

A STORY-SHAPED GOD: READING GENESIS

In the Place of God?

Genesis 50:15-26

February 9, 2025

Well, a lot has happened since we left Joseph in the hands of the Ishmaelite traders bound for Egypt last Sunday. Here's the short version. Joseph is an uncommonly gifted man with a special talent for dream interpretation that serves him well in tight spots. So well, in fact, that he makes his way over the course of time from prison to the palace, where he rises to second in command under the all-powerful Pharaoh. By the time we meet him this week, he is not only an influential leader, but he is also an entirely acculturated Egyptian. His dreams of abundance and famine shape decisions that expand his power and Egypt's reach. Eventually, that famine forces the family of Jacob to seek support from Egypt. During that time, Joseph hides his identity while testing his brothers' character. Ultimately, Joseph can hold the secret no longer, and in a moment of high drama after twenty-two years of estrangement, the brothers hear words that would have shocked them. "I am Joseph, your brother." First, he asks about his father. Then, he reassures his brother. That moment with Benjamin gets me every single time. Joseph saves his family from starvation. Jacob blesses Joseph's sons, and then Jacob dies and is buried back in Canaan. The family returns, and just when you think the drama of Genesis is over, one more chapter unfolds.

You must remember this. Joseph is by now a man of immense power, and he has always been a man of unpredictable behavior. His brothers have yet to pay for their mistreatment of him as a teenager, and Jacob, whose love and devotion held the family together, is gone. The brothers are rightly filled with fear and anxiety. They send Joseph a message claiming that Jacob had left on his deathbed instructions that they be pardoned. Clever. And yet, anyone who has read the story up to this point would not be surprised if Joseph had his brothers thrown in prison or sent packing back to their homeland. He has reason to doubt their motives. And he certainly has the authority to punish them.

But something significant has shifted in Joseph, something that his brothers could not have known. You hear it in the exchange between them. The brothers rush to Joseph. They beg him to forgive them, to remember their father, to act with compassion. They offer themselves as his servants. And when he hears them, Joseph—this abandoned brother and governor of Egypt—begins to weep. For me, it is one of the most poignant moments in all of scripture. In the place of punishment, Joseph offers an extraordinary promise. *I will care for you, my brothers, and your children. Your home will be in the land of Egypt.* And then, in one of my favorite examples of Biblical understatement, the author of Genesis writes, "In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them."

I think Marilynne Robinson gets it just right. "This is not a pardon. It is grace." In a recent conversation, Robinson marveled at the moment. She said, "It's a very beautiful image of grace that I think of having no parallel in ancient literature. To be able to look beyond the offense rather than to forgive the offense is the difference between grace and forgiveness."

So, we find at the end of Genesis this human being, this human creature capable of both crafty cunning and commendable compassion, this complex man exercising the restraint that has marked God's action from the very beginning. As he does this, Joseph asks a riveting, rhetorical question.

Am I in the place of God?

Here's my confession. I had always assumed the obvious answer to this question is "no!" Joseph is distancing himself from the providence and power that belong only to the divine. But two voices have shifted my perspective on this question. The first was a friend of mine who pointed out that, in the land of Egypt, especially relative to his brothers, this is precisely the place Joseph occupies. He holds absolute power. He could do anything he desires to his brothers. They are refugees.

He is the proxy of Pharaoh. Is Joseph in the place of God? For all practical purposes, the answer is yes.

The second voice belongs, no surprise, to Marilynne Robinson. She answers the question in this way: "Yes, Joseph is, in the sense that his mercy toward his brothers seconds what he sees as God's will. In the sense that he sees beyond a human conception of justice..." I want to say that again. "He sees beyond a human conception of justice." And so, given this Godlike power, Joseph chooses to act with Godlike restraint.

Now, for a preacher, this unanswered question—*Am I in the place of God?*—offers an intriguing opportunity for reflection. For while it is self-evident that we are not in the place of God in any far-reaching effect, the query might be reasonably rephrased this way:

What are the realms of your influence? In what areas do you have power and agency for good or ill?

Now, the answer to that question will be different for each of us, but all of us should have one. And so, the follow-up question: will you use that influence in ways that reflect the God you meet in scripture? I think this is complicated in our moment. There is a, to me, regrettable assumption among many that compassion among the powerful is another word for weakness. A friend I hold in high regard recently wrote in response to a call for mercy, "Sometimes one has to be ruthless." I've honestly wrestled with that. Ultimately, I conclude there are two fatal flaws in my friend's reasoning.

First, there seems to be no end to the cycle of retribution unleashed by ruthlessness. In other words, *sometimes* quickly becomes *most of the time* and then *anytime I choose*. Rarely do we see ruthless behavior have a peace-giving effect on those on whom the ruthlessness is released. Or in the words of a favorite axiom, never in the history of calming down has anyone calmed down by being told to calm down.

Second, I have a high degree of skepticism about my ability to determine who is deserving of ruthlessness. And I think you should too. We humans are prone to excess, especially when it comes to anger. Can you trust yourself with the means of power to unleash violence?

Here Joseph offers an extraordinary counterexample. He sees his brothers, the very ones who abused and abandoned him, but he sees something else. He sees

people in profound need. When he looks at his brothers, he sees their hunger. He sees their absolute vulnerability.

And, in his own power, he sees the plan of God. His specific words matter here. Joseph says,

Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good... in order to preserve a numerous people.

Joseph sees the providence of God not in the power he has amassed but in the lives he can save. He promises to care personally for his brothers and for their "little ones," that is, the most vulnerable among them.

I submit that Joseph has learned what it means to be Godlike in the use of power.

And so, this moment of reconciliation between brothers begins the final chapter of Joseph's story. It will be focused entirely on the future. Joseph lives to see his great-grandchildren, and when it is time for his journey to end, Joseph is surrounded by his brothers. He speaks aloud the promise that God will lead them out of Egypt, and he makes this request: *carry my bones to the promised land...the home of my ancestors, the resting place of my father*. And with that, Joseph's wild and winding journey leads him back to what has always mattered most. He dies surrounded by his family.

Of course, the story continues. Marilynne Robinson writes, "Genesis can hardly be said to end...The whole great literature of scripture, unfolding over centuries, will proceed on the terms established by this book." Joseph's family remains in Egypt. When a new Pharaoh rises to power, they spend four hundred years as captives in that land. They are centuries of silence only broken when God hears their cries and responds with liberation. *Let my people go*. When God's people are freed, their leader Moses carries with him the bones of Joseph. In other words, they do not forget this sacred act of grace, this Godlike restraint. But more than that, they inscribe it in the law.

When Moses delivers God's commandments to his people, expectations of compassion are rooted in this collective experience. Look it up. Exodus 23:9: "You shall not oppress a stranger among you, for you know the heart of a stranger. You were a stranger in the land of Egypt." People of God, listen to this. We are **commanded** to identify with the most vulnerable to abuse. We are not permitted to turn away from those in deepest need and

call ourselves faithful while doing it. On every page of our sacred text, Godlike compassion begins with those who need it the most. In the scripture it's the orphan, the widow, the alien. And in our time, very little has changed. We are meant to identify with the strangers whose lives are at great risk. With no place to call home. With not enough food to fill their empty bellies. With voices silenced by hatred and hearts filled with fear. Without protection or provision.

You must know that retribution, rage, and ruthlessness are the ways of Pharaoh. And yes, from the vantage point of human power, they are efficient. They get the job done, if the job is consolidation of power and subjugation of enemies.

But to be Godlike is to follow a different path. To see in the stranger a sibling, in the foreigner a member of your family, in the impoverished an imprint of God's image.

Joseph looked on his brothers with the eyes of the divine, and he used his power to serve. He ended this life with a deep sense of fulfillment. He did his part. His memory endures as a blessing.

Scripture is not subtle here. There will be a reckoning. Somewhere, sometime, the question will be asked: When members of your human family stood before you in need, what did you see? What did you say? What did you do? When the opportunity was before you, how did you respond? May the record show that we served the God whose sovereign will is rooted in mercy. Let us leave no doubt in the minds of those who come after us that we chose compassion, even when it was hard. Because while the story of God goes on, *our* days will come to an end. O God, give us the courage and the wisdom to extend the grace you have so freely given.