

Joseph, the Daily Man
 Pastor Sam Richards
 November 22, 2020

How can a man preserve his love of family in the absence of family? In Joseph's case, it was not merely that absence of family but the antagonism of the siblings—fraternal hatred, envy and violence. Joseph's brothers were fierce, cruel, heartless men who hated their father, Jacob, *for his many faults*: his penchant for getting his own way, a shrewd sheep-dealer, a polygamist who provoked strife by favoritism: one wife (who bore him two sons) over the other (who bore him six sons), one wife's children over all his other offspring. His capacity to beget children far exceeded his capacity to nurture, father and parent them. Jacob came by his favoritism naturally enough. Abraham favored Ishmael, while Sarah favored Isaac; Isaac favored Esau, while Rebecca favored Jacob; yet Jacob, in the third generation of this practice, has learned nothing in the process. It was this dysfunction, we might say, that led to the eruption of anti-family sins (such as dishonoring their father, hating their brother, incest and fornication) among Jacob's ten eldest sons. I have particularly in mind the plot against Joseph by his ten older brothers who sought to "disappear" him—first by murder, and then by the social death of enslavement. They sold their brother to Ishmaelite traders (who were actually extended family!) who then sold Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt. Then they proceeded to further dishonor their father, by faking the death of his favorite son and by maintaining that ruse for some twenty-two years. So the sins against family transcended simple attempted fratricide—and extended beyond dishonoring their father to crimes, lies and deceit.

Some theological writers claim the most astonishing things about Joseph's story. For instance, one writer asserted that if it weren't for Joseph, Jacob's *family would have perished* in the famine. That's untrue. We know it is untrue because God's plan intervened and that Joseph was sent to Egypt specifically to save them from that disaster. Failing that, God would have found another way to protect his chosen family, who would develop into "the people of God" by way of keeping his promise to Abraham—and to secure redemption, eventually, through the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, Jacob's descendant! And that is not beside the point; it is the point—it is God's saving purpose! The peril of starvation was real, but so what the way of escape.

Another writer, just after claiming that "God controls all things, and that God uses his providence to bring about what he deems best," spends the next three paragraphs calling into question these assertion just cited. He asks, "Is it too much to think that even when our family severely disappoints that God is in control and has a plan?" No, it isn't. "However, is there some plan that God could have even when those around us hurt us?" Of course, he has such a plan. "Is there some good that can come from the hurt and disappointment we feel?"

This is the same writer who, just one page before this self-contradictory snarl of soft ball questions, opined: “In psychotherapy, there is a technique referred to as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT for short). In CBT, you really attempt to change people’s actions by changing their cognitions, their thought process. That’s really what I am arguing for here. We need to focus and think on the good in our family, rather than the bad.” What does it mean to “change one’s cognitions?” Are we talking about how one thinks? Or are we deliberately changing what one thinks—as in “substituting one truth for another,” or substituting a more convenient truth, adaptable truth for an inconvenient one? When that is done to a historical document, it is called “revisionism.” We bend the facts to fit the narrative? I think that this technique is what post-modernists may have in view when they assert that all statements are acts of power and assertion. They mean that those in power write the history books—I find this rather cynical. I actually believe that historians may write history to present what happened and to offer their best shot at explaining why—and that social dominance isn’t necessarily their upfront motivation.

What this sermon writer is expressing is a fairly blatant endorsement of “the Power of Positive Thinking” (al la Norman Vincent Peale)—CBT must be a later, more highly evolved form of Peale’s approach. But I wonder why in the world are we discussing CBT/or psychotherapy in the middle of a sermon on the Joseph narrative?! Besides being anachronistic, CBT would never have occurred to Joseph in 1600-1700 BC!—let alone psychotherapy!

This therapeutic twist contrasts sharply with the biblical narrative. We have no record of the ten brothers sitting around in a therapy circle, convened by Joseph as therapist, sharing positive thoughts about the “family.” Middle-aged, weather beaten shepherds from ancient Palestine?! And, after the requisite number of sessions, moving on in their lives, think new thoughts/cognitions so as to reconcile the family, find their unity and positively love each other more fully and truly. I think what set me off, is the line: That’s really what I am arguing for here. We need to focus and think on the good in our family, rather than the bad. Biblically, and authentically, the brothers needed to come face to face with their sin, stop running from the guilt, confess their evil and seek forgiveness for God—*and the necessary result would be better family.*

Because what actually happened is that they sinned, sought to murder Joseph, faked his death, lied to their broken-treated father (for years) and never expected that their sins would find them out on their shopping expedition to Egypt in a time of dire famine. They apparently felt guilty about their sin and were trapped in it. It was God who provided a way out by **raising Joseph from the pit into they had hurled him, naked, to the Governor’s office, enrobed, in Egypt**—where he ruled second only to Pharaoh himself. The reality therapy God had in mind was confrontation, confession, repentance and restoration; all familiar, all spiritual and quite effectual.

God wanted, we assume, Jacob's family healed and he did the behind the scenes work, he put the players in place and guided the process over a long period of time—God harnessed their wickedness, evil and sin towards that good end. *And the bread news is that God is still doing this kind of deliverance and healing today?* The miracle then is that Joseph who suffered from the same family dysfunction as they all did; he survived betrayal and abandonment (**God being with him!**) and even hatred to become a **loving, peaceable advocate for family reconciliation**. Joseph was “a family man”—however, we are not talking about family as in a husband, wife and children setting. Rather we are describing the extended family of origin and Joseph's compassion for his warring siblings in that larger set of relationships!

There are, I think, at least five components to this astonishing scene of family reconciliation: a. the disclosure, b. the conscience stricken silence, c. the encouragement and forgiveness piece, d. the message to Jacob and e. the reconciliation piece. We will go over these five divisions in order. The disclosure follows hard upon the torrential intercessory speech by Judah. This highly emotive speech makes it clear that, in Judah's heart, filial and fraternal affection have overthrown the love of self enthroned in his formerly hard heart of resentment, bitterness and envy.

What follows is b. a conscience stricken silence where the brothers are too stunned to speak. Indeed the object of their hatred/abuse is standing in front of them smiling. They sincerely thought him to be dead, and therefore there was no conceivable remedy for their collective malfeasance. They had done what they had done and were stuck with it. And not only did he identify as Joseph but he was also the reigning Governor of Egypt! So, they were in serious jeopardy—he had the authority and means to avenge himself on them! But, strangely, he was choosing not to?! This was confounding to them, contrary to their treacherous hearts. What should have caused joy (discovering that your brother was alive not dead), because of guilt, evoked terror. That struck them silent.

c. Joseph stresses that it is God who sent him to Egypt for such a time as this. Having discovered that they are no longer the cruel, heartless and fierce men, they were wont to be; he moves on encouragingly to put them at ease. Joseph even urges them not to be aggrieved over their past crimes! Most assuredly they didn't reflect on God's purposes as being undeterred by their crime—they were insensitive to the divine delays behind the scenes. The living room screen which hid their sin from view had been torched . . . and now, in smoldering tatters, it exposes their sin all to view! We are in the encouragement phase where Joseph is hoping to convey complete forgiveness to their tentative, inexperienced hearts. Joseph actually loves his undeserving and unsuspecting brothers. They had been adversaries; foes, unintentionally co-opted by God as benefactors—from the true point of view! Joseph seems happier to save and gladden them than he is to have attained prominence and high office! I am trying

to convey how topsy-turvy this all is from their skewed perspective. An ill-used brother yearning to forgive his sullen half-brothers, who have just been exposed and shamed! He is seeking their peace, their love, and their reunification?!

It also appears that Joseph d. moves on to frame his message to Jacob so as to defuse the situation, lessen the intensity. Joseph is longing to be rejoined with his father, but until now they were separated by the hostility and animosity of the brothers—it is very unlikely that any involvement with Jacob would have been welcome (as initiated by Joseph while he was located in Egypt). Sin separates believers from God and from each other as well. He reiterates, **Make haste, make haste** for his is the impatience of a long absent son.

At this point, e. the enduring sanctity of family ties is prominent. Joseph wants his father to see *how God has blessed him*—to reassure him that with God things have turned out right (despite the ill-conceived plans to sabotage his plans—and the resultant discouragement, depression and despair). Jacob is the only parent that Joseph can gladden in Jacob's old age—but he is most excited by being so placed as to take care of his own family, and to help with a world-wide food crisis as well. What a platform to act on! It is as if he wants to exult in the great wisdom of God displayed in this providential course of events.

There is no hint here that the move to Egypt was envisioned to be more than a five year stop gap measure. No suggestion as to how this might degenerate into bondage for four hundred years, as we know it does eventually.

And our scene closes with a kiss of reconciliation—first with warm affection to Benjamin and, then, more out of filial duty to the others. That of course might be as much a function of their ages, as it is their birth order/blood relations. It is instructive to note that in this reconciliation business, it is the offended (Joseph) who initiates the process (with his estranged brothers)—echoing the verse: **We love God because He first loved us.** (1 John 4:19) And imitating the priorities of Jesus, who came to seek the lost—even those who did not know their critical need of their good shepherd. **In the beginning God created** is transposed into a new key, and **God so loved the world that he sent his only Son**—God is gracious, always taking the initiative. Let us respond to his invitation, let us attend with our brother Christ, let us go up to the house of the Lord and worship, rejoice and be glad.

Meanwhile, back in the governor's mansion, we read: **And after that his brothers talked with him.** (v.15) Of course. Let us do likewise.

Amen.