



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### The Lord is in his Holy Temple

Genesis 45:1-28

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Last week we ended somewhat abruptly at the end of Chapter 44, with Judah's impassioned plea to Joseph. You'll remember that when he spotted his brothers on their arrival in Egypt to buy grain, Joseph set a plan in motion, not only to save his family from starvation, but ultimately to reunite them with himself. But first he had to know if it was safe to do so. Were these the same evil brothers he had known twenty years before or had they changed. And considering how well Joseph had come to know God during his years of exile, his hope that his brothers had changed isn't as unrealistic as it might sound. Remember that Joseph had been raised on his own family's stories: stories of God calling the unlikeliest of sinners and then transforming them into saints ready to do the work of his kingdom. Certainly Joseph had heard something of his own father's story: how Jacob, the backstabbing schemer, had learned to cling to God and had been renamed Israel. Joseph had seen God very much at work in his own life, walking with him through those years of slavery and imprisonment, as he made him ready to govern Egypt. He had seen God at work when ten of his brothers knelt before him on their first visit to Egypt, fulfilling very vividly and in part the dreams Joseph had had as a young man. We know that Joseph knew God was at work in his own life; it would have been natural for him to expect that God was also doing something in the lives of his brothers. But *how* has God been at work in their lives? Have they changed? And if they've changed, has it been for the better? And so Joseph devises three tests. He wants to know if they still value profit over family and he wants to know if they resent the favouritism that their father has shown to the sons of Rachel, his favourite wife. Do they

show Benjamin with the same hatred that they had shown him?

As the tests play out, Joseph sees that his brothers no longer put money before family and he sees that they show no jealousy or resentment towards Benjamin when he receives Joseph's favourable treatment. But Joseph is overwhelmed by the transformation he sees, especially in Judah. In Chapter 44, as Joseph tests his brothers and insists that Benjamin be left behind as punishment, Judah steps before Joseph and humbly pleads to be allowed to take Benjamin's place. He shows concern for Benjamin, but he also pleads with Joseph that if anything should happen to Benjamin, it would so grieve their poor father that he would die. This was a greater transformation than Joseph ever hoped for. God has been at work in his brothers' lives just as dramatically as he has been at work in Joseph's. Look now at Chapter 45:

**Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. (Genesis 45:1-3)**

As he sees the evidence that his brothers have changed so dramatically, Joseph can no longer hold back his joy. He sends away the Egyptians—they would have considered an outburst of emotion unseemly—and then he breaks down and weeps before his brothers. "I am Joseph!" he cries out. And as he's been asking all along about *their* father, now he makes it personal as he asks them about *his own* father. His question isn't so much whether or not Jacob lives—Joseph already knew that Jacob was alive—but the Hebrew suggests that it's a question about his vitality: "How is my father?" he asks.

And yet as Joseph weeps in joy, we can almost see his brother's faces falling. They were already convinced that they

were in trouble. Judah has just pleaded for Benjamin to be spared punishment and offered himself in his place. But up to this point they thought they were pleading with an Egyptian stranger. Suddenly this man reveals himself to be the very brother they had abused and sold into slavery two decades before. They're thinking about payback. And the fact that Joseph is now the most powerful man in Egypt means payback has the potential to be all sorts of horrible!

Seeing their fear, Joseph draws them near and reassures them. Look at verses 4-8 and pay particular attention to Joseph's understanding of all these events that have passed.

**So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And 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. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.**

Joseph's had heard his brothers as they argued amongst themselves. They had assumed that what was happening to them was God's punishment for what they had done to Joseph. But Joseph draws them near—again, he reassures them that he means no harm—and he gives them a completely different perspective on all these events. "Don't worry," he says, "It wasn't so much that you sold me here; it's that God sent me here to prepare a place of safety for you and for our family. You don't realise it, but God has revealed that there are five more years of famine left." *Three* times Joseph emphasises that it was *God* who had sent him to Egypt: God sent me here as much as you did. God sent me to preserve a remnant. God sent me here a slave, but it was he who raised me to be

the vizier of Egypt. Joseph describes the role that God has given him using the same language that was earlier used of Noah. God preserved Noah and a remnant of humanity by means of the ark. God now preserves another remnant—the covenant family—by means of Joseph. Later, in Genesis 50:20 Joseph once again assures his brothers that he means them no harm, saying to them:

**You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive.**

You see, Joseph had come to understand the sovereignty of God in the midst of sinful human actions. As we come near to the end of Genesis, Joseph himself gathers up the threads that have been running through the story for forty-five chapters and weaves them together. Joseph takes what God has revealed of himself and in just a few short words he weaves these strands together into the worldview of God's covenant people. This is the heart of the story and I want to come back to it in our conclusion, but for now we pass on to verses 9-14. Joseph has a plan.

**Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry. You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.' And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him.**

Think back to how Joseph's story began. Back in Chapter 37, Jacob had sent Joseph to check on his brothers as they were herding the family flocks near Shechem. Joseph was sent to ensure their wellbeing—their *shalom*. He was sidetracked from that mission by those same brothers, who threw him into a pit and sold him to a passing caravan. But now, twenty-two years later, Joseph fulfils his mission as he sends them home to their father and to their families and invites them to come back to live in safety and prosperity in Egypt.

In verses 16-20 we see the respect that Pharaoh had for Joseph. When word of what had happened got back to the king, he and his whole household rejoiced with Joseph over the reunion of his family.

**When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house, "Joseph's brothers have come," it pleased Pharaoh and his servants. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Say to your brothers, 'Do this: load your beasts and go back to the land of Canaan, and take your father and your households, and come to me, and I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you shall eat the fat of the land.' And you, Joseph, are commanded to say, 'Do this: take wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father, and come. Have no concern for your goods, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.'"**

Joseph had offered to provide for his family in Egypt, but now Pharaoh takes responsibility for them. Not only does he tell Joseph to send for them, but he also offers the "best of the land of Egypt". In fact, he sends his own wagons with the brothers to make their journey easier and tells them not to worry about their goods. All the best Egypt has to offer will be theirs.

The interesting thing here is that earlier in the history of the covenant family, to abandon the land of promise was tantamount to abandoning the covenant. Abraham got himself into trouble when he went "down to Egypt". He was

afraid his son, Isaac, would abandon the covenant if he left the land, so he sent his servant to find a wife for him and to bring her back. The long story of Jacob's exile highlighted the importance of God bringing him back into the land to receive his inheritance. And yet this time it's different. In fact, this time, God has arranged the course of history *so that* the covenant family will go down to Egypt. And in Chapter 44 we saw the reason for this. On the surface it's about saving the family from starvation during the famine. But the bigger reason is that now the covenant family is in jeopardy of being lost if they stay in the promised land. The first four generations have laid a claim on it, but there is a constant threat that they will be absorbed by the pagan Canaanites who live in it. Now that their claim on the land has been made, God is send them to live with the Egyptians so that the family itself can grow and become a nation without the threat of losing its identity. The Egyptians were just as pagan as the Canaanites, but remember that the Egyptians didn't mix with foreigners—to do so was an abomination to them. And so, in Egypt the covenant *family* can grow into the covenant *nation*. In Egypt God will prepare them to return to the land of promise when the time is right, so that they can reclaim it for themselves.

In verses 21-24 we see the story come full-circle again. It had begun with Jacob showing Joseph favouritism and his gift of the fancy coat. Now Joseph dresses them all in fancy coats of their own.

**The sons of Israel did so: and Joseph gave them wagons, according to the command of Pharaoh, and gave them provisions for the journey. To each and all of them he gave a change of clothes, but to Benjamin he gave three hundred shekels of silver and five changes of clothes. To his father he sent as follows: ten donkeys loaded with the good things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and provision for his father on the journey. Then he sent his brothers away, and as they departed,**

he said to them, “Do not quarrel on the way.”

Giving his brothers new clothes would have reminded them of the fancy coat they had so resented all those years ago. It seems to be Joseph’s way of stressing that there are no hard feelings. Again, he sees God at work in all of this—and far be it from him to resent God’s plan, even if his brothers meant it for evil. He also loads their wagons with provisions for the interim—for the journey home and back. And as he sends them he tells them not to quarrel. The Hebrew word translated “quarrel” never means that anywhere else. It usually refers to anxiety or getting “worked up”.<sup>1</sup> In light of the last two trips the brothers made to Egypt, they might be afraid that Joseph will change his mind, send his men after them, and accuse them of being spies or of stealing the riches he has given to them. Joseph assures them: “Don’t worry. Don’t be anxious.”<sup>2</sup>

**So they went up out of Egypt and came to the land of Canaan to their father Jacob. And they told him, “Joseph is still alive, and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt.” And his heart became numb, for he did not believe them. But when they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. And Israel said, “It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.”** (Genesis 45:25-28)

They returned to their father—to *Jacob*, who had spent the last twenty years in mourning for Joseph—but the chapter ends with the words of *Israel*—words spoken in faith: “My son is alive and I will go down to Egypt to see him.” God has been at work in Joseph’s life. God has been at work dramatically in his brothers’ lives to transform their

character and to make them fit fathers of the nation. And here we finally see the transformation in Jacob as he is once again referred to as “Israel”—as the one who clings to God. His determination to see Joseph before he dies points to the next scene in the story.

In conclusion I want to return to Joseph’s declaration that it was God who had sent him to Egypt. “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” That’s a difficult statement. It affirms that Joseph’s brothers had done something and that they had done it deliberately and with evil intent. But his statement also affirms that their action was part of God’s plan and that he used it for good. Joseph raises the difficult question: How do we reconcile human freedom with God’s sovereignty?

This is an important question. Not only does our answer influence who we understand God to be, but how we interpret his actions and how we act ourselves. This is part of what we call our “worldview”. Joseph’s actions, done in faith, were shaped by his worldview—by his understanding of what God was doing and of the relationship between human action and freedom and God’s sovereignty. As I said before, Joseph had managed to pull together the threads that we’ve seen running through the story so far.

What are some of those threads? Genesis teaches us that God is the Creator. But more than that, as we’ve seen throughout these chapters, God is also the one who provides what is good. We’ve seen that for God *to see* is for God *to provide* and he consistently meets every need in his perfect goodness. In Joseph’s story in particular, we’ve also seen how God works through circumstances—even through human sin—to bring about his good will and to meet the needs, not only of his people, but of his entire creation. We choose our actions. We’re responsible for our actions. But God never ceases to be sovereign over them. Again, these are all basic truths that Genesis teaches us; they’re the threads running through the story and here Joseph picks them all up and weaves

them together as he assures his brothers: “You sold me into Egypt, but it was God who sent me before you to preserve life. You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” Joseph gives us a vivid picture of the interrelationship between God’s sovereignty and human freedom.

And note I said *picture*. The Bible affirms over and over that God is sovereign over his creation. It also affirms over and over that he has created human beings as free agents. We’re not puppets under his control, but neither is he dependent on our actions. But how do we reconcile these two facts? To the consternation of theologians everywhere, the Bible never sets out an easy synthesis of this age-old problem in *words* or in the language of systematic theology. It may simply be that human language can never adequately express the depth of this truth. But sometimes an illustration can express what words can’t, and in Joseph, I’m convinced, we have one of these illustrations—a picture, painted by the storyteller as God works with and in and through the actions of sinful men to bring about salvation.

Let me use another picture. I wonder how many of you have ever played chess against a computer. I’m not a glutton for punishment, so it’s not something I do very often. It’s an exercise in futility; the computer *always* wins. In fact, I know even as I double-click on the Chess icon, before the board even appears on the screen, that the computer will win. I know it with absolute certainty. As far as the digital chessboard is concerned, the computer is sovereign. It knows all and can anticipate into near-infinity every possible move I might make. There’s nothing I can do to surprise the computer. From the beginning it plays its pieces in ways that manipulate me to play into its strategy. If I do something stupid, the computer makes me pay for it and then weaves my mistake into its strategy. On those rare occasions when I may think I’m finally making an offensive move against the computer, I usually find that within one or two moves, the computer has parried and

<sup>1</sup> M. Van Pelt and W. C. Kaiser Jr., “רגו” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, W. Van Gemeren, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), vol. 3, pages 1045-1046.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 271.

used my strategy against me. Checkmate is inevitable.<sup>3</sup>

Now, does that mean that the computer has somehow taken away my freedom? That I'm no longer responsible for what I do with my chess pieces? Absolutely not. It means that the computer is, so to speak, more powerful and more knowledgeable than I am. The difference between God and the computer is that God isn't operating mechanically and he's not out to destroy us. God acts according to his character—according to his love, his holiness, his justice, his mercy. And when it comes to his Creation, from the beginning God has been working to meet its needs with perfect goodness. As Joseph discovered, things may look bad and our fellow human beings may commit evil acts, but in the end—whether we're ever able to see it or not—God is working in all these things towards the redemption of his rebellious people and the restoration of his Creation.

Brothers and sisters, this should give us hope. John Walton writes: "The Bible knows only of providence, not serendipity."<sup>4</sup> Just as nothing happens on the digital chessboard by random chance, so nothing happens in God's creation by random chance—or at least, we can say that even "random chances" are still subject to the order God has built into his Creation and are still subject to his sovereignty. This is the great truth we've been given from the beginning. Genesis 1 isn't simply about God as Creator. It's also about God in control and about God sustaining. We miss the beauty of what Genesis 1 so vividly illustrates if, as so many do today, we try to squeeze it into the mould of our modern materialistic way of thinking—if we look at it as a story of material origins and as a story meant to answer the question "*How did God create?*" This is a way of looking at the world completely foreign to ancient peoples, including the Hebrews.

Genesis 1 answers the questions that interested ancient people: "What for?" and "How come?" And if we look at Genesis in its ancient context we see that Chapter 1 describes the creation from that *functional* perspective. It uses the language common to that culture and paints a dramatic picture of God creating the cosmos as a temple for himself and then taking up his Sabbath rest on its throne—not a rest in which he unplugs and does nothing, but a rest in which he takes up the task of sustaining the day to day operation of the temple—of the cosmos. Not a quark or an atom, not a quasar or a comet, not a strand of DNA, not a serpent or a fallen angel, and not even a band of jealous brothers acts outside of God's sovereignty.

You see, this was Joseph's worldview: God is in his holy temple and over it he reigns as Sovereign. God is in control. God always meets the needs of his Creation with his perfect goodness. And so, even in slavery, even when falsely accused, even when in prison, Joseph could trust that God was still in control, that God was working to bring about something good, that he will never fail to out-manoeuvre evil, and that he will never fail to fulfil his promises. And that knowledge—that worldview—was the foundation of Joseph's faith. It's what made his faith strong. His was a faith ready to seek God's kingdom first and to trust God for the outcome of events. His was a faith rooted in the knowledge that God is a God who redeems and for that reason Joseph himself was ready to forgive and to redeem. His was a faith ready to take action, precisely because he knew that God was in control.

Brothers and sisters, is that our worldview? If it isn't; it should be. This is the worldview that undergirds a powerful faith. The atheist may look at the "Big Bang" or at the evolution and life or at the complexity of our own human genome and see only "random chance", but for the man or woman who knows that God is in his holy temple, we see God's sovereign direction at work. The cynic may look at the problem of human evil, at war, at genocide, at violence and conclude that there is no

God, but for the one who knows that God is in his holy temple, we see our sovereign God working to redeem his Creation from that evil, countering our rebellious moves and working every sinful strategy into his own gracious and merciful plan to punish sin and to restore his people to life. This is the worldview that stands behind the cross. If there was any action that human beings meant for evil, but that God subsumed into his own plans and used for good, it was the cross on which the Lord Jesus bled and died to purchase our redemption. And it is the knowledge that God was at work in those events, as evidenced in Jesus' resurrection and ascension, that we live in confident faith—a faith confident in the new life he has given and confidently carrying the good news of Jesus' lordship to the rest of humanity.

Dear friends, the Lord is in his holy temple. He is sovereign and his actions are leading us to that final day when he will destroy sin and death once and for all and restore the fullness of life to those whom he has redeemed. With that in mind, let live in strong faith as Joseph did. Let us trust in our sovereign God, putting away all sin and unrighteousness and devoting ourselves to holiness and to righteousness and to the spread of his kingdom.

Let us pray: "Merciful Lord, grant to your faithful people pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*"

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to John Walton for his chess illustration. *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), page 697.

<sup>4</sup> *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), page 690.