

¹Then Joseph could no longer control himself... ⁴Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!

The wonderful thing about the Bible especially when it comes to the familiar OT stories we have known since childhood is that you can understand it on so many different levels. On one level, today we read the dramatic conclusion to a soap opera; a fascinating study of human nature but you could go further and recognise within it a spiritual journey which everyone involved has undertaken. On this level there is much to learn about ourselves and where we are with God but we could take a third step to see how God reveals to us his great plan of salvation conceived in his heart before the world began and gloriously worked out for us in His Own Son, Jesus.

1. At the basic level this is the dramatic moment when all is revealed and Joseph and his brothers can be a family again. At long last the day of revelation has come when all that had been done in secret all those years before on a lonely hillside is now headline news in Egypt and inscribed in God's book for ever. Back then the Brothers had thought themselves in command of a situation; who would ever know their treachery. It never occurred to them that God would turn their dark hate into a wonderful, glorious act of power. Folk like to think they're in command of their own lives and may give God no more than a passing thought but He knows our hearts and our ways and the day must come for all of us when it is revealed. That may seem to us like a dark day but by God's grace the disastrous tale of a complete failure by God's people turns out to be great evangelism! God is able through the disaster of Joseph and his brothers to touch the hearts of the whole Egyptian people. God has turned so much human sin; failure and bitterness into a witness of His Grace.

We should know that in our day when churches are so under pressure, despised and struggling in the world He can take even this and make his name to be praised. Joseph's story inspires us to have courage and faith in The God who can transform, hate into love, shame into glory, defeat into victory and death into life. When our family life is in tatters and we are worried sick look at what God was able to do in this family, take heart and pray on!

2. But we can look at these events on a second level; at the spiritual journey for God's people. When you read of Joseph's gracious attitude and faith and think of all that he has been through it comes as a huge challenge to us and the ways in which we cope when things go wrong. So often our reaction is one of anger, frustration, why me? This man of Faith has quite a different outlook: ***⁵do not be distressed and do not be angry with***

yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.

After those dark days in a prison cell, being sold as a slave, unjustly accused, forgotten by those he helped, dragged before Pharaoh to interpret a dream, in fear of his very life. We would rebel at this and wonder if God was there. Surely God is the one who makes life go smoothly. If He loves us will we not be kept safe? Is this not a funny way of showing His love? Joseph recognises God's hand on him all the way, ***"He sent me, He made me"***. What power is this that can turn the darkness of despair into the light of hope and make a man so despised by his own brothers, so betrayed by their hate, so misused by circumstances offer tender love to those who had so cruelly abused him and all but destroyed him? This is no wishy-washy sentiment of a tender heart. It is a love far greater, far more noble, grand, robust and strong than anything we can humanly know. Only God can do this in a human heart. Joseph knew his life was in God's hands and God's love had kept him and brought him through. I wonder if you know today what that kind of trust is?

Maybe you are in the thick of things right now, dark days when the way ahead is not seen. When we despair and lose heart remember Joseph. He patiently recounts to them all that has happened, pointing them to the God who led and kept him and bearing testimony to His goodness. ***"God sent me ahead of you"***, witnessing to an everlasting love which seeks our good by leading us even by hard roads into God's good and perfect will. It is one thing to know the verse about all things working together for good quite another to recognise it when it's happening to you. Because he knows God's power Joseph is able, not to condemn his brothers but draw them close ***"Come close to me"***

3. When we hear those words we **move to the third level and recognise God's great plan for us in Jesus**. We are drawing near to Easter and to Palm Sunday when Jesus wept over Jerusalem longing to draw its people to him. Matthew 23: ³⁷***"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."***

In so many ways God calls us to come near, calls us to himself in Christ. No greater word can be spoken, no better invitation issued, no more welcome gift offered than this; ***"Come close to me"*** In his touch there is healing, all the dark days are flooded with light and the pain overwhelmed by joy. With one embrace Joseph banishes all the past. Their reconciliation is complete. So the day of reckoning came for the brothers as it must come for all. On that Day, everything, everything that has been done and thought and lived will be

made known. Does that fill you with horror? Jesus said, ***'No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'*** It's a word of warning in Matthew 24 but also one of re-assurance that the day of Christ's return must surely come. The world is not eternal, and God could not allow things to go on as they are. Jesus will come as he promised; the day will dawn when, in a sense, God too can no longer control himself or hold back, when the dark night will come to an end and we will see Him face to face. We ought to be very sure that when that day comes we stand not in our own strength, alone before a stranger but that we can plead the name of Jesus. Think of all we have done; the poverty of our service, the secret sins, the twisted broken promises, the selfishness of our lives and the perversity of our hearts. If God should look upon us as we are without the bright robe of the goodness of Christ wrapped around us, what will he see? Only envy, malice, shame, tawdry goodness and shallow sentiment.

In Christ, God looks not on the ugliness of our sin but on the pure and lovely face of His Son, our Saviour, who has taken every sin upon Himself, pleaded guilty to all so that we might be acquitted and be received into the kingdom without blot or stain. Is that not a most wonderful thought? To stand in the Eternal kingdom clothed with a righteousness that is not our own but His and hear our God say, "This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased."

In Joseph you have the picture of one who was despised, rejected and sent to die but who was raised to become a Prince in the Kingdom and who now having brought his brothers to repentance welcomes them in to share His Glory. Jesus calls us to come close to him, recognise him as the brother who was despised, rejected condemned to die and yet now crowned the Prince of Peace before whom every knee shall bow before. He brings us near to share in His glory. This is the Father's heart and the Son's sacrifice.

A very human story of reconciliation, a spiritual journey and an insight in the saving heart of God but just as Joseph's story could be understood on three levels so too could Jacob's. On one level there is a glorious reunion with his son and an easing of his pain but it is also for him a spiritual journey.

The next chapter tells us that before setting off the Egypt he came to worship. After so many years without a word from God it must have been a wonderful thing to know the wonder of God speaking to his heart in a vision. It would take him back to the days when he had known God's hand on his life but it had been a long time and he had become worldly, cynical and sick at heart. Now he feels again the touch of the master's hand as God says with infinite gentleness. I am... I will...

The next chapter also details the names of those who went down to Egypt. Only 66 people though I think there would be others, hangers on, workers, herdsman and so on but it's not an impressive start. No one would guess that they would become a nation, bring about the fall of the Egyptian throne and change the course of history. As the Egyptians turned out to see this straggly crowd coming to visit they might think how odd they looked with their strange behaviour and religious scruples. It would cause much comment even amusement although most would just ignore them as being insignificant, tucked away in Goshen but as they straggled in people spoke about how God's hand had been upon them even as they had been through deep and dark valleys of bereavement and loss, of hate and despair and even the valley of the shadow of death. God had gone with them and brought them safely through to the other side though it must often have seemed otherwise and though it was difficult for them to realise and accept, even when Jacob could not believe it at first still He was their Saviour and their Lord.

Jesus said: ***Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.*** ⁴***Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!"***