

Facing Family and Famine
Joseph: More than a Dreamcoat Part 5
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[Genesis 42-44, selected verses](#)

Life in Jacob's family has gotten very difficult indeed. Imagine all the food and supplies that you need for your family – and imagine how much is needed for Jacob's family! He's living not just with his two wives and their children, but with their servants and children, too. 11 boys, their wives, and children too – not to mention all the people that they have hired to work with them. As shepherds, they also need to provide for their animals, a feat that has gotten more and more difficult as the famine has set in. But – there's a possibility for salvation – Egypt has stores of food! Jacob sends 10 of his boys – really, grown men at this point – to get enough food to feed this... complex of family members.

Why do the 10 brothers go? Surely, it doesn't take 10 people to lead a caravan of donkeys. But... perhaps these 10 brothers, the 10 who threw Joseph into a pit and sold him to slavers and lied, telling their father that he was dead – maybe even thirteen years later, they don't trust themselves to be split up for long periods of time. If Reuben and Simeon were to leave Judah behind... maybe Judah would tell Jacob what happened. And there's no telling if Dan and Naphtali would try to curry favor with Jacob if they were left behind, instead. Much better, from the brothers perspective, to remain all together.

And so, they go. This caravan of cynicism, the detail of distrust, the vanguard of variability – they head down to Egypt. And there, though they don't know it yet, they are about to encounter... grace. Also, some more trickery. But mostly grace.

Joseph had to be ecstatic to see his brothers appear before him. Now, at long last, he could get his rightful vengeance on those who sold him into slavery. At least, that seems to be what he thinks at first, when he accuses them of being spies. "You have come to see the vulnerabilities of this land!" he roars from the dais,

probably pleased as punch with himself for how he can exact retribution from these brothers of his. And then... they say something that he never expected to hear. They say that they are twelve brothers. “The youngest is in the land of Canaan with our father, but one is no more.”

The brothers think they’re talking to a complete stranger, but without being prompted, they finally acknowledge Joseph to his face. And now Joseph’s whole demeanor changes. He’s got to come up with a new plan. One not focused on retribution, but on grace... or, maybe something a few steps closer to grace.

I grant you, he does lock up his brothers for three days before releasing all of them but Simeon, but he does return all their silver. And while his brothers, when they discover the returned money, start to panic a bit, I doubt that Joseph intended that reaction. Even so, there were definitely better ways to handle the situation – like being direct and immediately telling them who he really was. After all, he wants to meet the one brother who didn’t throw him into a pit, and he wants his brothers to come back again.

Maybe you have had experiences like Joseph’s. I mean, not exactly like Joseph’s – but felt the same things that Joseph is feeling. For instance, I may not have had siblings growing up, but I did have close cousins that were like my siblings at family gatherings. I was right in the middle, age-wise – two cousins older than me, and three younger. At one family reunion in St. Clairesville OH, where my grandmother lived, we were having a big family dinner. We were split between the huge adult table, which was setup in the basement, the only place with enough room for all the adults together, and the kids table upstairs in the kitchen. I say adult and kids tables – but there was one open seat at the adult table, and Amber, my eldest cousin, was invited to take it, though she was all of 11 years old. Her sister and I could have been gracious – excited that one of us would be sitting at the adult table – but instead, the green-eyed monster of jealousy rose up in us. And, to be fair, cousin Amber did not help matters, suddenly treating us like servants.

“Hey, Luke, grab me a bag of chips from the kitchen, where you’re sitting at the kids table. The adults are having mashed potatoes, but I want some chips, too.”

Grumbling, I went to do what she told me. In the kitchen, I ran into Maggie, who was also on a fetch-quest for her sister. But Amber had made the mistake of asking Maggie to bring her a pop from the fridge. And that's when, just like Joseph, we knew we could get our revenge. "Maggie," I said, "what if you gave the pop to Amber, just like she asked, but we... shook it up first? Technically, she never asked us not to shake it up."

Giggling maniacally, we proceeded to each shake the pop for a good two minutes. Then, we took the pop and the chips to Amber, and climbed up the basement steps, pausing at the top to look through the spindles on the railing, certain that the glorious results of our mischief would be evident soon.

And we waited. And waited. And finally, Amber opened the pop. Fhwsssssssssssst! CO₂ bubbles and soda syrup sprayed everywhere. Oh, the glory. Our plan had worked! And Amber was none the wiser that we had shaken it up. We had caused her downfall without suspicion falling on us, the innocent kids at the kids table. But then... we heard a cry of distress. Amber, so proud to sit at the table with the adults, was understandably upset that her place at the table was a mess. Somehow, she'd managed to keep from spraying herself, but the tablecloth was wet and sticky, and Amber was thoroughly embarrassed.

And, just like Joseph's brothers, Maggie and I knew we had screwed up. All the "glory" we had felt just moments before – it was changed into guilt. And we were too afraid to admit our guilt to Amber – or to our parents. Years later, at a family reunion in Michigan, I brought up the events of that night – and both Maggie and I remembered, but Amber had long forgotten. We apologized, and received the grace and forgiveness that helped to heal our conscience.

Joseph's brothers felt the great guilt for their actions, and obviously had incorporated it into their lives. Unlike with my cousins and I, they had no way of knowing that Joseph was alive and they could apologize and be forgiven. Instead, they carried the guilt with them. At their second meeting with Pharaoh's Great Official, this time with brother Benjamin in tow, they were very worried that the guilt they carried for "losing" a brother would be repaid by the loss of another

brother. But, at first, it seemed that all was well. Indeed, though they were fearing the emptiness of belly and of family, the great official invited them to a feast – and sat them in family birth order. That which they were lacking – food and family – was being provided to them, and more than they had any right to believe.

This time, when the brothers left, Joseph played one last trick on them to make sure they returned. In addition to returning their silver, Joseph also hid a silver cup among the packs of his youngest brother, the one brother that had not wronged him as a child. And now, Joseph sets one last test before them.¹ Facing famine, will they forgo family? Or will they face family, forsaking the food they sought?

When Judah responds, he offers himself in place of Benjamin, showing Joseph that Judah, at least, cares about his brothers and their father. Judah's response is powerful, no matter how many centuries pass between then and now. He ends with, "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."

Now, Joseph, rather than feeling the glory of comeuppance, instead feels the guilt of trickery. Everything has come full circle. His life has been bereft of family since his brothers sold him – and now, he is facing a famine of family again, should his brothers leave.

Joseph now faces one final choice: will he reveal himself to them, and offer forgiveness? Or will he let them leave, and maybe never see them, his father, or any of his family again? We'll find out... next time.

May you feel the grace of God and know that you are forgiven. Forgiven in Christ's grace, may you forgive those who have wronged you, rather than tricking them. And filled with the Holy Spirit, may you face your family and friends with love for all. Amen!

¹ I'm indebted to Charles H Fritz for this framing, in the Layman's Bible Commentary on Genesis.