

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 3, 2011**

GUILT AND GRACE

Genesis 50:15-21

Joseph certainly lived an interesting life, wouldn't you say? Just think of all the stories he could tell his grandchildren in his old age, reflecting on his life with all its twists and turns, seeing the hand of God and experiencing the grace of God at every moment along the way. Here is a look back at the life of Joseph, in case you need a refresher.

Joseph was the 11th son of Jacob, the first son born to Jacob's wife Rachel (Genesis 30), who was the true love of Jacob's life. Rachel would later die giving birth to Joseph's brother Benjamin, the youngest of Jacob's 12 sons (Genesis 35). Joseph grew up with ten older brothers – half brothers, since, though Jacob was the father of them all, they were brothers from four different mothers.

Of all Jacob's sons, Joseph was his father's favorite. Everybody knew it. In the words of Andy Stanley, Jacob shamelessly doted on Joseph and showered him with special gifts, including a spectacular, colorful tunic which became a vivid, daily reminder to Joseph's ten older brothers that they would never receive the kind of love their father lavished on Joseph. The tunic (or robe) was a symbol of Joseph's status as the favored son (Stanley, *The Grace of God*, p. 35).

How did his brothers feel about Joseph? Not surprisingly, they hated him (Genesis 37:4). Seeds of resentment, bitterness and jealousy, sown unwittingly by their father's favoritism toward Joseph, took root in their hearts and grew up to cause trouble for Joseph, grief and loss for Jacob, and a lingering burden of unresolved guilt for the ten older brothers. They hated Joseph so much, they wanted him dead. They plotted to kill him and dump his body in a pit to be eaten by wild animals. In a half-hearted attempt to save Joseph, Reuben (the oldest brother) talked the others out of killing him. Then, at the suggestion of Judah, they sold Joseph to traders who were on their way to Egypt. This way there was no bloodshed, and they all ended up with a little extra cash in their pockets. They figured they were rid of Joseph forever.

Joseph was taken to Egypt and sold to a high-ranking official named Potiphar. Joseph found favor with Potiphar. Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his entire household, and the Lord gave Joseph success in everything he did (Genesis 39:2-6). He bloomed where he was planted. But when Joseph rejected the advances of Potiphar's wife, she falsely accused him of making unwanted advances toward her, and Joseph ended up in prison.

Even in prison, Joseph found favor. The Lord was with him there, and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden, who put Joseph in charge of the whole prison. It wasn't the soil he would have chosen, but Joseph kept on blooming. In everything he did, God gave him success (Genesis 39:20-23).

While in prison, doing time for a crime he did not commit, God gave Joseph the interpretation of the dreams of two of Pharaoh's officials who were locked up with him. Even after his interpretation proved to be right and one of the officials (Pharaoh's chief cupbearer) was restored to his former position, Joseph was a forgotten man, stuck in prison for two more years, until, in the providence of God, he was released from prison and overnight – literally – became the prime minister of Egypt. Second only to Pharaoh in all of Egypt. It was Joseph's reward for interpreting Pharaoh's dreams and giving Pharaoh wise advice on how to prepare for the seven years of famine which would follow seven years of abundance and prosperity. Overnight, Joseph went from prison to the palace, in accordance with the gracious plan of God (Genesis 41).

At this point, Joseph was just 30 years old (41:46). Thirteen years had passed since his brothers sold him into slavery. During the seven years of abundance, Joseph "stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea" (41:49), so that Egypt would have food during the years of famine. The famine came, and it was severe throughout the whole Mediterranean world (41:57).

When it hit home in Canaan, Jacob sent his ten older sons to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. After inquiring about their father and their younger brother Benjamin, Joseph sent them home with sacks full of grain. But he told them not to come back to Egypt unless they brought their youngest brother with them. And, for leverage, he forced one of them – Simeon – to stay behind in Egypt as a hostage until the others returned with Benjamin. Still, the brothers didn't know it was Joseph.

The brothers, minus Simeon, went back home. When they told their father what "the man" said to them, and his demand that they bring Benjamin to him, Jacob said, "No way. I will not do it." But the famine worsened, the grain they had gotten in Egypt was gone, and Jacob reluctantly changed his mind. He told the nine to take Benjamin and go.

When they arrived in Egypt, they were taken to Joseph's house. They were afraid they must be in trouble, because the silver they had brought with them to purchase grain on their first trip to Egypt had mysteriously ended up back in their sacks. Instead, they were Joseph's guests at a banquet. A banquet of grace – which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it, especially people who have done the sort of thing Joseph's brothers had done to him. At the sight of his brother Benjamin, whom he had not seen for 22 years, Joseph was deeply moved, and hurried out of the dining room to find a private place to weep (43:30). After one more trick to test the character of his brothers (Genesis 44), Joseph finally revealed his identity to his brothers, and wept so loudly that everyone in the house heard him (45:1-3).

What do you think his ten older brothers thought – what do you think they felt – when they realized it was Joseph? The Bible says they were terrified (45:3). Terror. Fear. Panic. They knew what they had done to him. They knew their guilt. Even though they had tried to bury it, it was still there, still haunting them, after all these years. They must have thought it was payback time. They were finally going to get what was coming to them.

But that is not what happened. What they got that day from Joseph was not anger or wrath, not vengeance, but mercy and grace. Joseph, like God Himself, did not treat his brothers as their sins deserved. He did not repay them for what they had done to him (Psalm 103:10). Instead of punishment, they got forgiveness. But it didn't end there. Joseph explained that it was God who had sent him to Egypt, that God's hand had been in it from the beginning, that it was meant to serve God's purposes. Then, in another act of grace, he invited his brothers to bring their father and all their families to Egypt to live in the best part of the land.

Jacob was 130 years old when he came to Egypt and was finally reunited with Joseph (47:9). He lived another 17 years in Egypt, and died at the ripe old age of 147 (47:28). They took his body back to Canaan and buried him in the cave of Machpelah, where his grandparents Abraham and Sarah, his parents Isaac and Rebekah, and his wife Leah were buried (50:4-14).

Now that their father was gone, the ten older brothers wondered how Joseph would treat them. The same old twinges of guilt returned. The same old fears of retribution resurfaced. Would Joseph's attitude toward them change? Would he get even with them now, since they no longer had their father as a buffer? To defuse any anger and bitterness Joseph might still harbor against them, they concocted a phony message from their father, asking Joseph to forgive them and to treat them with kindness on his (Jacob's) behalf, which showed that they were still plagued by guilt after all these years, and that they just didn't – couldn't – believe that Joseph had really and truly forgiven them (50:15-17). They thought their plea for forgiveness would carry more weight with their brother if it came from their father.

When he got their message, the Bible says, "Joseph wept" (50:17). The Bible says the same thing about Jesus in John 11:35, when Jesus arrived in Bethany after the death of His friend Lazarus, and saw the sorrow and grief and weeping of all the mourners. John 11:35 is the shortest verse in the Bible. Only two words: "Jesus wept." Like Jesus, Joseph was a man of deep emotion. Some people believe that to show your emotions in public – especially to shed tears – is a sign of weakness. I confess that I *feel* weak when my emotions come to the surface (as they did last Sunday), and I am not able to hold them back or shut them off. But, please, don't try to tell me that it was a sign of weakness in Jesus when He wept. Or that, because Joseph wept on several occasions, it was a sign of weakness. Don't try to tell me that Jesus and Joseph weren't strong. If it is OK for Jesus to cry, and it is OK for Joseph to cry, then it is OK for you and me to do it. You don't need to apologize for it if it happens to you.

Joseph had already forgiven his brothers. He had shown them amazing grace. Here in Genesis 50, in verses 19-21, Joseph seeks to reassure his brothers that his forgiveness is real, and they have nothing to fear. Twice – in verse 19 and again in verse 21 – he says to them, "Don't be afraid." In essence, he says to them, "I have forgiven you. You are forgiven. What you did to me was evil and hateful, but God used it for good. God has brought great good out of it. I'm not out to get you. I'm not out for revenge. I will treat you with kindness and grace."

Joseph could have exploited his position of power in Egypt. He could have exploited the guilt of his brothers to exact revenge. But he chose the way of grace. Did his brothers deserve grace? Of course not. Nobody deserves grace. As Frederick Buechner explains, "There's no

way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of strawberries and cream (if you don't care for strawberries and cream, think of a taste you just love) or earn good looks or bring about your own birth." Of course they didn't deserve it, any more than you and I, with all the baggage of our sins and failings, could ever deserve it. But grace, as Andy Stanley points out, is not reserved for good people. Grace is not about our goodness. On the contrary, he says, it underscores the goodness of God.

If grace is not reserved for good people, for whom is it? Grace, dear friends, is for guilty people. Grace is for people who miss the mark, who fall short of God's glory. Grace is for people who blow it again and again. Grace is for people who do what they should not do, and for people who fail to do what they ought to do. Grace is for guilty people. It is for sinners who know they need a Savior, who know they are without hope of forgiveness and salvation except in God's sovereign mercy. Grace is not reserved for good people. It is for guilty people who desire to be set free from their sin and guilt. It is for people like the brothers of Joseph who carried their guilt with them wherever they went for more than 20 years.

It is this grace, this forgiveness, this freedom, that God offers to us in the saving work of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross. Joseph modeled this kind of grace. He foreshadowed the grace of Christ in the way he treated his brothers who had been so cruel to him.

Do you need this grace in your life today? Are you troubled by guilt over something you did yesterday, or something that happened decades ago?

A tool-supply company in Pennsylvania received a check in the mail to pay for a hammer. The hammer had been stolen more than 20 years earlier. The check was accompanied by a letter which said, "(This is) to cover the hammer plus a little extra for interest. I'm sorry I stole it, but I have changed my ways." Unforgiven sin can haunt you for years. Unresolved guilt can trouble your conscience and rob you of God's peace for a lifetime. There is no statute of limitations on it.

The good news is that forgiveness is available with God. Until the moment you die, it is not too late to repent and receive forgiveness. The good news is that God's grace is greater than all your sin and guilt. Grace is for guilty people, which means it is for you and me. And grace – His grace – is sufficient to make atonement for all our guilt. All of it.

Grace is for guilty people. Let Jesus take care of your guilt. Embrace and appropriate His forgiving, cleansing, healing grace in your life. Do not doubt the power and sufficiency of His grace.

If you need grace to forgive someone who has done wrong to you, ask Him for it. Joseph did not let ungrace win in his heart. Do not let it win in yours.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.