

Joseph Makes Himself Known to His Brothers

By Dr. Dave Neale

We have been waltzing across the three “cycles” of Genesis 12-50, the Abraham, Jacob and finally, the Joseph Cycle. We turn this morning to the last chapter of the Joseph story here in chapter 45.¹

To my mind, Joseph doesn’t get enough attention in our theology. He is remarkable in the pivotal role he plays in the patriarchal history. His journey from bitterness to reconciliation with his brothers is a wonderful story.

The representation of Joseph is complex in the cycle. We know him as a brash young man, vain and boastful of his favour with God and his father Jacob. He is ***handsome and good looking*** we learn in 39:6c. Potifar’s wife certainly thought so.

He is a genius in administration; massively competent, even above all other Egyptians, which is poignant, because Egyptians thought of Hebrews as inferior to themselves. The Hebrews were shepherds. Joseph tells Pharaoh this when the family joins Joseph in Egypt, so Pharaoh will ban them to Goshen, far from the palace and where Joseph can see to their safety.

That a Hebrew shepherd winds up in charge of Egypt is a pretty ironic statement.

He serves Potifar, who ***paid no heed to anything*** while Joseph managed his affairs (39:6); he serves the jailer so well the jailer ***paid no heed to anything*** (39:23); and the Cupbearer and Baker, and then Pharaoh himself, who says, ***“See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.”*** (Gen 41:41)

He can be kind. Sending their money home with them after their first visit. By turns he secretly loves his brothers, turning away as he weeps. But then he cruelly taunts this unknowing band of brothers who have come to him to stave off their own starvation.

It’s complicated.

By the way, the Pseudepigrapha has a charming tale called *Joseph and Aseneth*. It is a fictional expansion of Genesis 41:45 about the beautiful 18-year-old daughter of the high priest Potiphara who is given to Joseph as a wife by Pharaoh. From roughly the time of Jesus.

She is so captivating that Pharaoh’s first-born proposes, but she scorns all suitors, until she sees Joseph enter her compound attired in his elegant robes. ***“Behold, the sun from heaven has come to us on its chariot... this shepherd’s son from the land of Caanan.”***² He shuns the pagan maiden, she repents of her false gods, they live happily ever after.

I used AI for the first time this week. I got a new laptop and the Microsoft Edge has an AI feature built in. I asked it “What does the pseudepigraphic *Joseph and Aseneth* teach modern Christians?” And AI said, “It’s complicated.”

The emotional tension builds and builds.

“At the climax of the dramatic event, when the tension has reached its limits,”³ Judah pours out his heart in an appeal to keep him and not Benjamin back in prison. He knows, he tells Joseph, that it will kill Jacob to lose his second son by Rachel. Von Rad calls Judah’s speech one of the loftiest examples of rhetoric in the Torah, a work of art.

Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.” (Gen 44:33-34)

Judah’s plea precipitates the emotional breakdown of Joseph.

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him... He sent everyone out and was alone with his brothers. I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?

The pent-up emotions finally spill forth in our reading for the morning.

I have three lessons we can take-away from this passage.

First, I think Joseph finally exhausted himself with the vortex of longing, mixed with anger, swirling in his heart. It’s complicated.

The dominant themes of the story of this troubled family are grievance, bitterness, judgment, revenge, retaliation. These are all cut from the same piece of cloth in our human emotions.

It takes a lot of emotional energy to sustain grievance, to hold on to a grudge. It’s exhausting. We can keep it up for a while, but God did not create us to be bitter and vengeful. He created us in love and forgiveness. It’s just not sustainable.

History proves that violent movements always burn themselves out? Northern Ireland, various forms of religious extremism, fascist movements, Jim Crow, misogyny, racism even today. And we *are* making progress in culture because the haters just can’t keep it up forever.

When Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive a brother who sins against him, “as many as seven times?” Jesus said ***Not seven times, but, I tell you seventy times seven.*** (Matt 18:21-22)

This is the gospel for us today. This gives us hope! And determination to meet bitterness with mildness and cruelty with love. Both personally and as a culture.

We are witnessing a terrible time of grievance culture in our day. Politicians have made grievance a political strategy. We will find our way out of this because it’s not sustainable.

Jesus’ words to Peter are a clarion call to us as to how we as a church should live.

When Jesus says ***Do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...*** (Matt 5:39). He isn’t recommending pacifism (with all respect to our Mennonite brothers and sisters); He is saying it isn’t God’s heart to hit back!

I think Jesus’ point is that we can’t live this way. You can’t make a good life out of it.

Let’s talk about the cross for a moment. What does the cross of Jesus mean to us? Did you know that outside of the gospels, where the word “cross” always refers to a physical instrument of punishment, there are only 11 theological references to the cross in the whole of the NT? Mostly Paul, one in Hebrews 12.

The cross ***isn’t*** an act of God to appease His anger. It isn’t a transaction to satisfy judgment.

We ought to have a big problem with theologies that focus on portrait of God as an avenging Judge, prosecuting an eternal anger with the wicked or anybody. It is malignant and corrosive theology antithetical to Christian spirituality.

Jesus' cross *is* about the victory of love and sacrifice over everything. Hebrews says that ***for the joy that was set before him, Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame. ...so that you may not grow weary or lose heart in your struggle against sin...***

Because love is more powerful than evil could ever be!

What we are seeing here in Joseph's breakdown is the heart of God breaking in on him and this holy family. This dynasty of dysfunction! The heart of God breaks through.

In this moment of sublime surrender, Joseph is freed from his sinful bitterness and grievance *because he chooses to be free.*

It puts me in mind of the Keith Green lyric:

*...I was lost in a fantasy
That blinded me
Until your love broke through.*

The second application of this story is this – its an observation really. I don't think we will ever be able to really understand this mystery. That the sovereign purposes of God are brought to pass ***through*** human hands, even those of a dysfunctional dynasty like Jacob's family – is a great mystery. Joseph said in his moment of emotional awakening:

And do not now be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. (Gen 45:5)

God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. (Gen 45:7)

Put yourself inside the micro-perception of Joseph as he looked upon his brothers. Welling up from deep within the dysfunction there dawned an understanding about the "why" of his life and how it all came around to this moment. He was just God's hand. His brothers were just God's hand.

Our church vision is to be the visible handprint of God in our spheres of influence. It's why you see these pictures of human hands up here. Our hands are all God has.

So, my second point is that it is a great mystery that God should work through human hands to accomplish His purpose. It makes us aware of the imperative to wear the heart of God on our sleeve.

Finally, this [Worship Team Come]

You have to love that the story of this Dysfunctional Dynasty ends the way it does. He sent everyone out of the room. ***And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians hear it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"***

Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him. (Gen 45:14-15)

It is just like Jesus said:

The truth will make you free... And if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:31-36). Thanks be to God.

Benediction:

And now may the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph bless you and keep you. May you wear God's true heart of love and reconciliation on your sleeve this week. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

¹ Sidebar: When we reread the stories of our forefather and mothers, we see here our shared foundation stories, Christian and Jew alike. Can you see that the fact that these are shared with God's various peoples makes them all the more profound for us. What we see by looking back is the heart of God from the very beginning – through the whole of His Story.

² *Joseph and Aseneth*, 6:2; *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol 2, p. 209.

³ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 394