

“Ego and Humility”
Genesis 37 and 45, selected verses
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First Scripture Lesson

Genesis 37, selected verses, dramatic interpretation

Narrator:

God made a promise – or covenant – with Abraham, that Abraham’s children would be especially blessed, and that they would be a blessing to others.

Abraham’s son Isaac inherited the promise, and then his son Jacob inherited God’s promise. This is the story of what happens next in Jacob’s family, when they lived in the land of Canaan.

Joseph:

My name is Joseph. I’m one of Jacob’s 12 sons – my mother was Rachel, my father’s favorite wife.

I was 17 years old when the trouble started. I told on my brothers - I was with them shepherding the flock when they behaved badly. I thought I owed it to my father – after all, I was his favorite son. My father Jacob – he was also called Israel – had made me a beautiful robe of many colors. All eleven of my brothers hated me for it. They wouldn’t even speak to me.

It didn’t bother me too much, really. Once when I had a dream, I told it to my brothers and they hated me even more. This was my dream: There we were, binding wheat stalks in the field. Suddenly my wheat stalk rose and stood upright; then their stalks gathered around it, and bowed down to my stalk.’ My brothers were pretty upset and hated me even more, because I dreamt I would rule over them. They even nicknamed me “the Dreamer.”

One day, I went to find my brothers who were pasturing the flock. When I found them, they had a funny look on their faces. Later I found out why: they were so angry at me, they were ready to kill me and throw me into one of the pits. They even decided what they’d tell our Dad: they’d say a wild animal killed me and ate me.

Lucky for me, my oldest brother Reuben had second thoughts and told them not to kill me. But that wasn't the end of it! A caravan came by from the east – a group of Ishmaelites with their camels, carrying goods to sell in Egypt – when the caravan came by, my brother Judah got the idea to sell me to them! I'll never forget what Judah said: he asked the others, "Reuben's right – Joseph is our brother, so we shouldn't kill him. How about, instead of killing Joseph, how about we make some money on him?" And all my brothers agreed. So they pulled me out of the pit and sold me – sold me! – for a mere twenty pieces of silver.

Narrator: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Ego. It's not a bad thing, in and of itself. At its Latin root, ego just means "self," nothing more, nothing less. In psychoanalytic theory, ego refers to that part of oneself that navigates relationship with the external world. An ego is something we all have as human beings; without a solid self, after all, there can be no relationships with others.

But like any other aspect of ourselves, the human ego is vulnerable to unhealthiness: infected with pride, swollen with achievement, over-indulged with praise, twisted with delusion. And when that happens, the ego becomes toxic: striking down everyone in its path with clueless, humiliating, heavy-handed, presumptuous words and actions. Perhaps you've been on one side or the other of this equation. Perhaps you've been on both.

The story of Joseph is in large part a story of ego run amok. Joseph is the favorite son, the golden child who can do no wrong. The Patriarch Jacob bestows his precious boy with an elaborate sign of his favor, a multi-colored, long-sleeved robe to parade around in, reminding everyone of Joseph's special status. If that weren't enough, Joseph is also a "gifted child" with an

extraordinary capacity for dreams and their interpretation. Unfortunately, his overinflated ego prevents him from keeping his mouth shut. Then, in the last straw, Joseph has the gall to tell on his brothers when they behave in a way he believes his father may disapprove of. The smarmy tattle-tale is in trouble.

The outcome is predictable. His jealous, annoyed, humiliated brothers want to kill him. Lucky for Joseph, his oldest brother Reuben steps in to prevent murder; but another brother has another idea: make a profit on the jerk. So the brothers sell Joseph into slavery to Ishmaelite traders who come along in their caravan. The brothers take Joseph's pretty coat, tear it up, smear it with animal blood, and go back to their father with the bad news. Jacob is inconsolable, no doubt to the brothers' annoyance ... and maybe their snarky delight.

And Joseph? He's lucky to be sold to Potiphar, the leader of Pharaoh's Egyptian guard, and he gets a gig in the household and does very well. Unfortunately, Potiphar's wife finds him very attractive, and tries to foist herself on him. This time, he has better self-control, and he resists her advances. She's so angry that as he runs, she grabs his cloak – and his clothes get him into trouble again. Potiphar's wife takes Joseph's torn clothes to her husband and accuses Joseph of trying to molest her. Nice.

This time, Joseph's punishment is entirely undeserved, and he's thrown into jail. He begins to discover how it feels *not* to be the favored one ... how it feels *not* to be entitled. For those among us who might have always been the rising stars, maybe you know how that feels too. How the trajectory had always been terrific, how there was no question you would succeed, how you were guaranteed to win. And maybe you know how extraordinarily disorienting it is to have the rug pulled out from under you. I suspect that anyone who's been fired, who lost their financial footing in the great recession, who was passed over for the promotion or the A-Team or the Pom squad or the lover ... It feels, well, *impossible*. The cognitive dissonance between who you are and what's happening is incompatible. And that moment

... that moment is *precisely* when God steps in with a remarkable and unexpected offer: the offer of *humility*, in contrast with *humiliation*.

For Joseph, that gift of humility comes to him in prison. Scripture puts it this way: “the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love” (Gen. 39:21). Instead of depending on his own winsomeness and wiles, Joseph learns to depend on God’s wisdom. Instead of presuming his own special value or singular gifts, Joseph discovers the unmerited mercy of God.

And *this* is when things start to turn. Joseph’s gifts are put to use again – but this time, not for his own welfare or enrichment. Instead, fueled by humility, Joseph’s gifts are put to use for the well-being of other vulnerable people. The chief jailer puts Joseph in charge of the prisoners, and his leadership creates a safe and orderly environment. Time goes by, and Joseph is called on to interpret dreams for Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer and chief baker, and his discernment predicts a just and fair outcome for both. Two more years go by, and Joseph is called on to assist no less than Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh dreams of seven fat cows and seven lean cows, and seven plump ears of grain and seven scrawny stalks of grain. And Joseph, gifted Joseph, knows exactly what this means: there will be seven years of plenty, when the crops are lush and the cows are fat ... followed by seven years of famine, when the earth is cracked with drought. Joseph advises Pharaoh to place an overseer to prepare ahead for all that is to come, so that reserves are put aside and no one need perish.

It is not in Joseph’s egotism and preciousness that his gifts are well used; it is in his humility that God uses him. And then God takes it one more step: God raises Joseph up, resurrects Joseph, if you will, into transformed glory. For whom does Pharaoh appoint to manage the future but Joseph himself? And Joseph is literally clothed in splendor again – he’s given Pharaoh’s signet ring as a symbol of his power, and is draped in garments of fine linen. Not because Joseph is the “golden child,” but because God has used him in his humility.

And, if we're fortunate, we know something of this transformation too. Not long ago, Roger Burgis shared with me a piece from the *Harvard Business Review* that highlights the value of humility. Citing Jim Collins' work on leadership – in his books *Good to Great*, *Great by Choice*, and *Built to Last* – it turns out that “the most important variable for companies that become great is whether or not they have a ‘Level 5’ leader.” And what makes a Level 5 leader? He or she is someone who “blends genuine personal humility with intense professional will. Whether or not they have charismatic, larger-than-life personalities is irrelevant.” Instead, it's their “dual nature. They're modest and willful, understated but fearless. Abraham Lincoln was in many ways the prototype of a Level 5 leader. He was not driven by ego, but he had the ambition to hold the United States together as a single nation.”²¹ That, I believe, is what Joseph was too: driven to be a faithful steward of his abundant gifts ... but humble enough to know that his ego wasn't the point. And it's *that* combination - gifted *and* humble, blessed *and* humble, insightful *and* humble, ambitious *and* humble – it's *that* combination that's at work in us when we let go and let God use us for God's best purposes.

Don't you wonder what our country could be like today if our political leaders all aspired to *that* kind of leadership? Can you imagine what our world could be if all our CEOs and entrepreneurs and financial leaders strove for *that* kind of leadership? And what would it mean for our schools and families, church and non-profits, towns and cities if *we* – all of us – aspired to *that* kind of leadership?

For Joseph, it means that God will use his gifts far beyond what he could ever imagine. After he interprets Pharaoh's dreams, the years unfold, just as he predicted. The land prospers for seven years ... and then the famine hits with a vengeance, not only in Egypt, but in all the surrounding areas ... all the way to Canaan, where Joseph's family still lives.

And then, as only God can make unfold, the story comes full-circle. Back in Canaan, Jacob – Joseph's father - learns that there is grain in Egypt. Jacob sends a number of his sons to beg for mercy, and for bread, and so they do.

They kneel at Joseph's feet, but they do not know him. Joseph sends them back with food, and with all their money besides. His only demand is that *if* they come back, their youngest brother be brought next time ... whom Joseph knows is his own brother Benjamin, the only remaining son of his mother Rachel. Of course, they need to return to Egypt, and bring their little brother with them. At last, Joseph can stand it no more, and reveals himself to them:

Second Scripture Lesson

Genesis 45:1-9, 25-28 and 47:27

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. 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 five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 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. 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 delay.'

So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. And they told him, "Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt." He was stunned; he could not believe them. But when they told him all the words of Joseph that 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. Israel said, “Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die.”

Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly.

Ego. It’s not a bad thing, in and of itself. But ego with humility? It is a gift of God. A gift that can be used to serve the prisoner, to advise the powerful, to lead the distressed. Ego with humility? In God’s hands, it can even be used to reconcile us with those who once wronged us. Ego with humility? In God’s hands, it can be used to make us all Level 5 leaders. Ego with humility? In God’s hands, it can be used to make us no less than *Christ-like* ... in God’s hands, it can be used to make us no less than *holy*. Amen.

¹A 2 *Apple* August 30, 2015, Insights on the fastest growing companies from A Round to Apple, shared by Roger Burgis in a private email.