

God's Greatest Miracle
Genesis 50:15-21

Introduction

Of all the miracles in the Bible and all the miracles of history, which one might you consider the greatest miracle of all!? Perhaps creation itself is the greatest miracle, for without the creation we simply would not exist. Some may suggest the great flood through which Noah and his family were preserved. How much grander can a miracle be than the drowning of an entire planet! Ancient Israel might point to the plagues of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the great Exodus event as God's most important miracles. The Exodus event is often considered the very birth of the nation of Israel through the powerful deliverance brought about by God's mighty hand against Pharaoh. Or, at the other end of Old Testament history, some might point to the great restoration from exile, including the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. Also, there are host of more localized miracles which we might consider: the provision of manna and quail in the wilderness, the collapse of the walls of Jericho, the defeat of the giant Goliath, Elijah raising the widow's son from the dead, fire from heaven lighting the altar at Mt. Carmel, and many others. Of course, we haven't even mentioned the miracles of Jesus and those done through the apostles: walking on water, turning water to wine, healing the blind, cleansing leprosy, causing cripples to walk, even raising people from the dead.

In response to this mystery, I suggest, not one particular miracle, but a category of miracle which God performs throughout the Bible and history. I believe this category of miracle embraces the greatest acts of God. However, before identifying my suggestion for greatest miracle category, we need to discuss a significant prerequisite which sometimes appears with this type of miracle. That is, the need to surrender bitterness and turn toward trusting God, when in the midst of crisis. This need for surrender and my understanding of God's greatest miracle are illustrated in the story of Joseph, as related in the book of Genesis. I invite you to hear the Joseph story once again and capture the message within the drama of his life.

I. Surrender Bitterness and Turn to Trust in God.

The story of Joseph spans chapters 37-50 of Genesis; more than one-fourth of the book of Genesis. Even before the book focuses on the adventures of Joseph himself, the writer sets up the story with important information regarding the family dynamics of Jacob and his 12 sons. So the story of Joseph actually begins as early as Genesis 29.

Jacob had two wives; but we discover that his true love was for the second wife, Rachel. He fell in love with Rachel and desired to marry her. However, his father-in-law tricked him into first marrying Rachel's older sister, Leah. Only then was he able to marry Rachel as well.

Rachel, Jacob's beloved, was initially barren. Leah, meanwhile, started bearing sons for Jacob. Out of anxiety that she would no longer be considered worthy, Rachel gave her handmaiden to Jacob in order to bear sons on her behalf; and with that, in the words of a former professor of mine, the baby olympics began! Leah figured two could play that game, and so she gave her handmaiden to Jacob in order to bear more sons on her behalf! Finally, Rachel herself was able to give birth to a son, who was named Joseph. When the family was nearly complete, Jacob had 11 boys and one daughter, by two wives and their two handmaidens. Sometime later, while the family was traveling toward Bethlehem, Rachel died while giving birth to her second son for Jacob. At this point in the story, it is important for us to recognize that the two youngest boys in the family, Joseph and his baby brother **Benjamin**, were extra dear to the heart of Jacob, for they were all that remained to him of his beloved Rachel.

Jacob's favor for Rachel's two boys becomes evident when we read in the biblical text that Jacob loved Joseph more than any other of his children. Naturally, Joseph's brothers became jealous of Joseph, because their father clearly favored him. To make things worse, Jacob gave to Joseph a special coat of many colors. The brothers' jealousy grew into hatred against Joseph. The hatred grew even greater when Joseph had a dream which implied that his brothers all bowed down to him. Thus, it is not completely surprising when we read that the brothers plotted to kill Joseph when he came to them out in the fields where they were watching over their flocks. However, instead of killing him, they ended up throwing him into a pit and selling him as a slave to a caravan of foreign merchants {must confess such a thought crossed my mind when growing up with my brothers}. The brothers took Joseph's multi-colored coat, dipped it in goat's blood, and convinced their father that Joseph had been devoured by wild animals.

In response to this painful news, Jacob tore his garments, put on sackcloth, mourned and bewailed the death of Joseph, and refused to be comforted. Of course, Jacob's sorrow is all the more dramatic because he had lost one of the only two sons of his beloved Rachel. Meanwhile, Joseph was taken as a slave to Egypt and began a series of turbulent adventures. Though he prospered as a servant for an officer of Pharaoh, he was falsely accused of attempting to rape his master's wife. Though he was placed in charge of all the other prisoners, he was still incarcerated in Pharaoh's dungeon for over two years.

Joseph's freedom came when God enabled Joseph to interpret two troubling dreams which Pharaoh himself had dreamed. Not only did Joseph identify that the dreams were a warning of a great famine, he also provided Pharaoh with sound advice for preserving Egypt through the famine. Since none of the magicians or wise men of Egypt could help Pharaoh, he became so impressed with Joseph and his wisdom that he freed him from prison and placed him second in command of all Egypt. As part of his responsibilities, Joseph controlled all the grain and produce of Egypt. He arranged for grain to be gathered and stored during the initial time of plenty, and then he controlled the distribution of grain during the time of famine. This brings us to the critical point of our story. In the context of ruling Egypt as second only to Pharaoh, Joseph was reunited with his brothers who previously sought to kill him and had sold him into slavery.

The great famine impacted all the world, and all the world came to Joseph to buy grain. Thus, back in Canaan, Jacob determined to send his sons to Egypt in order to buy grain and save the family from starvation. It is significant that the biblical text states that exactly 10 of Joseph's brothers were sent to Egypt. And, just in case we miss the point, the writer explicitly notes that Jacob did not send Benjamin, who we know is Joseph's only full-brother, the only other child of Jacob's lost love Rachel.

When the boys arrived in Egypt, Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did **not** recognize Joseph in this powerful Egyptian, who is ruler of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. Though Joseph did recognize his brothers, nevertheless, we read that he spoke to them harshly and accused them of being foreign spies seeking out the vulnerabilities of the land of Egypt. His brothers denied the charges and with anxiety blurted out a brief family history, explaining that they came from a family of 12 brothers, one of whom is no more, and one of whom is back home with father. Joseph continued to accuse them of being spies, and said he would test them, to see if they were telling the truth. He placed all of the 10 brothers in prison for three days. Then, he released them and said that one of them must remain in prison while the rest purchased grain and returned home. Joseph further demanded that the brothers must bring back to Joseph the younger brother of whom they spoke, in order to verify their story, so they shall not die. That statement in Gen. 42:20 illustrates the kind of power which Joseph held over his brothers. He actually held their lives in his hands and threatened them with death. This first encounter ends with Joseph having brother Simeon bound before the eyes of the others, and the remaining brothers were sent back home with the grain they purchased. Meanwhile, Joseph secretly arranged for all of his brothers' money to be returned to them in the top of their grain bags.

It is evident that Joseph was toying with the powerful temptation of vengeance! Though he recognized his brothers, he accused them of spying, threw them into prison, threatened their lives, and kept one of them bound. At the same time, it is clear that Joseph was torn between his bitterness against his brothers and his compassion for them. After all, he did return all of their money in their grain bags.

When the boys returned home to father Jacob, all was revealed to him. When he heard that this ruler of Egypt was demanding that the boys take Benjamin back with them the next time they returned, Jacob cried out to his sons, "I am the one you have bereaved of children: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin!" In response, Reuben, the oldest son, stepped up and boldly told his father that he may kill Reuben's own two sons if Reuben did not bring Benjamin back home safely. Nevertheless, Jacob refused and stated, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him, **you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol!**"

When the family ran out of grain and the second trip had to be made back to Egypt, brother Judah stepped forward and assured Jacob that he would stand as surety for Benjamin and bring him home safely. Judah stated, "If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever!" Clearly, the fate of Judah, of Simeon, of Jacob, and indeed the entire clan of Israel now revolved around the safety of this youngest son, the only child of Rachel remaining to Jacob, young Benjamin!

When the brothers returned with Benjamin to Egypt to buy more grain, once again we see Joseph struggle with emotions torn between bitterness and compassion. He set up a banquet for all the brothers, and he brought Simeon out to join them. The brothers still did not recognize Joseph and they remained fearful for their lives. When Joseph saw Benjamin, his mother's only other son, Joseph was overwhelmed with love and rushed out of the room in order to weep privately. After composing himself, Joseph returned and had the meal served. He arranged for the brothers to be seated and served in order from youngest to oldest, and Benjamin was served with a portion five times as large as that of the other brothers. This move astounded the brothers, as they looked at each other with amazement.

When the brothers were ready to return to Canaan with more grain, Joseph once again secretly arranged to have all their money returned in the top of their grain bags. This time, however, he also had his silver cup, representative of Joseph's power and position, secretly placed in the top of Benjamin's grain bag. When the brothers had only traveled a short distance, Joseph sent his steward after them with the accusation of stealing from the ruler of all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh.

The brothers reacted in desperation. In verse 9 of chapter 44, they proclaimed their innocence and stated that if the stolen cup was found with any one of them, that one brother may be killed, and the rest would become Joseph's slaves. The drama and suspense of the event is drawn out as a search was made through each brother's grain sack, from oldest to youngest. When Benjamin's bag was searched, the stolen silver chalice was revealed! Surely NOT Benjamin; NOT the only son left to our father from his beloved Rachel! Look what our actions have led to. We have brought about the death of our father!

The brothers tore their clothes in an act of mourning and panic. They reloaded their donkeys and headed back to Joseph. Brother Judah offered himself and all the brothers as Joseph's slaves. Joseph responded by stating that only the one in whose possession the cup was found, need remain as his slave; all the others could return to their father in peace. At this point, brother Judah stepped forward before Joseph and delivered one of the most strained and impassioned speeches in all the Bible. He cried out:

- We came to you for grain and you asked if we had a father or a brother.
- We said we have an old man father and we have a younger brother.
- His** brother is dead, and he alone is left, and father loves him.
- You insisted we bring our younger brother to you.
- We told you the boy cannot leave his father or our father will die.
- When we told father the boy must come with us, he cried out, "You know my wife bore me only two sons; one has left me and he has surely been torn to pieces, if you take this one also from me and harm comes to him, you will **bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol.**"
- Now, if we return home to father without the boy, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, when he sees the boy is gone, **he will die**, and your servants will **bring down their father's gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol!**
- Please, I beg you, let me stay as your slave in place of the boy!

Upon hearing Judah's impassioned cry, Joseph could no longer control himself! He had been toying with the very lives of his brothers. He had cried over being deprived of his family. Judah's speech broke the dam of all of Joseph's bitterness and released the flood of his compassion. Joseph sent out all of his servants and finally revealed himself to his brothers. He broke down and wept so loudly that the all Egypt heard his wailing, as far as the household of Pharaoh! And he kissed his brothers, and wept upon them. Some time later, when all the family had been reunited, and after Jacob had grown old and passed away, Joseph's brothers approached him glinging to their fear that he might still hold a grudge and repay them for having sold him as a slave those many years before. They asked for forgiveness in the name of their father Jacob.

Joseph responded to his brothers with these words: "**Even though you intended to do harm to me, God devised it for good.**" Joseph released his bitterness and the desire for vengeance, and he forgave his brothers by recognizing that God had brought about good from evil. In this act of surrendering his perceived right to vengeance, Joseph becomes a model of Christlike behavior. He echoes the concepts of turning the other cheek and loving your enemies, and Christ's words on the cross, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Joseph models for us the ideal of forgiveness. At the same time, we can relate to the struggle which Joseph exemplified throughout this story. Through his position of power and authority, he deceived, threatened, imprisoned, and terrified his brothers by holding their lives in his hands. He was finally overwhelmed by compassion and love for his family and released his bitterness by recognizing God's grace in saving the whole family through such wrongful circumstances. Joseph's release of bitterness and turning to love and compassion reflects God's own passion for his people as described by the prophet Hosea. In Hosea 11 we read of God's wrath directed against the sin and apostasy of Israel. Verses 5-7 of Hosea 11 describe God's anger and plans to bring punishment and destruction upon Israel for her sins. However, verses 8-9 communicate the release of God's bitterness and the overwhelming love and compassion of God:

[Read Hosea 11:8-9]

II. God can Turn Evil Circumstances to Good.

Now, we can identify what might constitute God's greatest miracle. I believe it is identified by Joseph as he surrenders his bitterness and recognizes God's hand of deliverance. Joseph stated to his brothers, "**Even though you intended to do harm to me, God devised it for good.**" One of God's greatest miracles is the miracle of turning our evil intentions and evil circumstances into good. It is expressed by Paul with the statement in Romans 8 which can be translated, "We know that in all things God works for good."

It is NOT that God devises evil circumstances in order to bring about good from them. It is NOT that God desires or needs evil circumstances in order to bring good from them. Rather, it is that the marvelous **grace** of God does not leave us wallowing or suffering in our wrongful circumstances, but rather delivers us and devises good even out of our sin and evil. God's greatest miracle is the exercise of His grace in turning evil to good, death to life, hopelessness to deliverance, lost to found, corruption to salvation, bitterness to kindness, and vengeance to compassion!

I have spoken before about my admiration for my older brother. However, in relation to my younger brother, my own actions in the past bring me shame. In elementary school my friends and I repeated an insulting saying to those whom we sought to mock. I used to repeat that saying to my younger brother. It reflected the ugliness and immaturity of early adolescence. I had long forgotten the words of that insult, when just a couple of years ago, my brother and I both in our 40's, he reminded me of hearing those cruel words. He did not claim any remaining pain from them, but it struck me that they could still be seared in his mind after all these years. It cut me deep in the heart to think that after more than 30 years, my cruel and ugly words still remained in his thoughts. Nevertheless, just last week, in a broadcast email to family and friends, my younger brother called me his hero. Such love and respect I do not deserve. Yet here is an expression of God's great miracle. With my brother's forgiveness, God transformed my evil actions into reconciliation and renewal. I love my younger brother, and am grateful for his friendship.

The greatest manifestation of this miracle is evident in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What humanity intended for evil, the elimination of God in the flesh and the destruction of God's ways of love and selflessness; God devised into good, the deliverance and salvation of a world lost in sin. As one of my professors described it, "God twisted the crown of thorns into a crown of glory."

Conclusion

The story of Joseph calls us to Christlike living and the recognition of God's miracle of grace in our lives. How often we become caught up in our desire for revenge when others hurt us. How often we fall into hopelessness when circumstances overwhelm us. Yet, Christ enables us to surrender such bitterness, and allow compassion and love to overwhelm our response. God then enacts the miracle of transforming our wrongful situation into good, bringing restoration and deliverance.

Is there a relationship for which you need to seek forgiveness. Is there bitterness against someone which you need to release. Are there wrongful circumstances overwhelming you concerning which there seems no hope. Seek forgiveness, surrender bitterness, and recognize God's great miracle of turning evil into hope and deliverance.