

Sunday June 27, 2021  
Lesson 4: Grace Abounds  
Scripture: Genesis 45: 1-15

**Context:**

This week we end the unit for the start of this series for the summer titled: Respond. The focus of the lesson today will be to understand how our reception of grace allows us to give grace. Today's lesson concludes the Joseph narrative in the book of Genesis.

The background text from this lesson continues the story of Joseph's rise in the Egyptian court. Because of his dreams, Joseph is able to protect Egypt and the surrounding regions from famine. During the years of abundance, the land is cultivated and the harvest is simultaneously rationed to prepare for the impending famine. As a result of his dreams guiding Pharaoh, Joseph rises in prominence in the court.

All of these details lead to the climax in chapter forty-five. In chapters forty-two through forty-four, Joseph's brothers have found themselves in Egypt searching for food. They cannot recognize their own brother who is decorated in the styles of the Egyptian ruling class. Yet they are placed in the hands of the very one they betrayed. Joseph is left with the choice of reconciling with his brothers or to make their lives a living hell just as they did to him.

There are several themes concluding out in this part of the narrative. The themes of empire and family are played out respectively as Joseph discloses his role in both of them.<sup>1</sup> When Joseph is left with the choice of what to do, he is surrounded by the empire with his attendants and Pharaoh's household. Yet Joseph is not of the empire and thus his disclosure of his feelings and his identity are not for the empire; they are for his family.<sup>2</sup> And thus, he asks the others to leave him with his brothers. The dream to get him here in the first place is now up for conversation and they must process it together.

Yet now the family must deal with the fact of how their world will no longer be the same. The family is suddenly in a new context and their presumed world has been irreversibly shattered.<sup>3</sup> Joseph though is focused upon putting the narrative into perspective of how God was at work in the midst of their evil.

Never abandoning his royal role, Joseph breaks his world of empire to clash with that of his family. He is portrayed as a deeply human person who is impacted and transformed by his brothers, a bond deeper than Egyptian success.<sup>4</sup> Yet there must be a newness in this role and in his risky, self-disclosure, Joseph makes clear the path in front

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 343.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 345.

of them so their family may move forward. It is still painful and yet God will be at work with Joseph and his family.

### **Application**

Do the words empire and family go together in your vocabulary? They do not necessarily run together in my own. Usually we associate family as something more tender and intimate, whereas empire is depicted as distant and cold. Yet when the two words collide, things can become complicated and messy. And sometimes that is the very thing needed to happen.

Such is the case for Joseph and his brothers. At this point in their lives, they have been separate. The empire has become Joseph's new home where success is important and crucial to survival. The family of Joseph though finds themselves threatened and there is now a need for the empire to intervene in their lives. And so the scene is set where the long-term conflict will come to a climax.

If most families are honest, there will be the admission there is at times conflict. Conflict is not a bad thing; conflict helps us to understand more about values and direction and give a sense of meaning to what matters in this life. Yet conflict not handled well can always lead to rancor, resentment, and grief.

As we discover with Joseph, it does not matter how successful a person has become or if the circumstances have led to that person flourishing. There is still brokenness when lines have been crossed and people have felt betrayed by those they love. Even empire cannot protect a person from being a human being, having emotions and feelings. There is only so much wealth or prestige can give a person. Sometimes what people crave most is love from those in their families.

In this case Joseph learns about giving grace to those who have hurt him, remembering the grace he received from God throughout his life. Yet giving this grace will not necessarily be carefree or easily. Giving this grace to his brothers will be messy, full of human feelings of grief, anger, and love. The theme of family will overpower the theme of empire and force him to remove the very armor to bring him thus far in life.

While the text does not tell us the details of the brothers' talk with Joseph following the disclosure, one can only imagine the words to be exchanged between the two parties. Perhaps it is a good thing we will never know as the words were meant to be intimate, where both parties could engage in what they felt and how the experience impacted them. The text does end with his Joseph falling back into his role as an Egyptian courtier and giving his brothers the commission to retrieve their father, signifying there was some type of reconciliation.

This conclusion to the story of Joseph reminds us of how our own lives will often be messy when it comes to our relationships and discerning God's will in the midst of harmful behaviors and actions. If we live long enough, we will have someone we love deeply to disappoint us. And we will disappoint someone who loves us. Often times, the road to trust again will be difficult as the relationship will never be the same. The journey will take healing, perhaps tender conversations, and time. We pray how over time the Lord will show us how to live in the complicated world of family and empire.

The Joseph narrative reminds us of how the Lord God is even in the midst of the sordid messes humans make, especially when it comes to family and empires. God is not in the business of controlling humans, and yet God will have the bend to justice and

mercy even if it takes years. God has given humanity grace and calls for humanity to come out of their slumber and to give grace as well. It does not mean it will be easy, uncomplicated, or quick. God will be at work, especially when it comes to those most tender of relationships to move people to where they need to be.

How do you think people sometimes try to hide behind the world of empire to avoid attending to those “familial” relationships, which are so important? When have you felt disappointed or betrayed by someone you love and vice versa? In what ways did God bring you to reconcile with each other? How have you seen God’s grace at work in relationships strained and hurt by unjust behaviors?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh  
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge  
PO Box 71  
Brantley, AL 36009