Agents of Grace

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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. ***2*** *And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.* ***3*** *Joseph 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.* ***5*** *And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.* ***6*** *For 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.* ***7*** *God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.* ***8*** *So 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.* ***9*** *Hurry 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.* ***10*** *You 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.* ***11*** *I 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.'* ***12*** *And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you.* ***13*** *You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here."* ***14*** *Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck.* ***15*** *And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him*. (Genesis 45:1-15).

1. Family Conflict

I remember meeting a family from an old church where the daughter and father hadn't communicated after a long time. The daughter had been estranged from her father. I wished she could have reconciled with her father before he passed away, but they had remained distant from each other. Forgiving friends and family can be difficult. Reconciliation between family members is not easy.

2. Joseph's Family

In today's scripture, Genesis 45, we hear a story of forgiveness and reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. Last Sunday, we learned from Genesis chapter 37 that Joseph was sold to passing merchants as a slave. What happened to Joseph after he was sold as a slave?

In Egypt, Joseph became a house servant to a high-ranking Egyptian, Potiphar. Attracted by his handsome looks, Potiphar's wife desired to lie with him. Joseph continually refused. He was later wrongly accused and put in prison. While Joseph was in prison, he interpreted the dreams of the people in the prison. When the Pharaoh had two disturbing dreams, Joseph was called to interpret them.

Joseph told Pharaoh that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Joseph advised the Pharaoh on how to prepare for the famine. Pharaoh recognized Joseph's God-given ability and appointed him as the chief administrator of Egypt.

The famine was severe throughout the world. Hearing that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob sent Joseph's brothers to buy grain. When Joseph encountered his brothers in Egypt, he didn't disclose his identity. Instead, Joseph accused his brothers of being spies and asked them to come back with their younger brother, Benjamin. Otherwise, Joseph would not sell them grain.

The ongoing famine made Jacob reluctant to send his sons to Egypt with Benjamin. When they came back to Egypt to buy grain, Joseph invited his brothers to dine at his house. Joseph then placed a silver cup in the sack of Benjamin and falsely accused him of stealing. When the brothers came back to his house, Joseph said that Benjamin would have to remain in Egypt and be his slave while the other brothers would go back to their father.

Judah said to Joseph, if Benjamin would not return, their father, Jacob, would die. He begged Joseph, "***Let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers***" (Gen. 44:33). When Judah offered to stay in place of Benjamin, Joseph noticed that there had been a big change in Judah. Judah was the one who wanted to sell Joseph into slavery. But now, Judah was willing to sacrifice himself for his father, Jacob, and his younger brother, Benjamin.

Joseph was no longer able to control himself and said*, "**I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt*** (verse 4). When Joseph revealed his identity, his brothers were astonished.

3. Forgiveness and Redemption

Joseph said, "***now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life*** (verse 5). Joseph acknowledged the past, but did not make them feel guilty for what they had done. Joseph could have become bitter and hateful since he was separated from his parents for 13 years. He could have taken revenge by denying help to his brothers. But he realized that God was active and present in his life. He recognized God's sovereignty in his life journey. And that recognition changed Joseph's perspective. Joseph realized that God had used his brothers to bring him to Egypt to save many lives in Egypt and his family. So, before his brothers requested for forgiveness, Joseph forgave his brothers.

What made Joseph interpret his life in light of God's providence? Abraham directly encountered God on multiple occasions. God also appeared to Isaac and Jacob. God even engaged in a direct struggle with Jacob that lasted throughout the night. But Joseph had no such direct experience with God. Although God seemed to be absent in Joseph's life, people around him noticed that God was with Joseph.

Genesis 39:3 says, "***His master saw that the Lord was with him (Joseph), and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands***." Joseph's first master in Egypt, Potiphar, realized that God was with Joseph. Through Joseph, Potiphar was blessed. The blessing on Joseph overflowed to Potiphar and the other Egyptians. When Joseph reflected on every occasion in his life, he realized that God was with him and took care of him. Such realization made Joseph weep in front of his brothers. His weeping was the weeping of joy and thanksgiving.

4. Agents of Grace

Today's sermon title is "Agents of Grace." According to a dictionary, grace means "the freely given, unmerited favor and love of God." Grace also means "the influence or spirit of God operating in humans to regenerate or strengthen them." In the story of Joseph, we learn that the Lord used Joseph as an agent of grace. God's blessings overflowed to those around Joseph.

5. Conclusion

Joseph knows that everything he had, including his position in Egypt and his ability to interpret dreams, was from God. He learns that God is able to redeem the bad intention of other people. Joseph realizes the divine sovereignty in his life. Joseph says to his brothers: "You sold me," but it was God who sent me to Egypt to preserve the Egyptians and his family.

In the story of Joseph, we see that Joseph is a reflection of Christ, Jesus was wrongly accused and crucified on the cross. Isaiah 53:5 says, ***"But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."*** Joseph suffered but saved many Egyptians and his family. Jesus suffered, forgave us all and we are saved. Although we might suffer during our lives, God continues to use us like Joseph and Jesus to be agents of grace.

1 Corinthians 15:10 says, "***by the grace of God I am what I am."*** Paul realizes that God's grace allowed him to meet the risen Christ and his sins were forgiven by God's grace. Even he becomes the apostle for the Gentiles.

6. Application

What do we learn from the story of Joseph? Even in our suffering God is with us. And God uses us as agents of grace, forgiving our enemies and saving their lives. No one likes suffering. But God uses all our trials and suffering to save others.

No one is perfect. Everyone needs forgiveness and reconciliation. Everyone needs agents of God's grace. The retired pastor, George Moore, who came to see us from MO in April 2019 is my agent of grace. Through him I learned how much God loves me. We all can be agents of grace. I would like to be like Rev. George Moore. He still visits God's people in the hospital at the age of 91.

Why are we here today? God wants to use us as agents of grace. Are we willing to be agents of God's grace?