

Old Dreams Remembered

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Joseph and His Brothers in Egypt" by Salvador Dali, Biblia Sacra Suite, Rome, 1965-69"

Prayer of Illumination

*Eternal God, your Spirit inspired those who wrote the Bible
and enlightens us to hear your Word fresh each day.
Help us to rely always on your promises in Scripture.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Scripture: Genesis 42:1-25 (NRSVue)

¹ When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you keep looking at one another? ² I have heard," he said, "that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." ³ So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴ But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him. ⁵ Thus the sons of Israel were among the people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan. ⁶ Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with

their faces to the ground. ⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan to buy food." ⁸ Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹ Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" ¹⁰ They said to him, "No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹ We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies." ¹² But he said to them, "No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" ¹³ They said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more." ¹⁴ But Joseph said to them, "It is just as I have said to you; you are spies! ¹⁵ Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! ¹⁶ Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain in prison, in order that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you, or else, as Pharaoh lives, surely you are spies." ¹⁷ And he put them all together in prison for three days. ¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned. The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of your households ²⁰ and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they agreed to do so. ²¹ They said to one another, "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us." ²² Then Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood." ²³ They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter. ²⁴ He turned away from them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them. And he picked out Simeon and had him bound before their eyes. ²⁵ Joseph then gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to return every man's money to his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. This was done for them. ²⁶ They loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. ²⁷ When one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money at the top of the sack. ²⁸ He said to his brothers, "My money has been put back; here it is in my sack!" At this they lost heart and turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?" ²⁹ When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰ "The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly to us and charged us with spying on the land. ³¹ But we said to him, 'We are honest men; we are not spies. ³² We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.' ³³ Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. ³⁴ Bring your youngest brother to me, and I shall know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will release your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.' " ³⁵ As they were emptying their sacks, there in each one's sack was his bag of money. When they and their father saw their bundles of money, they

were dismayed. ³⁶ And their father Jacob said to them, "I am the one you have bereaved of children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has happened to me!" ³⁷ Then Reuben said to his father, "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." ³⁸ But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – "Old Dreams Remembered"

Just when Joseph forgot the misfortune of his brothers and moved on...he's forced to confront them. God doesn't want us to run from our past, but to embrace it, be reconciled to it. Our story begins with Jacob and it ends with Jacob.

Here we see the true Jacob, Israel, back to his alert and ever-planning self. He's a learner. Not learned. He's ever learning, grappling with life, even in old age. He's grieving, but still growing. He hasn't given up. He sees reality: his family is hungry. People are returning from Egypt with food. He speaks truth to his sons: *Why are you just standing here?*

In times of fear, there are different responses we humans often take:

Flight, Fight, or Freeze.

His ten sons were frozen—the frozen chosen. They were passive and paralyzed by fear. Jacob woke them up from their stupor and challenged them to another option:

Face your problems. And act.

This was not a time for inaction—lives, their lives were at stake. Go down to Egypt and get us food. Take initiative. Be responsible. Do what the situation requires.

But Jacob hasn't left all of his bad habits behind. He still plays favorites. Benjamin, his youngest son and child of Rachel, is his new favorite. He keeps him with him, not wanting danger to befall him, like what happened to Joseph. The other ten? They're just chopped liver.

The ten sons of Israel make their way to Egypt. They go not just as brothers, but as the young nation of Israel to Egypt, the place of their eventual exile. They make it to Egypt and Joseph's teenage dreams are fulfilled. The brothers bow to their brother, and they put their faces to the ground. They saw Joseph but didn't recognize him. Immediately, Joseph not only saw them...he *recognized* them.

We can “see” a person or a situation and still totally miss it. But when we **recognize** something or someone, we go deeper. We perceive. We identify. There is an understanding, an awareness. The significance is seen. Then, we know what to do, rather than remain clueless or oblivious.

In this moment, this caused Joseph to remember his dreams. He put two and two together. God was at work. Not just for Egypt, but his family. This was destiny.

At the same time, all the emotions of old hurts were rising up within him. He remained composed, despite his swirling emotions. The brothers, however, didn’t recognize Joseph before them. Maybe it was his Egyptian garb, shaved head, and position of authority. Maybe he just wasn’t on their radar because they thought he was dead or a slave.

So Joseph plays the stranger. And he acts harshly. “You’re spies. You’re trying to expose the vulnerability of our northern border. You’re intruders here to take advantage of us.”

The brothers are caught flat footed...they’re shocked into telling the truth, well at least most of it. Desperately they pleaded: We only wanted to buy food. We’re not spies, we’ve never been spies. My lord, we’re your servants. We’re sons of one man. We are all brothers, and one is with his father, the other is no more. We’re honest men. We’re here to help our father and our family survive.

Joseph would not and could not let them off easy. He had to find out if they changed. He had to test them. The Apostle John puts it this way, “test the spirits.” This word “test” can also mean “refine,” like the refiner’s fire. *Were they still self-seeking and envious? Or would they put family first?*

Joseph was giving them an opportunity to redo their past, to forge a new future. They were imprisoned by their guilt and chained to the past. Joseph was doing all of this to free and heal his brothers. It was relational surgery.

By the oath of Pharaoh, if you are to live, bring back your brother Benjamin. One of you can go back to get him and come back. The rest of you will be detained.

In Joseph’s hearing they finally got honest with themselves: *Are we not being punished on account of our treatment of Joseph, ignoring his anguish and tears, as we sold him into slavery?* Joseph had the power for revenge and poetic justice...and he refused to take it. He took the high road, the hard road of healing and forgiveness. And that’s what makes him one of the greatest leaders in Scripture.

But this was in no way easy for our hero, who had to work through his own deep family wounds. The tears of Joseph testify to this. “Joseph turned away from them and wept.” Two more times he would weep.

Weeping is a sacred part of being a child of God and a leader. Elisha the prophet wept. Mary washed the feet of Jesus with her hair and tears. Peter broke down and wept after denying his Master. And of course, Jesus wept—not only for his dead friend Lazarus, but over Jerusalem.

Sarah and I have been doing some weeping these days, missing our two little “babies” who have all grown up and gone away to school. We also weep for relationships gone sour. Weep for the loss of loved ones. We weep the inevitable loss of temporal things once enjoyed. It takes a real man, a real woman to cry. It shows we care, that we feel deeply. Tears are a gift. They’re a necessary part of the road to healing and growth. And it’s good to let out our tears, rather than keeping them bottled in.

Yet, we overhear the psalmist’s prayer that you God “put my tears in your bottle, are they not in your record?” ([Psalm 56:8](#)) God uses our tears to water the seeds of new beginnings that will one day spring up from the death of the old. They are not wasted or forgotten—they are reborn.

For three days, Joseph imprisoned all of the brothers. Only three days, to give them a taste of what he’d been through all of these years. His psychological strategy worked. The brothers started speaking about the elephant in the room—their guilt. This also opened the door for them to start talking about God.

Joseph modified his plans after having slept on them. So ON THE THIRD DAY, he came back with his new strategy which was more merciful for the sake of his father Jacob. “For I fear God, I will be merciful.” Only one would be imprisoned, the next oldest after Reuben, Simeon. The rest would go back for Benjamin.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks gives us helpful background here. Joseph was taking his brothers through the three stages of *teshuva*, which is the involved process of remorse, repentance, and return. And this would take more than words. It wouldn’t happen overnight. It was a process. A journey.

First, Joseph’s confrontation with his brothers was an opportunity for them to come clean and express remorse for their past actions against him. He was there to help them realize the seriousness of their actions.

The second component of *teshuva* is the commitment and resolve not to repeat wrongdoing. So he gave them a controlled experiment to test their loyalty. Everything that he did gave them opportunities to commit again the same errors. By doing this he would see if they would act differently on this second chance. This is the only way Joseph could see if they really changed. You see, **trust must be earned**, not given. This was an opportunity to **rebuild trust**. *Would they show loyalty to their brothers, to Benjamin, to Simeon who was held captive, and to their father Jacob?* The ball was in their court to change the course of their lives, family, and nation.

If they passed this test, it would reveal their change went deeper than words, deep down into their character, their very being. They could have a life of hope and possibility. So Joseph takes them into a time machine to their the past. He recreates the past.

They now have the grace to start their lives anew, the right way. He was beckoning them, summoning them, to rise to a new and redeemed life. To leave behind their deception and jealousies. It was a healing moment for the whole family. And it was painful. This could not be a “cheap forgiveness.”

And this is what Jesus did for us. He righted Adam's wrongs. This is why Jesus is called in the New Testament the Second Adam. Unlike Adam, "Adam Again" didn't take a bite out of that forbidden fruit. He was fully obedient to the end. The world was healed. We are healed.

We too are called to this healing journey of *teshuva*. To rise above unforgiveness, bitterness, guilt, and resistance to necessary change. Let us allow the Spirit to do a healing work in our families and church as well. So, if the brothers got the "redo" right, they would fulfill the third aspect of *teshuva*. They would be healed of their betrayals. They agree to the plan and return home.

Along the way, a surprise is discovered. In one of their rucksacks, there was not only wheat. There was the silver they used to pay for it! Was it a blessing or were they being framed? They perceive it as a threat. Fear causes us to see things weird. We see the world not as it is, but as we are. And so they lost heart with this new revelation. But we do know that the brothers received a payment of twenty silver pieces for selling Joseph into slavery. *Was it payback? Would they tell of the silver to Joseph? Did the silver remind them again of their treachery?*

They got home and shared *most* of the tough news with their father Jacob, except for the "three days incarceration part." They also discover in his presence that all of them have the silver in their rucksacks, not just one. Everyone was horrified. Reuben unsuccessfully tries to exert leadership for the last time. "If we don't bring Benjamin back dad, you can kill my two sons." *Losing two grandsons to make up for the loss of three sons?* Jacob doesn't even dignify Reuben's weak attempt to assure him. Once again Jacob decides to withhold his favored son from going—for a while. But hear this: Jacob will reconsider. He'll adapt, he'll change. Jacob will let go of the past. Let go of his fears. He will do what he needs to do to save his family and his nation.

Immanuel, let us follow Jacob's lead—who is willing to change, to move forward, to sacrifice, to grow.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Joseph and His Brothers in Egypt", by Salvador Dali, Biblia Sacra Suite, Rome, 1965-69, lucillelucasgallery.com

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