

SURPRISE, IT'S ME!

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Genesis 45

JOSEPH GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

In 1987, director John Sayles made a wonderful little movie called "Matewan."

It's the story of the birth of the United Mine Workers union and the coal wars that took place the spring of 1920 in Mingo county West Virginia near the town of Matewan. That spring the miners finally grew tired of the unsafe conditions in the mines and the oppressive tactics of the coal companies and decided to organize to force changes in the way mining was done. The companies hired Pinkerton thugs to bust the unions and the result was nearly all out war.

In one scene of the movie the Pinkertons make an attempt to discredit a union organizer. Using a combination of threats and bribery they get a young girl to say that the organizer raped her. Convinced that she is telling the truth some of the miners are dispatched by their friends to take the organizer up into the hills and kill him.

Shortly before the Wednesday night prayer meeting, the preacher at the Matewan church, a young boy, about fifteen or sixteen years old, overhears the Pinkertons talking and realizes that the miners have been duped, but he can't get past the thugs to tell them.

As miners file into the church and the Pinkertons fill the back pew, he looks desperately through his Bible for a text to preach about and lands on the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife.

He tells it in that Pentecostal style we associate with hill people but much as we have heard it – Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph but fails. Frustrated, she falsely accuses Joseph of trying to rape her. The Pinkerton thugs in the back of the church are bored and try to relieve their boredom by joking with each other, only half listening to the preacher. The miners have settled in to the service, listening contentedly to this story, one with which they are familiar and have heard many times.

The young preacher makes eye contact with each of the miners, making sure that they are listening carefully to the story. Now he comes to the place where Potiphar's wife makes her accusation of Joseph to Potiphar himself.

The preacher takes a deep breath, gathers himself to his full height and says, "And ol' Potiphar, he drew out his sword and cut ol' Joseph from brisket to bread basket fer the evil thing he done. And Joseph died a terrible and bloody death on account of it."

The Pinkertons have ignored the whole story and, we are left to believe, would not have understood what was said, even had they listened.

But the miners are different. They are church people, if only of a crude, simple, backwater kind, and they have heard this story before. They know that this is not how it ends. The preacher has changed it. But why would he...

Suddenly the light begins to dawn in the eyes of first one, then another and then, like an electric current we see it begin to flow through the entire room as they all become aware of what is happening. The union organizer, like Joseph, has been falsely accused and they must get out of here, now, and stop the action they have set in motion or he will be killed.

The young preacher sees that his point has been well made and taken and in one dramatic movement, says, "Amen, brothers. Go in peace," as everyone rises and rushes, nearly climbing over each other to get out of the little church. They arrive just in time to call off the hit and save the union organizer's life.

It is one of my favorite movie moments and it gives us a little inkling of the kind of thing that is possible when a culture is biblically literate, when we all know the same stories and speak the same language of faith. It is one of the reasons we're doing this sermon series, Fifty Bible Stories Every Christian Should Know. And it's one of the reasons why, this year, we are reading the Bible again for the first time.

JOSEPH IN PRISON

So Potiphar had no choice but to believe his wife and he had Joseph put in prison, the part of the prison called "The House of the Captain of the Guard," where the King's prisoners were kept. But God blessed Joseph even in prison and he prospered there as well, becoming right hand man to the warden and pretty much running the whole prison.

One day two new prisoners arrived. The king's chief Cup Bearer (we would call him the wine steward or *sommelier*) and chief baker had, in some way, offended the king and, as punishment, he had sent them to prison. Because they were men of some status they were placed in that special part of the jail where Joseph was in charge.

After they had been there some days they both had a dream that vexed and troubled them and, when Joseph asked them why they were so blue they said it was because they had had these dreams but there was no one in the prison to interpret them. (People believed in those days that dreams were communications, not from our subconscious but from the gods or from God, whichever they happened to believe in.)

Joseph said that since dreams were from God so were the interpretations. They should tell him the dreams and he would see if God would allow him to interpret them.

They both told their dreams to Joseph and Joseph said there was good news and bad news. The good news went to the cup bearer and his dream meant that he would be returned to his position with all forgiven and everything

would be good for him. And, by the way, Joseph added, when you get back to the palace, put in a good word for me because I'm innocent and shouldn't be here.

The baker got the bad news. Long story short – he was going to die. Sorry.

Three days later the baker was hanged – presumably for something more serious than displeasing the king – and the cup bearer was restored to his position with a raise, but he forgot all about Joseph.

Two years go by.

One night Pharaoh has a dream. In it he sees seven cows down by the Nile River that eat grass and grow fat. Then he sees seven more cows, gaunt and hideously thin, and they eat the seven fat cows. Pharaoh wakes up, vexed and troubled by his dream, washes his face, walks around a little, has a little nip of wine and goes back to bed.

This time he dreams about a grain stalk with seven fat, beautiful ears of grain on it. Then, all of a sudden, seven thin, emaciated ears grow on the stalk and eat the seven fat, healthy ears. Again Pharaoh wakes up troubled.

Troubled by his dreams, he calls together all of his wise men and advisers and ask them for an interpretation of the dreams but all they do is scratch their heads and shrug their shoulders. Finally, the wine steward comes forth and tells of a time when he was in prison a couple of years ago and there was this Hebrew kid who interpreted his dream and the dream of the chief baker and hit it right on the nose. Joseph, I think his name was. Yeah, that's it, Joseph!

Pharaoh sends for Joseph and they get him shaved and cleaned up and send him before Pharaoh.

In Pharaoh's court, the king tells the kidnapped slave the content of his dream and Joseph can hardly stifle a yawn. Yes, he says, of course I can interpret the dream. It looks pretty obvious to me.

Seven years of bumper crops followed by seven years of famine. The famine will be so severe that everyone will forget about the bumper crops and it will take all the grain grown during the fat years to get you through the lean ones. Also, you have had two dreams to this effect because it is already set in stone and there's no turning back. It's about to happen. In fact, it may have already started.

What should I do, asks Pharaoh.

Well, if I were you, says Joseph, I'd find a man who was smart as a whip and wise as an owl – someone who is really good at getting things organized and running at maximum efficiency – someone who has demonstrated and proven skills in this area – logistics and distribution, you know – and I'd put him in charge of the office of Famine Preparedness.

During the seven years of plenty he will build warehouses and fill them with grain and during seven years of want he will be in charge of distribution of the saved grain. Egypt will be the breadbasket for the world. Every nation will be beholden to us and you, my Lord Pharaoh, will be the most powerful man the world has ever known. But this man that you choose must be very wise. He must have a special gift from God.

Pharaoh looks to his advisers who are all standing around and then back to Joseph. "Uh, do you know where I can find a guy like that?"

Joseph rolls his eyes. Gee, let me think...long pause...and then it finally sinks in and the light bulb appears over Pharaoh's head. "Hey, what about you? You have a gift from God, right? Why don't you do it?"

Well, gosh, if you really think...well, gosh...okay.

So, in one day Joseph goes from guy-in-charge-of-the-prison to gu- in-charge-of-the-whole-country. He is made Chancellor of the Exchequer and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of all the Egyptians. He speaks with the authority of the Pharaoh himself and signs his orders and letters with the Pharaoh's personal seal.

And, the story teller tells us, he is only 30 years old.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN CANAAN

Meanwhile, back in Canaan, Jacob/Israel and his sons have not been spared from the famine.

Rachel has borne Jacob one more son, Benjamin, but she has died in childbirth. The sons have grown older and wiser. They do not begrudge young Benjamin his favored status, the place that Joseph once held as the child of Jacob's old age and the son of his favorite wife.

"Word has come down to me that grain can be bought in Egypt," he tells his sons one day. Go down there and buy some so we don't starve... all of you but little Benjamin. Leave him here because I'm afraid something might happen to him and I couldn't handle that.

So the ten brothers all go to Egypt to buy grain and they come before Joseph who is in charge of distribution of the grain and he recognizes them, of course, but they don't recognize him.

Now, here follows a series of games that Joseph runs on his brothers, messing with them, taunting them and getting back a little of his own after how they treated him. But, revenge, he discovers it not all that tasty a dish whether it is served hot or cold.

First, he accuses them of being spies and throws them in jail for three days. Then he lets them out and sells them grain to take back on the condition that they leave Simeon as a hostage and bring back Benjamin to prove that their story is true. Before they leave, as a gesture of kindness, he has the money they used to pay for the grain secretly placed back into their grain sacks.

The brothers get back home, discover the money, and are convinced they've been tricked. That powerful Egyptian, they think, planned to have them arrested for stealing the grain and they just escaped by the skin of their teeth. When they tell Jacob that they have to go back with Benjamin to ransom Simeon he refuses to let Benjamin go for fear the Egyptians will kill them all.

Eventually, however, the grain they brought back runs out and the hunger in their bellies takes control of their decision making process. Jacob tells them to take Benjamin and go, ransom Simeon and buy some more grain if you can. Take the money that you found in your grain sacks and an equal amount as well. Take gifts that can only be gotten here in this part of the world. And pray that the Egyptian man you spoke to will have mercy on you and let you come home again because if my little Benjamin does not come back, I will die from grief. Judah says that he will take personal responsibility for Benjamin's safety and then they leave for Egypt.

RETURN TO EGYPT

This time, when they return to Egypt, Joseph has them brought to his house. They don't know what to make of this and are scared just about silly. See, Judah says, what goes around comes around. We are about to be punished for the evil that we did to our brother, Joseph, all those years ago.

But they are told that they will be eating lunch with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Joseph enters with Simeon and asks them about their father: Is he still alive? Yes, he is alive and well. And this young man, here. He is the young brother you told me about? Yes, sir, this is him.

Joseph has to run from the room. Seeing Benjamin, his heart is warmed and the relationship of this youngster with his elderly father reminds him of his own relationship with Jacob and he goes into the other room and weeps. After he gets control of himself he comes back out and sends them on their way with the grain they came for.

But before they go he has one of his gold cups hidden in the grain sack on Benjamin's donkey.

The brothers have not gone far when riders from the city overtake them and place them under arrest. The charge: theft of a golden goblet.

The brothers protest that this accusation is insane! Why would we come all the way from Canaan and bring twice the money we need to buy the grain plus all those gifts only to steal a gold cup on our way out? If this is true, let the one of us who stole it be your slave forever. Whereupon they dump their bags of grain, each his own bag, and there at Benjamin's feet is the gold cup.

Benjamin will have to stay as the slave of this powerful Egyptian. Shocked into silence, the brothers can think of nothing to say. Finally, Judah finds his voice and asks to speak privately with Joseph and there follows one of the most beautiful, heartwarming speeches in the Old Testament.

In eighteen verses (Chapter 44: 16-34) tells the whole story of how Jacob lost his favorite son, the child of his old age and his beloved wife, Rachel and how Rachel was able to finally give him this child, Benjamin, but died in the giving. He tells how the child, Benjamin, came to be with them in Egypt and how Judah, himself, told Jacob that he would take personal responsibility for the child's safety. And he tells him that he cannot, CANNOT go back and tell his father that his favorite child, Benjamin will not be coming home to him.

"Now, therefore, please let me remain instead of the lad. I will be your willing slave. But, please, let the child go home with his brothers. For how can I possibly face my father without his child? How can I watch him go through that kind of pain and misery?" And we know that the word which goes unsaid but is thought by all is, "again."

Now, hear it as the story teller, himself, tells it in the 45th chapter of Genesis:

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.' So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty." ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.' ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

¹⁶ When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house, 'Joseph's brothers have come', Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. ¹⁷Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Say to your brothers, "Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan. ¹⁸Take your father and your households and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land." ¹⁹You are further charged to say, "Do this: take wagons from the land of Egypt for

your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father, and come. ²⁰Give no thought to your possessions, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.”’

21 The sons of Israel did so. Joseph gave them wagons according to the instruction of Pharaoh, and he gave them provisions for the journey. ²²To each one of them he gave a set of garments; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five sets of garments. ²³To his father he sent the following: ten donkeys loaded with the good things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and provision for his father on the journey. ²⁴Then he sent his brothers on their way, and as they were leaving he said to them, ‘Do not quarrel’ along the way.’

25 So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. ²⁶And they told him, ‘Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt.’ He was stunned; he could not believe them. ²⁷But when they told him all the words of Joseph that he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. ²⁸Israel said, ‘Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die.’

So the brothers went back to Canaan and brought their father and their families and they came to Egypt and there they lived and their descendants after them in the area of Egypt known as Goshen and they prospered and became a great nation in Egypt abiding there for a thousand years.

And “the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them.

“Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply and in the event of war, they also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us, and depart from the land.’ So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor.” (Exodus 1: 7-11a)

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Dean begins with a story from a Hollywood movie that illustrates the importance of biblical literacy. Anthropologists call this phenomenon “having a common cultural mythology.” What are some of the stories from the Bible and other sources that make up our “common cultural mythology.” Why is this mythology important?
2. Many families have a common cultural mythology. What are some of the stories that make up the common cultural mythology of your family? Of our community?
3. Again, this week, Joseph is not free but God makes him successful. Talk about this concept that a person of faith need not be free to be successful. In what other ways can a person who is not free still be successful?
4. Joseph became successful by making his bosses successful, first Potiphar and then the Pharaoh. Is there a lesson in this for us? What is it and how might it apply in our lives?
5. We get the feeling that Joseph’s brothers have become wiser and maybe a little more mellow as they have gotten older. In what ways do we see this? Why is it important?
6. When Joseph first sees his brothers he games them and seems to take revenge on them for the shabby way they treated him. But he finds it hard to continue this behavior. Why? What changes his mind?
7. Some historians have suggested that the Hebrews were, in fact, a tribe of Egyptians who left Egypt under the leadership of an Egyptian prince after a plague struck the area of Goshen and decimated their children. This plague, they say is the historic basis for the ten plagues that appear in the Moses story as well as the slaughter of the innocents that is ordered by Pharaoh and the killing of the first born that takes place on the last night of the plagues. The story we now have is simply the Israelite spin on the real story. What do you think about that? Is it possible? How would it change things for you if it were ever discovered to be true?