Foundational Stories #11 of 24:

"Reunion"

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Genesis 45:1-15

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

August 16, 2026

The story of Joseph is the longest continuous story in the book of Genesis. It begins in chapter 37 and ends in chapter 50, with a brief interlude in chapter 38. There is a big cast of characters; if we were turning this into a play we would need a large ensemble: Joseph, his father, his eleven brothers, the Egyptian Pharaoh, several Egyptian officials, two Egyptian wives, and more. *God* is also in the story, but makes no appearances and speaks no words – entirely behind the scenes, always present and at work.

Last week we heard the first part of this story. Joseph was hated by his ten elder brothers. They were jealous of the magnificent coat their father had made for Joseph. They were mad because Joseph tattled on them when they were being irresponsible with their father's flock. They were angry because Joseph told them about dreams he had in which they bowed down to them. They threw Joseph into a pit, sold him to some merchants for twenty pieces of silver, and made it look to their father as if Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. The merchants took Joseph to Egypt, and sold him into slavery.

Today we jump ahead eight chapters to the climax of the story, when Joseph is reunited with his brothers through a remarkable series of circumstances. A whole lot happened in those eight chapters!

Chapter 39: Joseph is a responsible, trustworthy slave in the household of Potiphar, the captain of the Egyptian guard. Joseph is also "handsome and good looking," and Potiphar's wife takes a fancy to him. She wants to sleep with Joseph. He says no. She approaches him day after day, and Joseph keeps saying no. Finally she pulls his tunic off him, and Joseph runs, but – holding Joseph's tunic in her hands – she tells Potiphar that Joseph tried to force himself on her. Potiphar throws Joseph into prison.

Chapter 40: Pharaoh is angry with his royal cupbearer and his chief baker and throws them into prison with Joseph. They have some unusual dreams which they don't understand, but Joseph is able to interpret them. The chief baker gets executed, but the cupbearer is restored to his position.

Chapter 41: Two years later, Pharaoh has some unusual dreams. None of Egypt's magicians or wise men can interpret them. The cupbearer remembers the prisoner who can interpret dreams. Pharaoh summons Joseph, and Joseph interprets his dreams: "There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. After them there will arise seven years of famine, and … the famine will consume the land." Joseph advises Pharaoh to "select a man who is discerning and wise and set him over the land of Egypt" to administer the country's grain supply. He should store up the grain surplus each year for the next seven years, so when the famine comes, there will still be plenty of food. Pharaoh is impressed: "Can we find anyone else like this, one in whom is the spirit of God?" Pharaoh

gives Joseph his signet ring, outfits Joseph in fine linen and a gold chain, gives Joseph a tour in a royal chariot, gives him an Egyptian name, and gives him an Egyptian wife. Joseph is now 30 years old; it has been thirteen years since he was sold into slavery. Over the next seven years, "Joseph stored up grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure." During those years he and his wife have two sons. Joseph names the first "Manasseh," which means "making to forget," because, as Joseph says, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." He names the second "Ephraim," which means "fruitful," because, as Joseph says, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes." The seven years of plenty end, and the seven years of famine begin. "Joseph opened all the storehouses" and began selling the stored-up grain. "All the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world."

Chapter 42: Back in Canaan, Jacob and his sons are starving. Jacob sends ten of his sons – all but Benjamin, the youngest – to Egypt to buy grain. They come before Joseph. He recognizes them, but they don't recognize him. It's been *twenty years* since they have seen each other. Joseph accuses them of being spies and throws them in jail for three days. Then he sends all of them home except Simeon. Joseph promises to release him if they will come back with Benjamin – who is Joseph's only *full* brother. The brothers say to one another, "Alas, 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." Joseph allows them to buy grain, but secretly puts their money back in their sacks. They return home with the grain and the money. They tell Jacob what happened, but he refuses to let them go back to Egypt with his beloved son Benjamin.

Chapter 43: Some time passes. The famine gets worse. Jacob and his family run out of food. They argue about what to do. Jacob sends all his sons, including Benjamin, back to Egypt. They bring gifts, double the money, plus the money they had found in their sacks. The brothers arrive and Joseph sees his younger brother Benjamin. The brothers fear they will be arrested and turned into slaves, but instead Joseph gives them a lavish feast in his own home, and treats Benjamin extra generously. Joseph is overcome with emotion, and he excuses himself to a private room, where he breaks down in tears.

Chapter 44: Joseph tells his steward to fill the brothers' sacks with food, and with their money. Joseph also tells the steward to put his silver goblet in Benjamin's sack. The brothers start heading home, then Joseph sends his steward after them, to accuse them of grand theft. The goblet is discovered in Benjamin's sack, and Benjamin is taken back to Egypt to become a slave. The brothers return with him and come before Joseph one more time. Judah – the brother who had come up with the idea to sell Joseph for money in the first place – gives a big long passionate speech, begging Joseph for mercy. He offers his life in exchange for Benjamin's. *Let Benjamin go,* he pleads, and *I will be your slave instead.*

That brings us, finally, to chapter 45, to the portion of the story we read earlier. "Then Joseph could no longer control himself." He reveals himself to his brothers. "He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it." His brothers are astonished. *How could this be?* they must have been thinking. *We sold him into slavery!* Joseph reiterates: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." He does not yell at them. He does not lash out at them with twenty years' worth of anger and rage. He does not call them all the expletive-laden names that many other people in his shoes would have called them. He does not utter a single unkind word. Instead, he does something truly remarkable: he tells them that *God* has been at work through this whole twenty-two-year-long drama. He tells them that the very *bad* things they did to him have led to a very *good* result.

Their act of cruelty to him ultimately – through God's handiwork – led to their *salvation*. Joseph puts it like this: "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not *you* who sent me here but *God*." That is a truly remarkable interpretation of the events that had transpired in Joseph's life. He means every single word. The dreams he had that his brothers hated – those dreams came from God. Being sold into slavery – God was able to use that. The false accusation made against him by Potiphar's wife – God could use that too. Joseph's ability to interpret dreams – that was a gift from God. Pharaoh's dreams – definitely from God. Joseph's wisdom in managing all the Egyptian grain – another gift from God. The famine that resulted in his reunion with his family – another turn of events in which God was at work. Everything that has happened in these past eight chapters, these past twenty-two years, has, it turns out, happened for a *purpose*, a purpose that *none* of these people were aware of at the time these events were unfolding.

Which brings me to the first of two lessons from this story. *God is at work, behind the scenes, in everything.* All the events in your life, the events that may seem random or haphazard, *including* the incredibly hurtful or harmful things that may have happened to you or been done to you – *there might be a larger purpose to all that.* There might be a *reason*. Please do not misunderstand, I am not saying that God *wanted* you to be hurt, or that God *wanted* you to suffer. But I *am* saying that God might be able to *use* those bad things that happened to you, and those bad choices that other people made that negatively impacted you, to lead to some kind of *positive* result or outcome in your life later on. I think of people who had a major health issue when they were young who later became nurses or doctors. I think of drug addicts who become drug counselors. I think of abused children who become child advocates. I think of any number of situations where *evil* can be transformed into *good*. God is not responsible for the *suffering.* But God *can* and *does* lead people *out* of suffering and into *service.*

The second lesson: Joseph can be a *model* of how to treat people who have hurt us. Joseph does mess around with his brothers for a few chapters, maybe because when he first saw them he wanted to hurt them back. But in the end, he came around. He *let go* of all his anger and hurt, all his bitterness and rage. He found the strength to *forgive* his brothers, even if he could never *forget* what they had done to him. Think about the people who have hurt *you*. Maybe a bully at school, or a cruel teacher. Maybe an abusive parent, or an abusive partner or spouse. Maybe a mean employer, or someone who made a false accusation against you, or someone who manipulated you into doing something you regret. *How do you feel about that person?* Are you still carrying around anger and hurt, bitterness and rage? Are you letting negative emotions eat away at your *soul*? Are you taking your hurt out on other people? Are you allowing what happened *then* to negatively impact your life, or other peoples' lives, *now*? If the answer to any of those questions is *yes*, then there's some work you need to do. Work that Joseph was able to do. *Let him be your guide.* Your model. I don't mean the way he acted in chapters 42 to 44 when he was playing cruel games with his brothers. I mean the way he acted in chapter 45, when he comes *clean* with them. When he welcomes them with open arms. When he is no longer *reacting* to them, but is actively *making peace* with them, doing everything he can to *mend fences* and demonstrate that he *forgives* them for the wrongs they did to them. *Let Joseph be your model.* If you have been carrying around emotional *pain* ... if there is anger, hurt, bitterness, or rage in your heart ... *Let it go!* Find a way to just ... let it go. Take that burden off from around your neck. Let yourself become *free!*

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