

God Sent Me, Not You (Gen. 45:1–15)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Judah has laid all his cards on the table. The silver cup has been found with Benjamin, and the brothers have no hope of demonstrating their innocence to a man who can practice divination. Judah speaks for all the brothers, then, when he implores the Egyptian ruler for mercy. Judah, however, offers himself alone as a substitute, so that Benjamin may be reconciled with their father, Jacob. What Judah does not know, however, is that he is pleading with the same brother whom he suggested selling into slavery over two decades earlier. How will Joseph respond to Judah's request. Has he been able to forgive his brothers, or is he still holding a grudge? Will he have mercy on Benjamin, or will he make his brothers pay for what they have done to him? Ultimately, Joseph's ability to forgive his brothers arises from a profound theological reflection that Joseph explains in this passage: *in the midst of evil, God accomplishes good*.

The Crisis (Gen. 45:1–3)

After Judah makes his impassioned plea to fulfill his pledge of safety for Benjamin by offering himself as a substitute slave, Joseph can no longer hide his true identity from his brothers. Earlier, Joseph had been able to “control” his emotions in the presence of his brothers (Gen. 43:31).¹ Now, however, Joseph tells everyone to leave his presence except his brothers (v. 1). Joseph's precise reason for sending everyone else out from the room is somewhat unclear. It may be that Joseph does not want to embarrass his brothers by speaking of the crime they had committed against him twenty-two years earlier in front of other people.² On the other hand, the precise language suggests that Joseph wanted to express his emotions fully to his brothers, but that he could not do so until the others had left the room.³ This was a private time for family reconciliation, where those outside the family would be out of place. Even so, Joseph wept so loudly that the Egyptians and the household of Pharaoh heard him (v. 2). Joseph wept in hiding twice before (Gen. 42:24; 43:30), but now he weeps openly before his brothers.⁴

Then, after twenty-two years of estrangement, Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers: “I am Joseph!” (v. 3a). Without giving his brothers time to absorb this stunning information, Joseph asks the question that is weighing heavily on my heart: “Is my father still alive?” (v. 3b). This question is somewhat curious, since Joseph had just asked whether his father was still alive when they had arrived on this trip (Gen. 43:27–28). It is not as though the brothers would have been able to call

¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 573.

² Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:376.

³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 573.

⁴ Hamilton, 573.

their father to gain further information in the meantime. John Walton is probably right, then, to suggest that the word “alive” means more than whether Jacob still has a pulse. Rather, Joseph is asking about more details about the well-being of his father.⁵ Judah’s dire description at the end of the previous chapter of the devastating effect that losing Benjamin would have on Jacob may have shaken Joseph with concern for his father (Gen. 44:30–34).⁶ While they may have given some information to the Egyptian ruler when he asked about “*your* father,” Joseph now seeks more information as he calls Jacob “*my* father” for the first time.⁷ The brothers struggle to answer Joseph, being “dismayed at his presence” (v. 3c). This word for “dismayed” describes a deep, visceral fear. It is the same word that describes King Saul’s fear when he saw Samuel rise from Sheol, after consulting the medium at Endor (1 Sam. 28:21).⁸

The Clarification (Gen. 45:4–8)

Perhaps from the recognition that his self-revelation must have come as a severe shock to his brothers, Joseph kindly asks his brothers to come nearer to him (v. 4a). When he does so, he identifies himself by providing information that the brothers have hidden from others for more than two decades: he is the brothers whom they sold into Egypt (v. 4b). Joseph does not downplay the evil of the action, but he is quick to comfort them, telling them not to be distressed or angry with themselves over their sin (v. 5a).⁹ To this word of comfort, Joseph provides a supporting reason: “for God sent me before you to preserve life” (v. 5b). This is an astonishing statement that deserves our serious consideration.

To start, Joseph is making an explicit claim about the work of God’s providence through the events of his life. Thus, he is able to separate the two aspects of what has happened to him: from one perspective, his brothers committed evil by selling him into slavery, but from another perspective, God had accomplished good through sending him to Egypt.¹⁰ Specifically, Joseph is identifying God’s work to “preserve life.” The theme of life vs. death has come up in a number of places in the Joseph story, on the lips of Jacob (Gen. 42:2), Judah (Gen. 43:8), and even by Joseph himself (Gen. 42:18).¹¹ This theme of life and death is of the utmost importance, since the beginning of the book of Genesis tells the story of how Adam and Eve forfeited life and embraced death by their faithless sin. Now, at the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph reverses that trajectory of death by becoming God’s agent to preserve life in the midst of the chief crisis of his day.¹² Still, for Joseph, this realization was not merely an exercise in philosophical speculation. Much more, for Joseph this was “applied theology, God’s truth releasing the will for constructive effort and the emotions for healing affection.”¹³

⁵ Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 682.

⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 427.

⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 574.

⁸ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:812.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:377.

¹⁰ Kidner, *Genesis*, 218.

¹¹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 223.

¹² Bruce T. Dahlberg, “On Recognizing the Unity of Genesis,” *Theology Digest* 24, no. 4 (1976): 364.

¹³ Kidner, *Genesis*, 217–18.

Importantly, this response does not teach us to diminish the significance of evil, and it certainly does not give us justification for our own sin on the basis that God is working providentially for good in the midst of evil.¹⁴ God's glory in working evil toward good does not in the least change the heinousness of evil. The Apostle Paul rejected this idea outright, when he wrote, "And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just" (Rom. 3:8). The fact that God brings good out of evil does not in the least mitigate the severity of evil, but only more greatly glorifies God.

Joseph continues, explaining that the famine has only gone on for two years, so that five years of the famine remain (v. 6). This information helps us to orient ourselves on the timeline of the story. Remember that Joseph was seventeen years old when he first incurred the hatred of his brothers (Gen. 37:2). Then, he was thirty years old when he ascended as the ruler of Pharaoh (Gen. 41:46), after thirteen years of suffering. That point marked the beginning of the seven plentiful years in Egypt (Gen. 41:47), and two of the famine years have now passed. So, Joseph is now thirty-nine years old, with twenty-two years having passed since the beginning of this story. Also, as we observed earlier, this helps us to see the narrative strategy for underscoring the severity of the famine. Where the seven years of plenty slipped by quickly across seven short verses (Gen. 41:47–53), the famine stretches excruciatingly across seven long chapters (Gen. 41–47). Indeed, we are in the fifth chapter of the famine, and only two years have passed!

In v. 7, Joseph returns to the idea that it is God who had sent him. Specifically, Joseph says that God sent him to preserve them as a remnant on the earth, and to keep alive for them many survivors. The words "remnant" and "survivors" are common terms in the Old Testament that further demonstrate the degree of disaster that this famine represents.¹⁵ Even more, these words carry theological significance. It is not merely that twelve lives are being saved from the household of Israel, but that by saving these lives, God is carrying forward his plans and purposes for the redemption of the world.¹⁶

To punctuate his thought, Joseph repeats his assertion one more time in pointed terms: "So it was not you who sent me here, but God" (v. 8a). By this, Joseph rejects categorically any notion that God may *will* some things, but merely *permit* others. On the contrary, he is stating that all things come to pass by the secret counsel of God's will, including the way that God works to bring the evil actions of people toward his good purposes.¹⁷ The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes this point well:

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the

¹⁴ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 673.

¹⁵ Kidner, *Genesis*, 218.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 576.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:377–81.

creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin. (WCF 5.4)

God does not sin, and neither does sin in any way proceed from him as the author or approver of sin. Nevertheless, in some mysterious way, God is almighty, powerful, wise, and good as he works out his will in and through the evil of sinful people. He gives evil boundaries and order, and he channels evil towards his own ends. Evil does not run without direction in this world, but God guides it wherever he wishes to accomplish his holy purposes.

Furthermore, Joseph states that he has been made a “father to Pharaoh” (v. 8b), a title that describes being an adviser to Pharaoh.¹⁸ Finally, Joseph states that he has become the lord over all Pharaoh’s house, and a ruler over all the land of Egypt (v. 8c). The word “ruler” (מֹשֶׁל; *mōshēl*) is important. At the beginning of the Joseph story, when Joseph told his brothers his dream, they asked him, “Will you surely rule (מְשׁוֹל תִּמְשֹׁל; *māshōl timshōl*) over us?” (Gen. 37:8).¹⁹ Joseph now not only rules over his brothers, but over all the land of Egypt. We misunderstand Joseph if we think he is bragging about this. On the contrary, Joseph is talking about what God has done. As Victor Hamilton observes, “Joseph talks more about God than about Joseph.”²⁰

The Call (Gen. 45:9–15)

After Joseph explains the backstory of everything that has happened—and why it has happened—since they parted ways over two decades ago, Joseph gives his brothers instructions. He tells them to hurry back to their father, declaring that Joseph has been made lord over all Egypt (v. 9a). Joseph is eager to be reunited with his father, and he will repeat his exhortation for them to hurry at the end of this speech in v. 13.²¹ The brothers are to tell Jacob to come down to Egypt quickly, without delay (v. 9b). This is not just an opportunity to reunite, for Joseph has plans for the long-term dwelling of his father and his brothers. They, their family, and all their flocks, herds, and other property will dwell in Goshen, which will keep them near to Joseph (v. 10). This is important, since those five years of famine still remain, and Joseph will be able to provide for his family in Goshen (v. 11). As such, Goshen will be a dwelling place where the household of Israel will be able to dwell secure, although surrounded on all sides by famine. Goshen, then, appears at the end of Genesis as an echo of the garden of Eden from the beginning of Genesis, which was surrounded on all sides by uncultivated land (Gen. 2:10–15). Furthermore, Goshen becomes a type of the promised land of Canaan, a fertile land surrounded on all sides by God’s enemies.²²

Joseph sends them back to his father, reminding them that they are eyewitnesses that Joseph is still alive (v. 12).²³ Jacob will certainly have doubts to hear that his long dead son is, in fact, alive, so Joseph charges his brothers to tell Jacob of all that they have seen in Egypt, in order to convince

¹⁸ Kidner, *Genesis*, 218; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 428.

¹⁹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 223.

²⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 577.

²¹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 428–429.

²² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 223.

²³ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:816.

Jacob so that Jacob will come down to Egypt. Before they leave, Joseph weeps, kisses, and talks with all his brothers (v. 14–15). Typologically, this scene foreshadows Jesus' appearances to his disciples, especially in the way that those who see Christ risen from the dead often struggle to convince others of what they have seen. Like Joseph's brothers to Jacob, Christ charges his apostles to be eyewitnesses to the world, declaring that the One who died is now alive forevermore.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why does Joseph's self-disclosure to his brothers pose such a crisis to them? What is at stake for them? How would they expect Joseph to respond after what they had done to him so many years ago? Can you think of a time that you were confronted for a sin that you believed to be behind you? How did you feel? How were you tempted to respond? What wisdom does God give us in the Bible about how we should respond when we are confronted with our sin?
- 2) How has Joseph made peace with the evil that has happened to him over the course of his life? How does he differentiate what his brothers did to him from God's hand in the course of events during his life? In this, does Joseph minimize the sin of his brothers? Does Joseph charge God with sin? How does Joseph balance the responsibility of his brothers for their sin, with the providential sovereignty of God over all his creatures, and all their actions?
- 3) Why does Joseph insist that his father and all of Israel's household should come to settle near him in Goshen? How much more of the famine remains at this point in time? How does the land of Goshen echo the garden of Eden, and how does it foreshadow the future function of the promised land of Canaan? How also will this move of the nation of Israel down to Egypt set up the conflict in the book of Exodus? How do we see God's hand of providence in this move?
- 4) How does this story foreshadow the resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ? Consider Christ's declaration that he has gained all authority (Matt. 28:18). How does this compare with the message that Joseph sends his brothers to proclaim to their father (cf. Gen. 45:13). Consider Peter's balancing of God's sovereignty and human responsibility in Christ's crucifixion (Acts 2:23). How does this compare with Joseph's understanding of what has happened to him?