

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 7: The Trouble & Triumph of God's Promise to Joseph (Genesis 37 - 50)

by Virgil Thompson

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible's story of God's promise twists and turns so continually that it would be impossible to boil it down and box it up once and for all. This much is certain: it would be a mistake to ever take it for granted, as though after you have read it once you could toss it in the corner and never look at it again. As Leander Keck said, when it comes to experiencing what is important, life-giving and emancipating in the Bible's story of faith, *"Nothing can replace reading the [story] again and again, questioning and being questioned, objecting and being objected to, discovering and being discovered."*

The Trouble Between Joseph & His Brothers

Take, for example, the Bible's story of Joseph and his brothers. We do not have to read too deeply into the "story of the family of Jacob" to appreciate that the story of "God's promise for us" continues to bump along the same troubled road it has traveled up to this point. In Joseph's case, trouble is spelled with a capital "A" for affection: *"Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age..."* (37:3). Of course, because of the favoritism Jacob showed toward Joseph, the rest of his brothers hated him. You might think "hate" is too strong a word to use, but the Bible does not mince words; it calls a thing what it is.

It wasn't just that Joseph was his father's favorite, but also, as Luther points out, the brothers hated Joseph because he spoke against their sense of entitlement. They figured that because they belonged to the family of God's promise they could get away with murder. Joseph refused to look the other way and do nothing to prevent their exploitation of God's promise. He refused to go along to get along. He stood up for the truth: God's promise to be for us is not permission to laze about—it is freedom to be a blessing to others.

For his trouble, Joseph was rewarded with the contempt of his brothers. And to top it all off, he dreamed that the well-being of the family had been entrusted to his care. As he explained, in the dream, *"There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf"* (37:7). The brothers didn't like the sound of that at all. To them it didn't sound like the care of the family had been entrusted to Joseph—it sounded like he was boasting he was going to reign over them, and of course they hated him all the more (37:8).

Eventually, all that hatred boiled over. The brothers conspire to kill Joseph. Before they sink the knife, however, they come to their senses. They reason, *"What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh"* (37:26). With brothers like that, who needs enemies?

The Bondage of Reason

We shouldn't run on ahead into the rest of the story, Luther cautions, without pausing to think about what faith learns from the "reasoning" of the brothers. Reason is a good thing. It is a gift from God. Reason is the necessary know-how to fulfill God's command to exercise caring dominion over the down-to-earth affairs of this life. Without it we would not know up from down. Humanity wouldn't know how to organize society or make out what contributes to peace and justice, health and happiness. But reason, as the example of Joseph's brothers illustrates, can be taken captive of a selfish and perverse heart: *"What profit if we kill our brother ... let's sell him ... after all he is our brother."*

The task of theology, Luther never tired of emphasizing, is to see and name things for what they are. Reason may delude

itself into believing it can disguise evil as good, but the Lord is not fooled. Neither should theology be seduced by the reasonable appearance of the heart's evil desires.

Deception's Cover-up

If the brothers' plan to dispose of Joseph wasn't bad enough, the deception they plan against their old father is even worse. To cover up their misdeed, the brothers drench Joseph's coat in blood and bring it to their father, "*We found this,*" they inform Jacob. "*Doesn't it belong to your son?*"

They leave the old father to put two and two together, which he does. "*A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces,*" Jacob concludes. He spends the rest of his born days inconsolably mourning the loss of the son he had loved (37:33).

Joseph, Sold Down the River

As for Joseph, the Ishmaelites sold him to the Midianites and the Midianites sold him to the Egyptians. In Egypt, Joseph's fortunes rose and fell like ocean tides. Initially, he had been sold to a certain Potiphar, a captain in the Pharaoh's army. Potiphar was quick enough to see that Joseph had the golden touch, and so "*he put him charge of all that he had*" (39:1-3). For a time both Joseph and Potiphar's estate prospered.

Then there was the alleged affair with Potiphar's wife. To his credit, Joseph resisted Mrs. Potiphar's advances, steadfastly explaining that he could violate neither Mr. Potiphar's trust nor the trust of the Lord God. So, it was nothing doing. When the story of it all came out to Mr. Potiphar, however, it came out upside down. It was reported that Joseph had attempted to force himself on Mrs. Potiphar. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Truth, however, does not always win out in the short run. For his trouble—standing upright for the values of faith and friendship—Joseph is thrown into prison. That might have been the last anyone would ever have heard of him, but for the dreams.

As it turns out, Joseph is not the only dreamer in this story. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, was also a dreamer. He dreamt disturbing visions. Neither he nor any of his advisors were able to interpret the exact meaning. When the Pharaoh learns that the Hebrew slave in his prison has distinguished himself as an astute interpreter of dreams, Joseph is summoned to Pharaoh's court. "*I have heard it said of you,*" Pharaoh confides, "*that when you hear a dream you can interpret it*" (41:15). Modestly, Joseph explains that dreams are worth paying attention to because God is not above using them as the means of message. Joseph's view of dreams may definitely be the minority view of the Bible, but nonetheless in this case Joseph not only explains the dream but comes up with a plan

to stave off disaster. The Pharaoh is so impressed that he puts Joseph in charge of "*all the land of Egypt*" (41:37-45).

Meanwhile, in the Promised Land

Back in the Promised Land, things were not going so well for Joseph's brothers. In fact, things were steadily going from bad to worse. Even the Promised Land was caught up in world-wide famine. The only difference between the Promised Land and Egypt was that in Egypt, Joseph's astute planning saved the day. Not only were Pharaoh's stores stocked with sufficient bread for his subjects, but there was plenty for export.

When Jacob learned that Egypt had grain for export, he sent his boys there to purchase a supply to feed his family. When the sons of Jacob arrive to do business with the Egyptian in charge of export, they come face to face with their brother. They fail to recognize him, but Joseph does not fail to recognize his brothers.

The Family Reunion

What occurs after that makes for a long story. Suffice it to say that Joseph is not especially inclined to make it easy for his brothers. He accuses them of coming into Egypt to spy and make trouble. They explain,

No, no, you have it all wrong. We did not come here to make trouble. We have come to buy food. You see, we are honest men, from a great family. There are twelve of us, the ten whom you see before you and our little brother who is at home with our father. And then there is the brother "who is no more." — Genesis 42:6-17

If Joseph is inclined to give his brothers rough treatment, I don't know who could blame him. He agrees to load them up with a sufficient supply of grain to feed their family, but on one condition: "*you may take the grain to your family but only if you leave one brother behind and return with the younger brother to show that you are neither spies nor thieves*" (42:18-25).

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There is nothing like a guilty conscience to make us think the worst of a circumstance. The brothers can only imagine that the sins of their past have caught up to them. “*Alas,*” they commiserate to one another in their own language so the “Egyptian” will not understand, “*we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us*” (42:21-22).

Of course, Joseph understands every word uttered of their guilty conscience. And in ways they couldn’t begin to imagine, their fears are not exactly unfounded.

The brothers, leaving Simeon behind, return to the Promised Land. Upon arriving, they explain to Jacob all that has transpired—although they do not divulge one peep of their guilty conscience. When they unpack the camels, it is only to discover that they have returned with more than they bargained for. They have been set up to appear as the thieves they really are. Jacob is first to lament the magnitude of the disaster. Reuben, of all people, seeks to comfort the old father, explaining he will personally guarantee Benjamin’s safety when they return to Egypt to collect Simeon. Even if Jacob doesn’t know of Reuben’s role in the whole sad affair with Joseph, still he knows better than to entrust anyone’s safe-keeping to the likes of Reuben.

So the whole family, including Benjamin and Jacob, returns to Egypt to face the music. This time when they come face to face with Joseph, he reveals himself to them. Jacob, understandably, is overjoyed to have Joseph restored to him alive and well. Reassured that the family may be entrusted to the care of Joseph, Jacob dies at the rich old age of 147.

When the brothers learn that Jacob has died, they worry that Joseph will avenge their shameful treatment. They concoct still another deception about how selling him down the river was all a mistake, and that anyway Jacob’s deathbed wish was that Joseph would let bygones be bygones. Of course, Joseph is an astute enough theologian to see the deception for what it is. Joseph pulls no punches. He tells his brothers,

Oh, you meant evil toward me, sure enough, but the Lord God is determined to use it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones. — Genesis 50:20-21

Just in that way the Lord God reassures his elect people—both the people in the Bible and the people who are readers of the Bible—of His gracious promise to preserve their life here and now and forever more, not on the basis of their

works, but on the basis of his promise. It’s the promise to which Joseph clung in all the dark days of his topsy-turvy life. When God seemed altogether silent and distant, Joseph clung to the promise of God’s Word. So you and I may as well. And as with Joseph, so with us: God will not disappoint those who put their trust in Him, no matter what may seem to the contrary.

Looking Ahead: Let My People Go!

In the next session we will take up the portion of the story that features the drama of the Exodus. It is a story that even Hollywood cannot resist making into a movie. That’s not surprising. The story has it all: love and romance, pursuit and escape, suspense, tragedy and death, and the promise of better tomorrows and todays better than we deserve. So we conclude as began: when it comes to experiencing what is important, life-giving and emancipating in the Bible’s story of faith, “*Nothing can replace reading the [story] again and again, questioning and being questioned, objecting and being objected to, discovering and being discovered.*”

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Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. Without doubt the strangest thing about the Bible's story of Joseph is that God seems to play such a minor role in the whole affair. If Joseph had been compelled to draw conclusions about God's role in his life on the basis of what could be seen he most assuredly would have had to conclude either that there is no God or that God does not care what happens to him. Joseph however did not live the life of faith on the basis of what could be seen of God

but on the basis of the promise that he had heard from God. Consider:

- a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about these chapters?*
- b. *What background knowledge would help me better hear the message of these chapters? How does my experience prepare me to hear the message of this story?*
- c. *What do these chapters promise to faith?*
- d. *What do these chapters demand of faith?*