people together, and builds the community of faith.

Forgiveness is also of course a factor, but it's not what Joseph talks about. He doesn't reassure his brothers with words of pardon. No, he tells them about the dream. He's much nicer about it, less bratty than he was at the beginning of the story. What he understood as a dream about his authority over them, he sees differently now. The elements of the dream haven't changed. Joseph is powerful and his brothers are not. But in this moment of reconciliation, Joseph understands that his power was never intended to subjugate his brothers, but to assist them in this time of need. He understood perhaps for the first time God's providential activity through these strange turn of events. The slavery, the imprisonment, the rise to power were all about putting Joseph into a position to help. What you intended for evil, God brought to good!

At the center of family restoration, the making of a people, the health of a community of faith lies the hidden activity of God. These are the sorts of days that God is bringing us to and without God we would never get there. That's Joseph's witness. God's love has power to turn dissension into unity, jealousy into community. When Joseph first shared his dream with his brothers, everyone thought they knew what it meant and it did not produce harmony, but God works and works at bringing the dream home at revealing its meaning. In the end people are fed and the family is restored.

Finally forgiveness is essential for the making of a community, for holding faith communities together. Without it, we cannot sustain community. We don't hear about forgiveness in this story. Joseph doesn't talk about it or use words of pardon, but you can see it. Joseph probably doesn't forget the original offense, but it's no longer a part of his story. The wrong done to him doesn't define who he is or set the tone for his future relationship with his brothers.

Probably Judah's gesture threw some kind of switch in Joseph that allowed him to move past the offense. There's often some spark that begins the healing, that redefines the relationship and moves it in a positive direction. Forgiveness allows us to move forward,

allows dysfunctional families to heal, pulls a people together, and builds a community of faith.

Faithfulness, the love of God, and the practice of forgiveness: these are the things that turn dreams deferred into dreams disclosed. We find these things in Joseph's story. We discover them in our lives as we trust God to lead us in bringing the dream to life. Thanks be to God! Amen.