

Recap the last few weeks and our sermon series “the Family of God” - first, John preached on Abraham, about how we’ve been given a name from God, Jeff preached on Abraham and Isaac and how we are called to faithfully follow God, and that He is our ultimate provider, and last week John talked about Jacob and Esau and the problems that arise when we allow our appetites to control us; this week, we’re looking at the literal Family of God, the family that eventually became the twelve different tribes of Israel, the children of Jacob.

And even though this is a LITERAL family of God, this family like most families, has some pretty major problems. It’s pretty dysfunctional. Pretty nasty, even. We’re picking up in Genesis 45, and taking a look at a weird family reunion if you’ve ever seen one. If you need a Bible, we have some available to you in the back. You can take of those home with you. They’re our gift to you. The verses will also be up on the screens around the room. Read with me:

We’re looking at Gen. 45:1-3 “Joseph could stand it no longer. There were many people in the room, and he said to his attendants, “Out, all of you!” So he was alone with his brothers when he told them who he was. **2** Then he broke down and wept. He wept so loudly the Egyptians could hear him, and word of it quickly carried to Pharaoh’s palace. **3** “I am Joseph!” he said to his brothers.”

Now, I want you all to do a little imagination exercise. I want you all to imagine yourselves in Joseph’s brothers’ place. I’m going to give you a little more context: you and your other ten brothers have come to Egypt, a foreign country, because you need to beg this guy, this Prince of Egypt, advisor to the Pharaoh, for food so you and your families back home won’t starve.

And this guy has **really** put you all through the ringer. He’s Egyptian, so he only speaks to you through an interpreter, and he doesn’t seem very happy with you from the get-go. First, he accuses you of being spies and puts you in jail, then he sends you home but says you have to come back with your youngest brother.

When you do come back, there’s a feast, but when the feast is finished and you’re about to go home with all the grain he’s given you, he then accuses you of stealing from him, and they find his special silver cup in your youngest brother’s bag! He’s ready to arrest your brother and throw him in jail for good - which is exactly what you don’t want to have happen.

So you beg this ruler for mercy: “Please!” You plead. “Please spare our brother!” This special brother must go home or your elderly father will die of grief; he almost didn’t let you all return to Egypt for the grain you needed because he was afraid of losing this beloved youngest son.

You beg and plead for this man to put **you** in jail, and spare your brother; you’ll take the punishment for him, just let him go home. And this prince explodes! He yells to his men in this foreign language, and everyone else leaves the room. It’s just you, your brothers, and him. And once the door is shut behind them, he begins to weep uncontrollably. And to your shock, he cries

out in Hebrew, your native language: “*I. AM. JOSEPH!*” Joseph. Your long lost brother. Your brother who you, yes, *YOU* sold into slavery over twenty years ago...

This person weeping in front of you is second only to Pharaoh. This person who you have wronged so grievously. Your life, your brothers' lives, and your families' lives, are in his hands. Everything depends on what he's going to say next and do next.

*Transition: I don't think any of us in this room would want to trade places with these brothers at this moment. Wronging a powerful person is not something a lot of us aspire to do. The last time these eleven guys saw Joseph was twenty years ago, and he was being dragged away to a life of slavery and bondage, while they walked off with twenty pieces of silver. After all, they hadn't shown mercy to him. **Why would he show mercy to them? Let's go back twenty years and get the full story...***

Right now, some of you might be wondering: why did Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery in the first place? It begins a few pages earlier in Gen. 37. And there is a reason. and that reason is that Joseph's brothers didn't like him. And the reason why they didn't like him is maybe more relatable than you'd think: *They thought Joseph was a little too perfect.*

John talked about Jacob last week, and Joseph was one of Jacob's twelve sons. The text tells us that Joseph is Jacob's favorite son. Do you all know that Donny Osmond musical Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor DreamCoat? That's the same Joseph: Jacob gives his son a special coat because he loved him so much.

Now, all of us knows what happens when there's a favorite kid who gets special treatment. Picking favorites does not suddenly make all the other kids love and adore the favorite one. It says here in chapter 37:3-4 that because Jacob loved Joseph more, his brothers HATED him.

Joseph was also given gift of dreams from God - which also caused resentment and trouble with brothers, because his dreams often had to do with everyone coming around to bow down to him and show him deference. Here's a free tip: even if God gives you dreams where everyone thinks you're worshipped by people far and wide, use some discretion about who you share this with and when. Don't tell your brothers who already hate you.

So these brothers *hate* Joseph. They hate that he's the favorite. They hate that God has given him a special gift that they don't have. And so, they devise a plan. First, they decide to kill him. But then they tone is down a little and instead throw him into an empty cistern. Some Ishmaelites come by on their way to Egypt, and so the brothers decide to sell Joseph into slavery. Now, this isn't really a much better alternative - while there's still life there's hope, but slavery is pretty devastating. These brothers take their own flesh and blood, and treat him like livestock- they sell him for a profit.

And that's not all. They take it one step further. They take that beautiful coat, this coat that Jacob had made especially for Joseph. They kill a goat. And they take Joseph's coat and smear it with blood, dragging it into the ground and getting it roughed up enough so that they can go home and put this very coat that was a token of a father's love for his son into their father's hands. The beautiful, intricately woven coat is now covered in what looks like Joseph's blood, and these brothers take it to their father Jacob and tell him Joseph was killed by wild animals. They lie to their father and drive him into intense mourning over the loss of his son. Can you imagine what cold-heartedness that took?

And Joseph's trouble is just beginning. He's taken to Egypt and he becomes a slave for a man named Potiphar. Potiphar sees potential in him - It says in Chapter 39:3 that Potiphar saw that the Lord was with Joseph, so he elevates Joseph to being an attendant.

But that's short lived - Apparently the Lord was also with Joseph in looks and Potiphar's wife begins to harass him to sleep with her over and over again. *Remember that Joseph gets enemies because he's a little too perfect.* Joseph does not give in to her because it would be a great sin against God to commit adultery with her. When she grabs him by the cloak and demands that he sleep with her, he just wriggles out of his clothes and runs away from that situation.

And *again*, his clothes are used to spread deception: she takes that cloak and she uses as evidence that he tried to assault her. Joseph finds himself not only far away from his home country, sold into slavery by his own brothers, but now he's thrown in jail for a crime he didn't commit.

Transition: So let's recap: Here's a list of the misfortunes that happened to Joseph because of what his brothers did to him (list) and here's a list of good things that happened (empty list). And remember: Joseph didn't do anything wrong.

But finally, we have a turnaround: God was able to turn this misfortune around. Even though he was sold into slavery, sent to Egypt, thrown away into jail, God was with Joseph the whole time and was able to redeem this horrible experience for good above and beyond even Joseph.

The Pharaoh of Egypt has been having some very troubling and cryptic dreams involving starving cows and sickly heads of wheat. And Joseph's able to interpret these crazy dreams: there's going to be seven years of prosperity and harvest, then seven years of drought and famine, and Egypt needs to prepare. And Joseph also tells Pharaoh how they can do this.

And FINALLY: Joseph's life changes. Not only does Pharaoh let him out of jail, he also gives Joseph complete control over the preparations for this famine ahead. It says in Genesis 41:39-40 that like Potiphar, Pharaoh recognized that Joseph's wisdom is a God-given gift, and so he makes Joseph a Prince over Egypt. Joseph goes from being forgotten in a windowless jail, filthy, ungroomed, and alone to the Pharaoh's second in command. People now bow before Joseph; he

looks like a king, wearing the linen garments of the Egyptians, gold chains around his neck, a chariot to ride in. Joseph marries the daughter of a priest and has two sons. Scripture tells us that by this point, Joseph was thirty years old. He was seventeen when his brothers sold him. Seventeen! That's *thirteen years* Joseph suffered! Thirteen long years before we start to see things come around for him.

So this brings us back to where we started. Let's fast forward the movie another ten or so years to the beginning of the sermon: Joseph's brothers, forced by the threat of starvation because of the famine - the same one Pharaoh dreamed about - have to crawl to Egypt for aid. They are at the mercy of this foreign power. And they're at the mercy of this Prince of Egypt - this powerful and demanding leader - and they didn't recognize him. So let's see what happens next, after Joseph tells them who he is:

Let's read Gen. 45: 3-8: **3** "I am Joseph!" he said to his brothers. "Is my father still alive?" But his brothers were speechless! They were stunned to realize that Joseph was standing there in front of them. **4** "Please, come closer," he said to them. So they came closer. And he said again, "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt. **5** But don't be upset, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place." and let's skip forward a few verses, to verse nine, where Joseph says: **9** "Now hurry back to my father and tell him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me master over all the land of Egypt. So come down to me immediately! **10** You can live in the region of Goshen, where you can be near me with all your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and everything you own. **11** I will take care of you there, for there are still five years of famine ahead of us. Otherwise you, your household, and all your animals will starve.'"

So how does Joseph react to his brothers? **He accepts them with open arms!** Instead exploding into a fit of rage, Joseph embraces them. Where his brothers only showed him rejection, hatred and disdain and actively sought to harm him, Joseph shows them kindness, acceptance, and mercy.

So this just leaves us with one question: **What the heck is wrong with Joseph?** These are the same brothers who threw him into a cistern. They sold him for 20 pieces of silver. He became a slave. He went to jail for refusing to sleep with his slave-master's wife. But NOW: the tables are turned. *He's* the one with the power. *He's* the one in control now. Now he has authority. He can finally deal out justice after twenty long years! But instead of justice, he shows them mercy. He could have broken them, made them suffer like he had suffered, but instead he offers them his hand. **What the heck is wrong with this guy??**

Did Joseph hit his head when his brothers threw him into the cistern? Is this brain damage? Or does Joseph just not feel normal emotions that the rest of us feel? Is he a psychopath? Is it amnesia? Why does he emerge from this trauma without the usual bitterness and anger that we'd expect?

Here's why: God was with Joseph the entire time, and Joseph saw God's redeeming hand at work even at the lowest points of his life. If you haven't noticed yet, there's a pattern in Joseph's story: **it's never by Joseph's power or hand that things in his life change - it's always God who brings out good things in the midst of the bad.**

We get a clue earlier on in chapter 39:21: "But the LORD was with Joseph in the prison and showed him his faithful love. And the LORD made Joseph a favorite with the prison warden." While he was in prison, God was with Joseph, loved him, and was faithful. **God gained Joseph favor.**

Again in 45: 5-8, Joseph tells his brothers: "It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. **6** This famine that has ravaged the land for two years will last five more years, and there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. **7** God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. **8** So it was God who sent me here, not you! And he is the one who made me an adviser to Pharaoh—the manager of his entire palace and the governor of all Egypt." **Joseph's brothers were not the one's in charge of Joseph's destiny- God was. God was always in control of Joseph's life,** even in the midst of misfortune.

And AGAIN, in 50: 19-20 after their father Jacob dies, Joseph reassures his brothers that he will not forsake them because of God's control over his life and his redemptive power. He tells them: "You intended harm to me, but God intended it all for good."

Joseph knew and felt this truth in his life and it shaped him because God is a living and active God in our lives through whom we can do all things. **He knew that even when our enemies wish us harm, God can take that harm and bring about good things. No situation, no matter how evil, is outside of God's redeeming reach.** Joseph fully and completely put his faith in God's plan for his life, in God's care and love for him in the midst of suffering and struggle. And because of this belief in God's goodness and ability to redeem all things, Joseph was able to forgive his brothers for what they did to him and show them mercy.

Joseph never lost hope in the midst of suffering and evil because he knew God was still in charge, still in control. He makes it look easy, doesn't he? First off, trusting God in the midst of horrible circumstances is not easy at all. And second, forgiveness does not come naturally to us.

I'm going to make a bold statement, and so I just want you to track with me, even if it initially doesn't make a lot of sense: **there's a strong connection between a hard heart that doesn't forgive and a need for control over our lives. (repeat) Bitterness, hardness, a lack of forgiveness is an attempt to try and get control back after we've been wronged or hurt.** We were wronged, and our sense of justice wants to set things straight. We lost control and we want it back. So when we don't forgive, we're trying to control something we can't. We were hurt, we

were injured, we were victims, and now we want to take back control, take things into our own hands.

We don't *want* to trust God, and we don't *want* to forgive *because we want to be in control*. When things go wrong, when life looks hopeless, when people wrong us and make our lives difficult or unbearable, when we encounter resistance and hatred from others, we like to respond by taking matters into our own hands.

This isn't easy stuff. I'm not going to stand here and tell you that the things that happened to you aren't that big a deal, that the terrible things that have happened or are happening in your lives aren't terrible. Those people who wished you evil and hurt you were wrong just like Joseph's brothers were wrong. So how can we avoid anger and bitterness when there is hell to pay, when justice should be done, when we're so hurt and angry? How can we give up control when we live in a world where innocent people suffer, and guilty people get off scot-free?

There's two parts to this: **One, we can forgive because we trust that God is in control and can bring about good in spite of evil. Nothing is beyond God's power. And two, we can forgive because we have also been forgiven so much, and given so much even though we don't deserve it.**

One way a lot of people look at Joseph is to see him as a proto Christ figure, a shadow of what was to come in several thousand years later when Jesus was born.

Like Joseph, Jesus was innocent and yet severely punished and rejected. But for Jesus, it was much worse: he was rejected by his friends, followers, and by the religious and political authorities, and ultimately by His heavenly Father when he cried out while he hung on the cross: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

But Like Joseph, Christ had trust and confidence that his suffering and his sacrifice wasn't for nothing. When he was in the Garden the night before he was executed, he prayed that God would take the cup from him, the cup of dying a horrible death on the cross, of being separated from God his Father by taking on the punishment that we deserved. And despite this, he said: "Not my will, but yours be done."

Jesus trusted God's divine plan for him and for all of us: he remained faithful even unto death - death on a cross. And like Joseph, Christ's sacrifice and complete trust in and faith in the Father's plan for his life opened the gates of life to all. God used Christ's suffering to save so many lives from separation from Him. Jesus knew the bigger redemptive story, the story that would turn everything around, that would make his suffering into something beautiful and world-changing. God used his suffering, the evil that was sin, and redeemed it so that many lives would be saved.

And in the same way Joseph's brothers played such a crucial role in his years of struggle and suffering, **we also played a hand in Christ's suffering because of our sins against him, against God.** The Bible tells us that when we sin, we sin against God only - there's no such thing as a sin that doesn't hurt anyone, because every single time we sin, we sin against God.

But in the same way Joseph welcomed his brothers, embraced them and wept with joy over his reunion with them, Christ also welcomes us with open arms; we don't deserve this mercy, but he gives it to us freely because **that is who God is, and that is what God does. God is merciful and full of lovingkindness.** God gave himself freely for us through His Son, despite the fact that we don't deserve His kindness and mercy.

And that's why we give up control. That's why we forgive. Because we have received forgiveness and we extend forgiveness to others. We have been forgiven a debt that we can never hope to repay. Just as Joseph's brothers could never take back those years of suffering that Joseph went through, we can never take back our sins against God - and yet Christ doesn't hold that against us when we're in him.

*That is what it means to be in the Family of God. Because Christ suffered much, we've been given much. Because we've been forgiven much, we must forgive others. And when we put our complete faith in God's goodness and ability to use all of our circumstances, even the worst ones, and turn it around for good, when we forgive people who wished us harm and evil, we trust in God's faithfulness, that He is still with us, **he will redeem any and all things into something beautiful.***

So the real question now is **what will you chose: the family of God or an attempt at control and withholding forgiveness?** Will you choose to follow in Joseph's and Christ's footsteps and trust in God's goodness and faithfulness in all situations, both good and bad, or will you choose to doubt God's ability to bring good out of evil and suffering?

I want to suggest a few next steps you can take if you want to try and take those steps of faith toward trusting God with your life and all your circumstances. It's not easy, and I'm not saying that suddenly everything will change, but these are steps in the right direction.

One thing you can do, if you haven't yet: You can become a follower of Christ, a believer in his divinity, life death and resurrection. When you follow him, you surrender yourself and the control your life. You are acknowledging that you aren't the king or queen of your life - and that God is. And you're trusting that God is a good God who has such greater plans for you than you have for yourself. But you must accept God's forgiveness and submit yourself to His will for your life, acknowledging that your life is only made complete in Him.

Another step you can take is to be like Joseph and submit your lowest moments, your times of struggle and unhappiness and misfortune, to God's *Sovereignty* and *Providence*. Now, I know

these are very, very churchy words, and sometimes churchy words aren't very helpful. But we say these words, or we sing about these words, and it's important we know them because they tell us about who God is and can help direct our lives:

Providence refers to the fact that God sustains his creation and directs it toward its appointed destiny. God has a plan for the universe, and He is still deeply invested in that plan and actively at work. God is directing it all. God is in control of the universe and he keeps the universe going. That's Providence.

The second churchy word is Sovereignty. And this refers to the idea that God knows everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen. This is a little trickier. One way of seeing it is this: God sees and experiences time the way you and I might look at a calendar.

Let's pretend my Charlie Brown Day planner is the history of the world: the beginning of everything in the universe is here; the end is here. And God is like us picking up this book and seeing both what happened back here at the beginning, what is happening presently, in February 2016, and what will happen five-thousand years from now. He sees and knows it all. We're trapped in the pages of this day-planner, but He isn't. Nothing that happens to us catches Him by surprise - He knows everything that will happen in our lives.

So great: we know these new words: Providence and Sovereignty. So what? Well, these words can bring us a lot of comfort in our lives when we surrender to God.

When we get laid off at work and aren't sure where our next paycheck will come in: God in his Sovereignty already knows this, and in his Providence is in control and hears our prayers and not only knows how to meet our needs, he has ALREADY met our needs.

When we get a diagnosis that is not what we expected or makes our future look shaky: God in his Sovereignty is not shocked or dismayed by the news, and in His Providence will be with us every step of the way, through treatment and the valley of the shadow of death.

When we encounter conflict in our relationships, and we find ourselves in the midst broken friendships and torn families: God is still Sovereign and sees a future of forgiveness and in his Providence will give us the grace we need to forgive and heal.

When we're stuck in the Waiting Room of life, feeling aimless, like we're not moving forward: God in His Sovereignty reassures us that He has a larger plan for us, a bigger picture that we can't always see, and in His Providence He will direct our steps as long as we put our faith and trust in Him.

When we're at our lowest low, when we're trapped in darkness and we can't see a way out, when we despair of having hope again: God in His Sovereignty has given us new life through the

redemptive power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in His Providence sent Jesus to us as provision.

When we trust in God's Providence and Sovereignty, we won't need to try and control everything.

So right now as we start to close, I want you to prayerfully consider what is it you need to surrender to God in his Sovereignty and Providence - what is it in your life you're anxious about? Where in your life have you lost hope? What is that one thing that that you are trying so hard to have control over and yet feel slipping through your fingers? What is the one thing in your life that you're scared is too big for God to change and restore? Who is that one person who you just don't want to forgive because you want to hang onto that anger and try and gain control?

Whatever it is: I want you to pray with open hands and surrender that one thing to God right now. I want you to have faith and trust in God like Joseph did, that God is with you in the midst of that uncertainty - that even though *you* are uncertain, God is all-knowing and all-powerful and can breathe new life where there isn't any.

Lord, We acknowledge that we often fail to see your hand at work in our lives when bad things happen to us. Please forgive us for thinking that people and circumstances in our lives have more power and control over us and what happens to us than you do. God, you are good, you are a faithful God who holds the universe in balance, and yet also knows the number of hairs on each of our heads. A sparrow doesn't fall without your notice because you care for your creation and you are deeply involved in our world and in each of our lives. And Lord, even in the midst of trials and struggles, we trust that you are still with us, and that you are more than capable of taking these bad circumstances and bringing about good, even when we can't see it, even when all seems lost. You see the larger picture of our lives - you see the larger picture of the world and of history, and you are directing us toward healing, reconciliation, and new life through your Son Jesus Christ. Lord, we believe that you are Sovereign over our lives, over the lives of everyone living, and over the lives of all people throughout history and into the future; please help us in our unbelief, and open our eyes to your provision and your hand at work, in our lives, in other people's lives, and in our world. Thank you for being a Good Father who loves us and cares for us. And we pray this in your son's name - Amen.