

“The Terrifying Twist”

Genesis 45:1-10

Series: Behind the Scenes Week 4: God Brings Good from Evil

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Jennifer worked hard, earned good grades and was admitted to nursing school. She would be the first in her family to graduate from college...if she could afford it. Her single mom could not offer any help. So Jennifer deferred her dream, lived at home, and saved every penny of her paycheck in a special box hidden in her room. Jennifer's 14-year-old brother lived there as well. He was headed down a different path. There were some run-ins with the law, trouble in school and drug use.

Jennifer loved her brother and prayed for him every day. When others accused and judged him, she always stuck up for him and encouraged him to stay on the right path. Despite the turmoil in her family, Jennifer pressed on toward her dream, getting one step closer with every paycheck.

One week, she went to deposit her money into her savings box. When she opened it, the only thing in there was a single \$20 bill. She was crushed. Her own brother stole from her to support his drug habit. Her dream was destroyed by her brother's betrayal.

Have you ever been betrayed, cheated, deceived, wronged? What do you do? Obsess over the situation? Practice your biting comeback? Assemble the evidence of your case? Justify your righteous anger? Wallow in a swamp of self-pity? Are you able to get over it immediately or does it linger for a long time? Are you stewing or steaming now?

Even though a couple of decades have passed, you can't blame Joseph if he still feels bitter over the betrayal by his brothers. Though he was kidnapped, sold into slavery, falsely accused of rape, unjustly imprisoned, forgotten and left to rot, still Joseph managed to rise up from the pit to the highest pinnacle of Egyptian power. Pharaoh had Joseph

Ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, “Make way!” Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt.” Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt. Genesis 41:43-45

Dressed in fine linen robes with a gold chain about his neck and Pharaoh's signet ring on his finger, Joseph is living the life. Married to a priest's daughter and father to two children, he has it all. The past is buried and gone, the future looks bright. If “Living well is the best revenge” then he should be at peace without a hint of resentment.

Then, like a sandstorm out of Sinai, a disturbing twist descends on Joseph. His brothers show up in town. At first, they blend into the mass of hungry nomads seeking grain. But then they bow to the ground before the Prime Minister.

And Joseph remembers! The dream! All their sheaves bowing to his. All the constellations kneeling before him. It's them! The faces are grayed, wrinkled, care worn but unmistakable. The last time Joseph looked into these eyes they were filled with rage and evil. The last time he heard these voices, they were cursing and laughing as the caravan dragged him into slavery.

What should he do? What would you do? It's a golden opportunity. They don't recognize him. His shaved head, regal garments, and Egyptian words disguise his identity. Should he reveal himself and forgive them? Reveal himself and humiliate them? Reveal himself and execute them? No, instead, he decides to play a little game of deception. Is it right? No. Even Joseph is troubled by this act. He must be harsh in public and keep his weeping private. But we cannot judge Joseph for using this moment to test his brothers. He wants to know if they have changed. Like a psychologist behind a see-through mirror, Joseph intends to observe their true reactions under pressure.

First he accuses them of spying, next he throws them all into jail for three days. Finally, he holds his brother Simeon hostage and requires them to bring Benjamin, the youngest, down to Egypt as ransom for his freedom. Reuben turns to his brothers with a classic "I told you so."

Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood. Genesis 42:22

Joseph eavesdrops on their confession and it causes him to turn aside with weeping. Before they leave the court, they watch the guards bind Simeon and carry him away.

When the brothers return home and explain the predicament, Jacob will not part with Benjamin. Having lost Joseph, he cannot bear to have Rachel's last son taken from his side. All of them know it will kill the old man. "Everything is against me!" he cries. But soon the grain is depleted, and a decision must be made or else they will all die. Reuben and Judah both guarantee Benjamin's safety. They will protect him with their lives. Finally Jacob, with fear and trembling, entrusts the boy to their care. Loading them down with gifts and silver, he tearfully sends off all his sons.

Arriving in Egypt, the brothers are immediately escorted to the Prime Minister's palace. Suspicious and wary, they fear a trap. "He wants to attack us and overpower us, seize us as slaves and take our donkeys" (43:18). But the steward of the house reassures them. Soon Simeon is brought out and all are invited to a feast. As the Prime Minister makes his entrance, they bow low to the ground. They try to impress him with their gifts. But the powerful man is more interested in their youngest brother. "God be gracious to you, my son" (Genesis 43:29) he blesses Benjamin and then quickly slips from the room. The host returns as the meal is served. When all enjoy the sumptuous fare, they retire.

On the morrow, with sacks full of grain, they set out for Canaan. As the towers and pyramids of Egypt disappear behind them, the brothers breathe a collective sigh of relief. All are safe and on their way home. Yet as Levi takes a backward glance he notices a cloud of dust on the horizon. The growing tempest turns out to be not a sandstorm but fast-riding Egyptian horsemen. Immediately they overtake and surround the slow donkeys and their riders. The Prime Minister's steward stares down at the bewildered men. "Why have you repaid good with evil?" he sharply accuses them. "You have stolen my master's silver cup." The sons of Jacob immediately deny the charge. They even swear an oath, "If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves" (Genesis 44:9). A second later, they all regret this vow. For as the soldiers search the bags of grain, they find the silver cup in the very last sack – the one which belongs to Benjamin. Heartbroken, they are herded back to Egypt like lambs to the slaughter.

Once more in the Prime Minister's palace, they throw themselves on the ground. "How could you do such a wicked thing after the kindness I showed you?" he demands.

"What can we say to my lord?" Judah replied. "What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves—we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup." Genesis 44:16.

"No," replies the Prime Minister, "only the one who stole the cup shall be my slave. The rest are free to go to your father." Now comes the final test. Will they take their chance and run? Will they cast aside another son of Rachel to save their own necks? Will they deceive and grieve their father again?

Summoning all his courage, Judah rises and asks permission to speak. He tells a story of a son of Jacob, the full brother of Benjamin, who was lost many years ago. The grief over this loss nearly killed their father. Long he refused to be consoled. So great was his love for this lost child that he would not let his younger brother out of his sight. With tears and anguish, he finally released the boy to come to Egypt with them.

So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father, and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy's life, sees that the boy isn't there, he will die. Your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow. Your servant guaranteed the boy's safety to my father. I said, 'If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life! Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. Genesis 44:30-33

This is Judah: the one who plotted to kill Joseph. Judah: the one who suggested that they sell the boy into slavery. Now this same Judah lays down his life.

At this brave and noble sacrifice, the face of the Prime Minister suddenly changes. "Everyone leave us," he shouts to his staff. When the room is cleared, the lord over all Egypt turns to these rag-tag shepherds and says in Hebrew, "I am Joseph!"

“Oh!” and “Uh-oh!” Stunned and silent, the full weight of this revelation begins to sweep over the brothers. And they are terrified. They figured he was dead. At most they thought he might be a lowly slave working on a pyramid. Never in all their wildest dreams did they picture him at the top of the pyramid. Dreams! Those wild dreams of sheaves and stars once drove them almost to murder. But in trying to kill the dreams, they actually caused them to come true. Here they are, bowing down to their kid brother, the ruler over all Egypt. Now they are at his mercy. And given the way they treated him, they expect no mercy. “Come close to me,” Joseph commands. They inch forward. “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!” Oh no, he hasn’t forgotten. Here it comes.

But then Joseph does a most extraordinary thing: he cries. He wails so loud that all the servants hear it. He raises up all his brothers and embraces them. He throws his arms around Benjamin and the two weep freely. Regaining his composure Joseph says,

And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. Genesis 45:5-8

Do you feel the power of that truth? Three times Joseph drives home three words, “God sent me.” Did God throw Joseph in the pit? Did He sell the boy into slavery? Did He arrange for him to be tempted and then locked in prison? No! But in all these dark moments, God was working silently to accomplish His will. Sometimes He worked through the actors in this drama, sometimes He worked alongside them, and sometimes against them. But always, the Lord’s will was to bring good out of evil. Paul writes,

We know that God works in all things for the good of those who love Him. If God is for us, who can be against us? In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” from Romans 8:28-39

Do you know that? Do you know that God is working for your good? Do you feel like more than a conqueror through Him who loves you?

- In the fires of temptation
- In the depths of depression
- In the face of injustice
- In the heat of family conflict
- In the grip of addiction
- In the shadow of disease and death

Are you convinced down to the marrow of your bones that nothing can separate you from His love in Christ Jesus, the descendant of Judah who also laid down His life? Joseph was convinced. His brothers meant to do him evil. But God brought good out of their evil and, by it, saved even their lives. He did it for us as well. On the terrifying twisted

Cross, God brought the greatest good out of our sin - all the darkest evil we do. And by it, He saved our lives. No matter what your situation, I invite you, like Joseph, to seek where God is working, to trust that God is working, to work where God is working and to give thanks that God is working.

Today I ask you to plant a seed of faith. Don't work against God. Work with Him. Write on the leaf in your bulletin what you will do. You can Love God by planting seeds of Praise and Thanksgiving. You can Grow in Grace by planting seeds of Spiritual Growth. You can Share with Others by planting seeds of Service. We have many ideas on the back. Choose as many as you like. Write on a leaf the seed you are planting and place it the offering basket and we'll put it on the tree.

Remember Jennifer? On the Sunday her pastor, Randy Frazee from The Story, preached about forgiving, letting go, and planting a seed of faith, Jennifer made an incredible sacrifice. In a handwritten note, she forgave her brother, signed it simply "Jennifer" and placed it in the offering plate with the \$20. For her, it meant she would trust that God would accomplish his good purpose despite her circumstances. On Monday the note landed on Pastor Randy's desk. He did not know Jennifer's identity. So the next Sunday he read the letter anonymously during worship the next Sunday.

When I read the letter in the second service, I added, "If the person who wrote this letter is here today, please come to see me." A young woman timidly approached me immediately after the service. It was Jennifer.

I told her that after the first service that morning a family came to the front of the church to see me. With tears in their eyes, they asked if they could talk to the woman in the letter. This family, along with two others, wanted to pay Jennifer's college tuition. Not just the first year, but all four! When I told her about the families' generous offer, she wept uncontrollably – tears of disbelief and joy.

Jennifer finished college and nursing school in the top tier of her class. Today she is an oncology nurse, a loving wife, and devoted mom. She faced betrayal, anger, and disappointment. Yet despite her circumstances, she trusted God. She discovered that God was working for her good.¹

Trust God to untangle all your terrifying twists.

¹ Ibid., 48.

