

Movin' On Up  
Genesis 42-45  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
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The last time we checked in with Joseph, he had done all right for himself. After at least a dozen years of slavery and ill-treatment, this favorite son not only got out of jail, but went straight to the halls of power in Egypt, where he became Pharaoh's prime minister, or vice-president, or something like that. Joseph is finally doing all right.

And do you remember what happens next in the story? The brothers are starving, they go to Egypt, they rediscover Joseph, and the family is saved, right? I don't know about you, but in my mind, this almost always sounds like the soundtrack to a 1980's tv show [play soundtrack to *The Jeffersons*]: the folks who tried hard but never quite got there finally get a chance to get "a piece of the pie."

Except that's not really how it is, is it? The story of what happens in this family after Joseph's release from prison is an intricate drama, told in eight acts over the span of five chapters in Genesis. Because the whole purpose of our preaching through Genesis this year has been to help us get the big picture, I'm going to try to tell you that whole story this morning, and invite you to notice with me some of the significant facets that it contains and how this story connects with some of the readings we've been doing in the *Treasures of the Transformed Life*.

First, let's look at the program. What are the "acts" in this play that is unfolding before us? If you open your Bibles to Genesis 42, you can skim along with me now, and then we'll come back and look at a few key points. For now, let's just say that this drama begins with famine striking the land of Canaan. That leads us to act 2, which involves a reunion with Joseph in Egypt. There, Joseph devises a test for his brothers, and then there is a return to Canaan. Act five brings us back to the issue of famine; in act six there is another trip to Egypt, and another reunion. Act seven tells the story of yet another test for the brothers and the drama ends with the return to Canaan that prepares the way for the entire clan to move to Egypt. Do you see how this is tightly constructed and parallel? How acts 1-4 are essentially repeated in acts 5-8. The question is, do our characters learn anything in the first half of the story, or are they simply repeating the same lines again and again? Walk with me into the text.

I love the way that the story begins in chapter 42. It makes me think that Jacob was a real dad:

1: When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" 2: And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live, and not die." 3: So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. 4: But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might befall him.

This is so typical. "What are you knuckleheads doing, sitting around staring at each other? Get off your rear ends and get us something to eat!" In our

readings from the *Treasures of the Transformed Life*, we've been seeing that people are hungry for something. What are they hungry for here in the beginning of chapter 42? Food! They are starving – hungry enough to follow a rumor all the way to Egypt. But not all of them went, did they? Jacob wouldn't let Benjamin go. Do you remember Benjamin? His mother was Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. He was the only true brother to Joseph, the favorite son.

The next few verses describe what I'm calling act 2 of our drama. The brothers make the trip to Egypt, and they come face to face with Joseph, who recognizes them immediately. They don't recognize him – why should they? He's been gone more than twenty years; he's pushing 40, and the last time they laid eyes on him he was only 17. Although our narrator doesn't comment on it, we readers of Genesis find it interesting that the brothers all bow to Joseph – just as he had foreseen in his dreams. The reunion is not necessarily a happy one for anybody. The brothers are scared, and Joseph locks them all away for three days. It would seem as though Joseph is at least a little bit hungry for revenge here.

Follow with me to 42:18, where act 3 begins. It seems as though the more he has thought about things, the more Joseph realizes that his hunger is not to punish his brothers, but rather to have some sort of real connection with them again. He hatches a plan to test the ten of them. He gives them food and even hides the money with which they've paid him in their luggage – but he keeps one brother, Simeon, as a hostage. "You all go and get your younger brother and bring him back," Joseph says, "and then I'll release this one to you." The brothers, desperate to feed their families, are really between a rock and a hard place. They have to say yes. And Joseph is one step closer to seeing his little brother and reclaiming his family.

The problem is revealed, however, in act 4, which starts in verse 26 of that chapter. The brothers discover the money in their bags, and worry that "the man" in Egypt will think that they are thieves. They get home and relay the whole story to their father, Jacob – who refuses to hear anything of this plan to take Benjamin away from home. Listen to him in verse 36:

"You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin; all this has come upon me."

37: Then Reuben said to his father, "Slay my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you."

38: But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he only is left. If harm should befall him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol."

Jacob is as hungry for Benjamin as Joseph is. Benjamin, symbolizing the love that Jacob and Rachel have for each other, is nothing more than a pawn between the Governor of Egypt and the nomad from Canaan. The curtain falls on act 4 in exactly the same place as it rose in act 1 – only now Jacob has lost two sons.

As chapter 43 begins we see the parallel structure in our drama. Act 5 tells us that there's still a famine in the land. And what has happened to all the food that the boys brought back from Egypt? It's gone. And what's the story now?

They are hungry again. Jacob approaches his sons:

And when they had eaten the grain which they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go again, buy us a little food."

3: But Judah said to him, "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.' 4: If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food; 5: but if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, 'You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.'"

6: Israel said, "Why did you treat me so ill as to tell the man that you had another brother?"

7: They replied, "The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' What we told him was in answer to these questions; could we in any way know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down?'"

8: And Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. 9: I will be surety for him; of my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame for ever; 10: for if we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice."

I want you to look at what is happening here. The family is starving to death. They have been offered life – if they will bring Benjamin down to Egypt and prove their honesty to the governor there. But Jacob is still swooning for his dead wife, Rachel. He is so fixed on her that he cannot think straight. Jacob, who has been offered the promises of God, who has been given the responsibility of bearing the hope of redemption into the next generations – he cannot fully trust God. He trusts in himself. He trusts in his experience. He cannot let go of the past. He cannot let go of Benjamin. When confronted with a problem – his family's food situation – Jacob can only think of doing the same thing that he has already done – "Just go on down there and buy some food, boys."

But did you see that the parallelism of our narrative is interrupted? In a very slight way. All through chapter 42, when Genesis refers to the father of this clan, he is called by his old name: Jacob. "Trickster". The one who relied on himself and his own guiles. But did you hear what he is called in chapter 43? "Israel". The one who wrestles with God. The one who strives, who struggles. Listen:

Then their father Israel said to them, "... 12: Take double the money with you; carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks; perhaps it was an oversight. 13: Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man; 14: may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, that he may send back your other brother and Benjamin. If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."

Jacob/Israel realizes that he's got no tricks left. All he can do is trust God. He is out of options. Have you ever been there? I don't know about you, but I'm often disappointed when I look at Christian symbols of people who are trusting God. Whether it's greeting cards or clever e-mails or those little precious moments figurines, we too often see trust in God as something that is easy, or

cute, or syrupy sweet. The reality, in Israel's life and in mine, is that so often trust is difficult. Trust is scary. Trust was not Israel's first choice – but somehow, he made it from fear to trust. And because Israel was able to risk what he desired most – his son Benjamin, even though the next three acts are parallel to what we've already seen in acts 2 – 4, the outcome is incredibly different. Jacob realizes that he is powerless to move to where he needs to be. And so he accepts his identity as Israel, he acts in trust. He stops worshipping his dead wife and starts accepting YHWH as the Lord of heaven and earth.

In act 6, then, we see another trip to Egypt, and another appearance before Joseph, and another opportunity for the brothers to bow down before him. The difference is, of course, that Benjamin has come. The brothers explain the situation to Joseph's steward, they are reunited with their brother Simeon, and finally all twelve brothers are in the same room for the first time in two decades. The end of chapter 43 describes how Joseph was overcome by the sight of his own full brother and how he ran out of the room before bursting into tears. He treats all of the brothers, but especially Benjamin, as royalty.

After dinner, there is another test – one that echoes the experience of 42:18-25. The brothers are once more sent packing, and once more there is something of value hidden in their luggage. The men still do not recognize Joseph, but he is starting to see who they are and how they have matured. He orders his cup to be hidden in Benjamin's sack. After the brothers had gone a short way back to Canaan, feeling great about the fact that they had gotten out of Egypt with everyone this time and having enough food to feed their families, they are stopped by the border police and whisked back to the city. There, Joseph reads them the riot act, saying that whoever has stolen from him must remain and be a slave for the rest of his life. Tension mounts as he goes through each man's luggage, and finally he ends up in Benjamin's pack, where he reveals the missing gold.

*44:16:* And Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord's slaves, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found."

*17:* But he said, "Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father."

Joseph here allows the brothers to continue the behavior that he has seen from them in the past. For all he knows, they'll be perfectly willing to abandon Benjamin here in Egypt – after all, that's what they did to him, right? So he says, "You don't all have to stay – just the guilty one. The rest of you are all free to leave."

And here we see an incredible reversal. Judah offers to stay in Benjamin's place! Chapter 44, verse 33:

Now therefore, let your servant, I pray you, remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord; and let the lad go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the lad is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would come upon my father."

Do you remember what happened back in chapter 37? When the brothers had had enough of Joseph and decided to sell him into slavery, whose idea was it? Judah's! And now, in chapter 44, he's begging the Egyptians, "No, don't take my brother as a slave, take me instead!" Why does he do that? Because his inner hunger has shifted. He is no longer hungry for anything except the well-being of his family. He has lost his desire for selfish gain or for pride. He wants to save his brother's life. He wants to save his father's life. He has been transformed.

When Joseph sees how the brothers have responded to his second test, and how they have stood together and refused to abandon the youngest and weakest of them, he can't hide it any more. He sends all the Egyptians out of the room and reveals his true identity to his family. Chapter 45, verse 2:

And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph; is my father still alive?"

Ahh, good news, right! The lost has been found! Start the party! Not so fast, folks. The brothers aren't exactly thrilled to learn that it's Joseph. Look at 45:3:

But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

Why are they "dismayed"? What if he's hungry for revenge? What if he's just been waiting to give them what they deserve? Would you be happy to see your brother if you sold him into slavery?

I said that this act – act seven - was a test. Now that the brothers have passed the test, Joseph teaches them a little theology lesson. Chapter 45:4 So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, I pray you." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And 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; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Make haste and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not tarry; you shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have...'

Did you hear that? After at least a dozen years as a slave or in jail, and then nine years as the Governor of Egypt, Joseph says, "It wasn't you who sold me up the river...God SENT me here." Why? To keep the promise alive. Remember the promise that we first heard back in Genesis 3:16 – that God would not allow sin and brokenness to win out, but rather that God would preserve the dream and the promise until he sent a savior. The story of Joseph in Egypt is the story of God's calling Joseph into a terrible place so that when famine struck, the promise would live.

Act 8 of our drama finds Joseph standing on his balcony, watching his brothers go to Canaan again – only this time they are going to get their father and bring him to his new home.

And what happens when they get there? This man who was ready to give up – he said that he was just as good as dead back in chapter 43, ends our drama with these words:

46:25: So they went up out of Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan to their father Jacob. And they told him, "Joseph is still alive, and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt." And his heart fainted, for he did not believe them. But when they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived; and Israel said, "It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive; I will go and see him before I die."

The spirit of their father revived. Friends, I don't know about you, but there are a lot of days where I find that my spirit needs to be revived. A lot of days where I think that I am hungry for one thing, only to discover that God is ready to meet my needs in a way that is entirely unexpected and undeserved. As we consider this story today, let's hold on to its truth and its meaning – that we have choices, and that we have opportunities, but it is God who is longing to write a story of hope and deliverance in our lives. There IS a lot of "movin' on up" in this story – but it has nothing to do with material wealth and everything to do with living into God's purposes for our lives. As we prepare to continue not only in worship, but in our daily lives, let us do so knowing that our deepest hunger is for Him, for His truth, and to do His will. Amen.