

Surprised by Mercy

Meant for Good Series Week 6: Genesis 42-45

10/1/17: PBO

Welcome/intro

We're in the last 2 weeks of a series of messages called "Meant for Good"

We're looking at the crazy life of a guy named Joseph in the Bible—some of the highest highs and lowest lows all wrapped into one life of anyone in the Scriptures

The whole thing starts with Joseph getting sold into slavery by his own brothers to slave traders going to Egypt

and the story takes lots of twists and turns until it takes the shocking turn of Joseph, who was rotting in an ancient Egyptian jail without much prospect of ever getting out

he interprets a dream for Pharaoh, king of Egypt: 7 years of great harvest, followed by years of famine, and here's what we should do about it

And as a result of what Joseph says and does, Pharaoh puts him in charge of the whole land of Egypt: prisoner to Prime Minister in about 30 minutes!

Throughout this story we're seeing that even though life is often difficult and disappointing and that sometimes there are people around you who are difficult and disappointing

the good news is that no matter how bad the mess, there's a God who is bigger than the mess who has the power to redeem the mess—who can take your hot mess and my hot mess and work it for good, make it good, bring good out of it

And where we left off last week was this unfolding dramatic scene where Joseph is the Prime Minister running all of Egypt with lots of stockpiled grain

And his family is back in Canaan, suffering under the famine that's consumed the entire area

And so the dad says to Joseph's brothers who are the ones who sold him into slavery, to go to Egypt to get food so that they don't starve to death

And there's about to be a little family reunion here in Egypt that's loaded up with more family dysfunction and pain and baggage even than YOURS from last summer!

And the question that you and I are going to wrestle with today as we watch Joseph wrestle with what to do with his brothers who sold him into slavery

Is this: ***what do you do with the people who hurt you?***

This isn't just theory, is it? This is real. There are people who have hurt us, all of us, somewhere along the way in whatever way

could be a parent or a sibling, could have been a peer growing up or a teacher who was awful to you, could have been a boss or a co-worker or a complete stranger

Can you think of someone in your life who has inflicted some measure of pain into your life, either intentionally or unintentionally?

When that pain gets deposited into our lives, one of the most important questions for you and for me for the rest of our lives from that point forward is “what are you going to do with that pain and the person or people who caused it?”

That kind of pain is a toxin, it’s not healthy for us, it’s introducing something into our lives that we don’t want in there and many times it’s something that we weren’t made for or meant to experience

And so when someone introduces the toxin called pain into our lives, we end up having very strong reactions to those people, don’t we?

Anger, rage, bitterness, hatred, fear—for some of you, just thinking about the person who inflicted pain in your life, thinking about their face, it stirs up strong emotions, doesn’t it?

This morning, Joseph is not only going to have to come face to face with his brothers who sold him into slavery

He’s going to come face to face with them AND they’re not going to recognize him AND he’s going to have the power of life and death over them

That’s a moment that maybe you’ve dreamed about and maybe Joseph has dreamed about and the excruciating project that Joseph is going to undertake in this section of the story

is probably the hardest thing he’s ever done and it might be one of the hardest things some of you will ever have to do

And that project is the work of mercy and forgiveness. This morning, Joseph and you and I are going to go on the ride of figuring out what to do with the people who have caused us pain.

For many of us, this is one of the most defining questions of our lives and Joseph is going to help you deal with it, right here, this morning.

Bible/no Bible/Genesis 42: pick up where we left off last week as Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt to buy food.

⁶ Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph’s brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. ⁷ As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. “Where do you come from?” he asked.

“From the land of Canaan,” they replied, “to buy food.”

⁸ Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹ Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected."

When I was in 8th grade for a couple of months I had the miserable experience of being bullied at school.

It was all verbal, but the dude was bigger than me and stronger than me and for a couple of months he made it his life's pleasure to be about as mean to me as he could be

And I of course spent those months cultivating a deep hatred for this kid in my heart avoiding him whenever and wherever I could, but it was a small school on a military base and there weren't a whole lot of options

And it was one of the most joyous days of my young life when he moved away, just glad to be rid of him

Many, many years pass and all of the pain and hatred and vitriol that I had cultivated I think goes away as he goes away

But then one day about ten years ago, totally out of the blue, I get a Facebook friend request from him and I am flooded with anger and rage and hatred at the sight of his name and his face:

"Facebook friends? I don't want to be Facebook friends with you, real friends with you, I don't want anything to do with you, I wish you nothing but a miserable life!"

Without any thought whatsoever, all the emotion all came rushing back so quickly and I was utterly shocked at how much anger was still locked up inside of me after all these years.

Joseph here one day just goes into the office, answers a few emails, has a breakfast meeting with Pharaoh to discuss the supply levels of grain in the midst of the famine, maybe squeezes in a game of foosball in the break room

Before heading over to the magistrate's office where he receives people who are looking to buy grain from the Egyptian government

And as he's settling into the day's work, in the long line of people who have been camping out overnight to talk with him, to his utter shock and dismay, in comes his brothers, the ones who sold him into slavery

They come in and bow low, they don't recognize him but he recognizes them. And I think two things happen:

FIRST, he's utterly flooded with all kinds of emotions, just like I was when I got that friend request out of the blue, we'll talk more about that in a minute

And secondly, the passage tells us that he remembers his dreams about them

If you missed week 1, the story opened with Joseph as a 17 year old having dreams where his brothers all bowed down to him

he foolishly told his brothers about this dream and they hated him for it, it's part of why they sold him off into slavery in Egypt

And here the passage tells us that at this moment Joseph remembers his dreams about his brothers bowing down to him, dreams that at this point were about 20-plus years ago

Now over the past couple of weeks, some folks have been asking the question about how much these dreams kept Joseph going during all his trials and tribulations sold into slavery and while in prison

I think that the dreams didn't do anything for him while he was in jail. I think he'd forgotten all about that dream until here, this moment: when the brothers are actually bowing down to him, THEN he remembers his dreams about them.

And when all of this happens, right here in this moment, he's utterly overwhelmed and flooded with conflicting emotions

Can you imagine being Joseph right here in this moment? The flood of emotions he's feeling when he sees his brothers?

Joseph is in that position and he has to make a snap-split-second decision about what to do in that moment as they're bowing down—and he decides to hide his identity until he can figure out what to do with himself

Someone in my small group called this Joseph's Undercover Boss moment!

And Joseph is so conflicted about what to do with himself and with the power he has over his brothers who inflicted so much pain on him, that there's this drama that's going to unfold over the next 3 chapters of Genesis as he struggles to figure out what to do with them

We're going to hit the highlights, so follow me as we skip through this portion of the story as Joseph struggles with wanting to unleash vengeance on his brothers while at the same time wanting to forgive them:

¹⁴ Joseph said to them, "It is just as I told you: You are spies! ¹⁵ And this is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶ Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!" ¹⁷ And he put them all in custody for three days.

So here's Joseph's **Plan #1: everyone stays in jail, one goes back to get Benjamin.**

Now Benjamin was Joseph's brother back home who was his closest brother.

His father Jacob had a couple of wives, Joseph and Benjamin were both born from Jacob's favorite wife, and so Joseph had been the favorite before his brothers sold him off into slavery

And now Benjamin is the favorite—his dad wouldn't let Benjamin go with the rest of the brothers to get food in Egypt because he was so concerned about his safety

So Joseph's on-the-spot response to his brothers: throw them all in jail for 3 days to give them a little taste of what he experienced for over 2 years

And then say they can get out if one of them goes to get Benjamin, the brother that Joseph most loved as well

But then 3 days passes, and Joseph has had a little more time to come up with a new plan, and here's what he says:

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 in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households. ²⁰ But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die."

So Plan #2: One stays back in jail, everyone goes back to deliver grain and get Benjamin

Upon further review, Joseph doesn't want his dad especially to die, so he sends everyone back home with grain except one of their choosing

and the only way he gets out is if Benjamin comes back with them—the brothers are utterly confused at this point, so they start talking amongst themselves as to why this is happening to them

21 They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us."

22 Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood."²³ They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter.

24 He turned away from them and began to weep, but then came back and spoke to them again. He had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes.

Now pause here: have you ever done something that you regretted and it hung onto and clung onto you like a dryer sheet that you couldn't get rid of?

And sometimes you were very aware of it and you tried to shake, shake, shake shake it off, but it wouldn't go away

And just when you thought you were over it or past it or it no longer would haunt your steps

something triggers you and it all comes flooding back to you, all the guilt and shame and attempts to justify or rationalize

The brothers are trying to understand why this guy is picking on them so much, and what's their go-to, #1 explanation? God is punishing us for this thing that they did **20-ish years ago**—it's not that far below the surface, it is? it still haunts them, doesn't it?

They did something horrible 20 years ago and they have PTSD because when we use our God-given strength and abilities or relationships in ways that violate how God made for us to live, it leaves a scar

it not only does damage to other people, if we're healthy people it does damage to us

The only people in the world who do harm and wrong and don't feel any guilt are psychopaths. Their wiring is broken. All the rest of us are wired up to feel guilt when we do something like sell our brother into slavery

And that guilt that we can carry, sometimes it's like a dryer sheet we can't shake off, but at other times it's like a huge weight hung around our neck that we can't get rid of

My friends, this morning, if you're carrying in a couple of dryer sheets from things in your past
Or if you're bringing in a couple of gigantic stones that are weighing you down, you've had something that has brought back to the surface all the pain of past bad decisions

You've come to the right place. This is a place where all of us are welcome, dryer sheets or gigantic stones and all

To the one place where there is power to finally be rid of those dryer sheets, to finally be cut free from those gigantic stones that would otherwise drag us down and ruin our lives

Here, 20 years later, Joseph's brothers are discussing amongst themselves how God is punishing them for what they did to Joseph, right in front of Joseph, who's still pretending to not be Joseph

And Joseph is going to work out his own angst and turmoil as well as test his brothers to see if they've changed.

Because he cooks up **Plan #3: Plant the silver back in their grain sacks**

The brothers had bought the grain, just like everyone else, and what Joseph does is plant their silver back in the tops of their grain sacks as they're leaving to go back home

They get down the road and they open up their sacks and are shocked to find the silver that they'd paid Joseph BACK in their sacks, it certainly makes any return trip a bit more complicated because they could be accused of stealing!

And again they interpret this as God's judgment on them, again for what they did to Joseph. When they discover the money:

Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, "What is this that God has done to us?"

So here's what happens next: the brothers go home, tell dad that they have to bring Benjamin back to spring their brother Simeon

Dad is upset at them for telling Joseph all their family history and he refuses to let Benjamin go back to Egypt, he's his dad's new favorite

But the famine continues and eventually they've eaten all the grain that they brothers brought back from Egypt

So dad says to the sons, perhaps very reluctantly: "Go back to Egypt and buy us some more grain."

One of the brothers, Judah says, we can't go without Benjamin, and finally Jacob agrees

So they pack up Benjamin, all the silver that they gave to Joseph the first time, plus more money and all the gifts and spices and honey and myrrh and such that they can scrounge up

When Joseph sees them, he tells his servants to prepare a feast for all of them at his house and when he arrives there, he has this dramatic reunion with his brother Benjamin:

29 As he looked about and saw his brother Benjamin, his own mother's son, he asked, "Is this your youngest brother, the one you told me about?" And he said, "God be gracious to you, my son." 30 Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there. 31 After he had washed his face, he came out and, controlling himself, said, "Serve the food."

So they're feasting and eating, Simeon is released and is maybe a little grumpy with his brothers for leaving him in jail for so long

And then Joseph moves to what at this point in the story is the final test of his brothers and his own last part of his own process of seeing if he can forgive them.

PLAN #4: As the brothers get ready to leave, he tells his stewards to AGAIN put the silver back in the sacks of grain that they're taking

AND he says to take his personal silver cup, one of his most valuable personal possessions, and put it in Benjamin's sack, thereby framing his own brother to be the worst of all the thieves!

Only this time, as his brothers are leaving the city he sends his steward after them screaming "STOP THIEVES!"

And they open up all their sacks and there's silver in all of them and ESPECIALLY that cup in Benjamin's bag—they're caught, red-handed, just like Joseph had set them up to be

And so they all drag themselves back to Joseph's presence [¹⁴ ***Joseph was still in the house when Judah and his brothers came in, and they threw themselves to the ground before him.***]

and now, and I want to pause right here before we go any further because this is such an intense moment in Joseph's life

In this moment, Joseph has his brothers right where he's wanted them in his darkest days and in those darkest moments while he was a slave and when he was in prison

Because I think Joseph, just like you and I, probably had some dark moments where he fantasized and imagined what he would do to his brothers who sold him into slavery—how he might get them back if he ever had a chance

And now, in this moment, is his chance: they're all together right there, he has full authority to do whatever he wants to to them

Can you imagine the person in your life who inflicted the most pain on you in your life being at your mercy and you could do to them whatever you wanted and no one would bat an eye or care why you did whatever you did?

That's the place where Joseph is right now, in this moment.

Judah, one of the brothers, says: [***Judah replied. "What can we say? ... God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves—we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup."***]

Notice that Judah owns their guilt, even though they actually didn't do anything wrong. Several commentators I read this week suggested that Judah is talking about the guilt the brothers have in selling Joseph 20 years ago, not their guilt with the silver

But Joseph says: "No, all of you may go back home, only Benjamin has to stay since he was the one found with my silver cup"

[¹⁷ ***But Joseph said, "Far be it from me to do such a thing! Only the man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace."***]

And then Judah steps up and delivers the longest recorded speech in the whole book of Genesis where he pleads with Joseph to not send them back without Benjamin because it would crush their father's heart

And he closes with this plea to Joseph: [***Judah's said] please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. ³⁴ How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father.***"]

Now here's the key connection to be made. Way back about 20 years ago, when the brothers decided to sell Joseph to slave traders, do you know who's idea that was? **Judah's.**

Do you know who's changed? Judah. And the rest of the brothers, as they prove their worth and character throughout this portion of the story

And last but certainly not least one of the most important people who have been changed is Joseph himself, who we met as a cocky and bratty 17-year-old but who has matured and grown and been humbled and exalted all at the same time

And so it's Judah's offer to essentially exchange his life for Benjamin's that finally breaks Joseph down

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

Now we talked earlier about how Joseph likely felt the day his brothers came in and surprised him with their presence

Can you imagine the emotions that his brothers are feeling in this moment?

My small group suggested that the first response was "Oh BEEEEEP!" And then the second response was a whole heaping pile of shame.

And then, of course, terror. They recognize that Joseph has the power that we were just talking about: to do to them whatever he wants to do to them because of what THEY did to him!

⁴ Then 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!

⁵ And now, do 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. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

⁸ "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. ⁹ Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay...

14 Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them.

Have you ever been surprised by mercy? You genuinely deserve X because of what you did. Guilty, no doubt about it, you know it and the person in authority over you knows it, too

But instead of you receiving X, you get A or B or C, which is more generous and kind and merciful than you could ever have asked for or imagined?

In this story, everyone is surprised by mercy.

His brothers are the surprising recipient of mercy. They deserved punishment, what they did was wrong, and Joseph was the one who they harmed and who was in position to inflict pain on them

And yet, instead of punishment, Joseph metes out mercy, undeserved, un-required, just mercy

And Joseph is the surprising recipient of mercy as God has led him through all the twists and turns of his life to bring him to the place where he is saving his family, as he declares here.

“GOD sent me here, not you” Joseph declares. We’ll talk more about that next week.

But as Joseph interprets and re-tells his story to his brothers, the primary actor is not himself or his brothers, but God

and the story he tells isn’t of an angry God who punished him for something wrong he did and it’s not the absentee God who just let all this miserable stuff happen to Joseph while God was off on a coffee break or taking a nap somewhere

He tells the story of a God who was merciful to him and through him to his family and all the rest of the surrounding countries and people.

And he himself is surprised by his act of mercy—he was teeing up more hoops for his brothers to go through, and instead he breaks down and forgives people who don’t necessarily deserve it

As the hot mess of his life becomes clear, Joseph has a new story to tell: mercy, not victimhood, mercy, not self-righteousness, mercy not vengeance, mercy, not regrets or bitterness or anger or hostility

And Joseph’s willingness to embrace God’s mercy and his willingness to be a willing participant and instrument of mercy is what frees him from the toxic stuff that could have taken root in his life like bitterness, anger, hostility or self-righteousness

Joseph has every right in the world to carry bitterness or hostility towards his brothers, but that melts away as he re-frames what his brothers did to him through the lens of God's bigger story of mercy

This morning a couple of **TAKE-WITH's** for you to think and pray about as we close:

1. How might you re-think your story (especially the most difficult parts) through the lens of God's mercy?

We're going to really drill into this next week, but this can be so hard for us that I wanted to get the juices flowing this week.

You have ways that you tell yourself your own story—especially the most difficult experiences or seasons of your life.

Can you begin to think about re-framing your story and re-telling your story, especially the hard parts, with God and God's mercy as the main actor and driving force behind all that has happened, both the good and the bad

Which doesn't mean it wasn't bad or that the people weren't responsible for what they did to you, again, we'll talk more about that next week

But can you start to engage the difficult project of re-thinking through your life's story through the lens of a merciful God—maybe even if THIS season, today, is your hard season and it's not completely clear yet what God's doing in the middle of it?

And this exercise can apply to you even if you're not a God person, even if you don't believe in God

the Scriptures tell all kinds of stories of people who don't want anything to do with God but God is at work in their lives in all kinds of ways anyway that they're totally oblivious to

So for you this might be an imaginative exercise, I'd liken it to putting on a set of 3-D lenses to re-look at your story that you've only looked at in 2-D:

If there was a God who was at work in your life in merciful ways, how might that re-frame how you tell yourself your story?

2. Who do you need to surprise with mercy?

Joseph spends months and months in these passages working himself towards mercy for his brothers, so it might take you some time to get here.

But this morning, Joseph is inviting you and I into the wide open, fresh air space called forgiveness. Forgiveness.

No more anger, no more bitterness, no more conversations running around and around in your head, no more rehearsing what you'd like to do to him or her

Who do you need to surprise with mercy—even if they don't want it! Even if they're dead and gone! You need to come to the place of forgiveness and mercy for you, if for no other reason

A couple of years ago we did a whole series on forgiveness, and after a couple of weeks, a few people just stopped coming—it was too hard, too difficult to get there

This morning, I want to invite you to do this core spiritual and emotional work: forgiveness and mercy, these are the paths of life

And do you know where the power to do that comes from? Do you know where the power to extend mercy to other people is delivered from?

Ultimately, the power to be merciful to your enemies and my enemies comes from this meal that we celebrate—the ultimate act of forgiveness and mercy, poured out for us

In Joseph's story, one of his own brothers, people who shared his DNA, sold him out—Judah in particular

But the Scriptures say that this is just a microcosm of the larger story:

when God made humanity in his own image, people who shared something of God's likeness, God's Spirit, we sold him out, abandoned him
and we re-abandon him over and over and over again over the course of our lives

But God, who is rich in mercy, will not abandon us nor will he merely let the guilt of our actions be the defining characteristic of our lives, in this life or the next

God, who is rich in mercy, pours himself into human likeness, comes to us as Jesus.

It is people made in God's image who have sold God out and abandoned God, it is one who is the perfect image bearer who will reconcile us back together

God who is rich in mercy, comes in the form of a human to redeem us, forgive us, ransom us back from sin and death

In the Joseph story, Judah offers his life in exchange for his brother Benjamin's. In the larger biblical story, Jesus offers his life in exchange for the whole world

And so we celebrate that by God's grace mercy is made available to us, granted to us, undeserved, un-earned, mercy

When we embrace and accept Christ, we swim in mercy, we are surrounded by mercy, our entire lives exist in an atmosphere and environment of mercy.

And this morning we celebrate the great gift and sacrifice that made our experience of mercy possible as we take communion...