

JOSEPH BECOMES THE SAVIOR
OF HIS FAMILY

(or, “Do You Think That There Is a
Place in Heaven for Your?”)

Genesis 45:1-15, 24-28

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[Note: The passage of Scripture is read within the body of the sermon.]

The book of Genesis has 50 chapters. Of the 50 chapters, 13 of them tell the story of Joseph. If you have not read the Joseph stories lately, I encourage you to do so this week. The Adventures of Joseph begin with chapter 37.

The late Union Theological Seminary Professor **Elizabeth Achtemeier** says that *the major actor in the Joseph stories is Almighty God*. And Joseph is the savior figure whom God uses to save His chosen people from starving to death. The manner in which God works out this scheme of salvation is simply amazing.

First, God uses the hatred of the brothers to prompt them to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt.

Then, having been sold into the house of Potiphar, Joseph grows in favor among the servants in Potiphar’s household.

But, falsely accused of trying to seduce Potiphar’s wife, Joseph is thrown into prison.

In prison, Joseph interprets the Pharaoh’s dream about the seven fat cows and the seven lean cows, and this wins Joseph’s release from jail and his rise to power as Pharaoh’s “Secretary of the Department of Agriculture.”

From this important position, Joseph is able to store up the grain that will combat the famine that hits the world, and Joseph is able to keep the Children of Israel alive.

Now, my friends, the Presbyterian Church teaches that God does not cause human evil and suffering such as a famine. However, God does use evil and suffering because God’s plan for the world moves steadily onward, hidden, unseen, but pressing toward God’s loving goal.

Back in the 19th century, American poet and essayist James Russell Lowell wrote a poem which was put to music and is what I think is one of the great hymns of the church; for some reason, the hymn is in our red hymnbook but did not make it into our

blue hymnbook. The hymn is entitled: *“Once to Every Man and Nation Comes the Moment to Decide.”* One of the stanzas of the hymn goes like this:

*Though the cause of evil prosper, yet the truth alone is strong;
Though her (truth’s) portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong;
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.*

[The Hymnbook, PCUS, Atlanta, 1955, #361]

So, when you think God is absent from our world.....

when you believe that all is lost.....

when cruel circumstances have overwhelmed you.....

THAT is exactly the time that you ought to get out your Bible and read again the story of Joseph!

One of the things that I do not understand is why some quality movie producer has not taken the Joseph stories and made them into a movie. The stories are filled with excitement and romance and drama. One of the great scenes is this passage in our *Common Lectionary* for today where Joseph reveals who he is to his brothers who have not recognized him. Listen as I read it to you.

GENESIS 45:1-15, 24-28 [CEV]:

- 1 *Since Joseph could no longer control his feelings in front of his servants, he sent them out of the room. When he was alone with his brothers, he told them, “I am Joseph.”*
- 2 *Then he cried so loudly that the Egyptians heard him and told about it in the King’s palace.*
- 3 *Joseph asked his brothers if his father was still alive, but they were too frightened to answer.*
- 4 *Joseph told them to come closer to him, and when they did, he said: “Yes, I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt.*
- 5 *Don’t worry or blame yourselves for what you did. God is the one who sent me ahead of you to save lives.*
- 6 *There has already been a famine for two years, and for five more years no one will plow fields or harvest grain.*
- 7 *But God sent me on ahead of you to keep your families alive and to save you in this wonderful way.*
- 8 *After all, you weren’t really the ones who sent me here---it was God. He made me the highest official in the king’s court and placed me over all Egypt.*
- 9 *Now hurry back and tell my father that his son Joseph says, ‘God has made me ruler of Egypt. Come here as quickly as you can.*

- 10 *You will live near me in the region of Goshen with your children and grandchildren, as well as with your sheep, goats, cattle, and everything else you own.*
- 11 *I will take care of you there during the next five years of famine. But if you don't come, you and your family and your animals will starve to death.'*
- 12 *All of you, including my brother Benjamin, can tell by what I have said that I really am Joseph.*
- 13 *Tell my father about my great power here in Egypt and about everything you have seen. Hurry and bring him here."*
- 14 *Joseph and Benjamin hugged each other and started crying.*
- 15 *Joseph was still crying as he kissed each of his other brothers. After this, they started talking with Joseph.*
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- 24 *Then he sent his brothers off and told them, "Don't argue on the way home!"*
- 25 *Joseph's brothers left Egypt, and when they arrived in Canaan,*
- 26 *they told their father that Joseph was still alive and was the ruler of Egypt. But their father was so surprised that he could not believe them.*
- 27 *Then they told him everything Joseph had said. When he saw the wagons Joseph had sent, he felt much better*
- 28 *and said, "Now I can believe you! My son Joseph must really be alive, and I will get to see him before I die."*

I have a book in my study entitled A Place for You. It was written by the late world-famous Swiss psychiatrist **Dr. Paul Tournier** who was, religiously, a Christian. His book, A Place for You, deals with the importance of the self and the understanding of God in our lives. Among other things, Dr. Tournier says that we all need a "place."

You can see it most clearly in times of a crisis:

in war refugees,
in homes broken by divorce,
in the restlessness of teenagers,
in the shifting from job to job
by unhappy adults.

The passage in Genesis for today involves Joseph saying to his family:

"I have a place for you!"

Dr. Paul Tournier would say that you and I need a "place" before we dare to move out toward other people. We need to be able to **receive** before we can **give**.

Do you think that you would agree with Dr. Tournier?

Our story tells us that Joseph had his “place.” And, although we are not told it, per se, by the Genesis writer, **Joseph was an extremely God-conscious person.** Evidently Joseph had experienced the love of God to such a point that he felt secure in his “place.” In fact, so much did Joseph feel secure that he could interpret healthily all the HELL through which he had gone by saying,

“...God sent me before you to preserve life...”

One of these days I am going to preach a sermon on these words of Joseph, **“...God sent me before you to preserve life...”** and I am going to use it as a text to speak on vocational calling to Christian young people. Can you imagine your life having such meaning that you can say with confidence and faith, **“...God sent me to do this...”**? If I had one prayer for the young people in Oakland Avenue Church, it would be that when they leave home and go out into the world to do their thing, it would be with the faith and strength and love found in the feeling: **“...God sent me to do this...”**

Have YOU ever felt “...God sent me to do this...” about anything?

At the end of the chapter, we learn that Joseph’s brothers return to their father **Jacob** [whose name was changed, you will remember, to **Israel** when he wrestled with God] and they tell Israel about Joseph. And the chapter ends with Israel saying,

“I will go and see him before I die.”

Years ago in 1969 I went to the Soviet Union on one of the first tours offered there since the Second World War. There was a large group of us who went from the United States, and we came in many different sizes and shapes and ages. One of the things that I noticed about our group was the sizeable number of people who had been born in the Soviet Union and who had fled in 1917 at the time of the Communist Revolution. For most of these people, this was the first time that they had been back to their homeland in 50 years.

On more than one occasion I heard different ones of these people express their feelings with words such as: **“I always hoped that I would come back to Russia for a visit before I died.”**

Now, I do not know how many of you are “goal-oriented” people, that is, people who set accomplishments, or goals, before yourself. I would hope that there are many of us and that our Christian faith is heavily involved in the goals we set. This is just another way of saying:

“With my life, before I die, I want to do such and such.”

I want to work for honesty in government.

I want to visit lonely shut-ins.

I want to influence legislation to protect the ecology of South Carolina.

I want to teach one international student at Winthrop about the love of God by the way that I treat him or her.

I want to become involved in working for a good national health program.

I want to feed someone by being a volunteer through the Meals-on-Wheels program.

I want to help “at-risk” children learn about values and love and honesty and faith in God.

I want to work for good standards in our area nursing homes.

I want to get America back on track with some kind of sensible and workable method of gun control.

I want to work to make our jails and prisons more capable of rehabilitation rather than just being simply hell-holes.

[Incidentally, in one issue of Harper’s Magazine, Middlebury College Professor Bill McKibben writes: “We (the USA) have prison populations greater by a factor of six or seven than other rich nations (which at least should give us [Christians] plenty of opportunity for visiting the prisoners) [as Jesus said his followers should do!]. (Harper’s Magazine, /August, 2005, p. 32)

Down in your ‘heart of hearts,’ have you ever wanted to say:

“With my life, before I die, I want to do such and such.”

Now of course, in the Genesis story, Jacob (Israel) simply wants to see Joseph again before he dies. It is a very personal thing for him, but no doubt he rests secure in the knowledge that if he can just get down to see his son Joseph, and if he can carry his whole family with him, then his family will be saved from physical starvation by the famine. And it is on this rather happy note that the book of Genesis draws to a close.

New Testament folk, such as you and I, cannot help reading this chapter of Genesis about the old man Jacob (Israel) wanting to see Joseph before he died without also thinking about a similar desire made by another old man in the Bible.

In order to think about this other old man in the Bible, you and I must leap forward in time over 27 centuries after the Joseph story, and we land smack-dab in the middle of the New Testament. The story is told for us in the Gospel of Luke, and the event occurred several days after the birth of Jesus.

The time came for Mary and Joseph to do what the Law of Moses says a mother is supposed to do after her baby is born. They take Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem and present him to the Lord, just as the Law of the Lord says, **“Each first-born baby boy belongs to the Lord.”** The Law of the Lord also says that parents have to offer a sacrifice, giving at least a pair of doves or two young pigeons. So that is what Mary and Joseph did.

At this time a man named Simeon was living in Jerusalem. Simeon was a good man. He loved God and was waiting for God to save the people of Israel. God's Spirit came to him and told him that he would not die until he had seen Christ the Lord.

When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to do what the Law of Moses says should be done for a new baby, the Spirit told Simeon to go into the temple. Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and praised God.

“Lord, I am your servant, and now I can die in peace, because you have kept your promise to me. With my own eyes I have seen what you have done, to save your people, and foreign nations will also see this. Your mighty power is a light for all nations, and it will bring honor to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:22-32, CEV)

Now, I do not know what you have planned for your life before you die. But I do know that in the midst of all the troubles in which we find ourselves in the world and in our nation and in our individual lives, there is some GOOD NEWS!

In the baby Jesus, in the man Jesus, in the resurrected Jesus, WE SEE GOD, and WE SEE GOD'S LOVE FOR US.

And you know what that means don't you? It means that you can go from this place in peace, and before you die, you CAN do that thing that all along you have thought that God has been wanting you to do.....whatever it is!

And you do not have to be afraid of anything.....even death!