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Genesis 50:15–21 ESV

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." ' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

3D Animation: Was Joseph an autistic genius?

When most Christians think of the biblical name Joseph, we think of the earthly father of Jesus. But there are other Josephs in the Bible, and of particular note, there is a Joseph in the Book of Genesis, who, at least according to the Bible, played a very important role in the establishment of Israel. Here's a quick overview. Joseph was one of Jacob's twelve sons. Keep in mind that Jacob was the son of Isaac and Isaac was the son of Abraham; thus, all of this is early in the story of the Israelites, and so we cannot be confident of the historicity of this part of the Bible. Jacob, Isaac's son, had a brother named Esau. We are told in the Bible that Jacob became the father of the Israelites and Esau the father of the Edomites. Although much is not known about the history of this time, we do know that the Edomites were real people; this is backed up by ancient Assyrian inscriptions and archeological

discoveries. The Edomites were the traditional enemies of the Israelites, and they battled over territory. We don't know much about their faith, but they were apparently pagans who worshiped a fertility god. During the time of Saul's kingship, and he was the first king of Israel after the age of the Judges, the Edomites attacked Israel. In a later attack, they would loot the Temple. Much later, during the second century B.C., the Edomites would be converted to Judaism, apparently somewhat forcibly. Herod the Great tried to have Jesus killed as a baby and murdered many children in the process, and his son Herod Antipas, killed John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Both of these Herods were of Edomite descent, but by this time, the Edomites identified as Jews.

So, again, Jacob, the biblical father of the Jews, and the brother of Esau, had twelve sons. Jacob loved Joseph the most of all his sons and gave him the proverbial multi-colored coat. His brothers became jealous and sold him into slavery. Joseph was taken to Egypt, where through the grace of God he became an official under the Pharaoh. Joseph the slave proceeded to flourish in Egypt. Because Joseph could interpret the Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph was made a governor. He alone predicted a famine and carefully rationed the nation's food supply, thus preventing famine. During the famine period that Joseph predicted, Jacob's other sons came to Egypt to look for food. They discover their brother, the one they had sold into slavery, there. This is from Genesis, Chapter 50:

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Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.”¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ ‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.” ‘And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.”¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

²² So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s house. Joseph lived 110 years.

²³ And Joseph saw Ephraim’s children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph’s own. ²⁴ And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” ²⁵ Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.”²⁶ So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

The other sons of Jacob meet their brother Joseph in Egypt and at first do not recognize him. When Joseph becomes convinced that his brothers are no longer evil, he forgives them and invites their families to live in Egypt where there is food. He chooses to bless those who had cast him into slavery. His dying declaration to his brothers is that God will surely deliver them from Egypt back to Israel, and he asks them to carry his bones with him when they go. These families that make their way back to Israel when the famine is over eventually become a major branch of the Israelites, the people of God. Thus, Joseph was fundamental in the formation of Israel. It all starts when he chooses grace over vengeance and then rescues his people from starvation.

Joseph is often seen as a sort of Old Testament equivalent of Jesus Christ. There are indeed many parallels between the biblical stories of Joseph and of Jesus Christ, although

some of these parallels are a bit thin. In the Bible, both are said to be beloved by their fathers. Both are envied without any true justification. Both foretell the day when they would be rulers. Both are accused of being wild dreamers. Both are said to be sent by their fathers to protect others. They are both rejected by their people and condemned to death. In the process, both are stripped of their clothing. Jesus and Joseph are both sold for silver. They both resist temptation, are falsely accused, foretell the future, provide for people who were in need, become servants, resist temptation, and reconcile people with God. So, although Christians don't focus much on the Joseph of the Old Testament, an argument can be made that he is a very important biblical figure who prefigured Jesus Christ.

But there is another side to Joseph, and before I get into this, I want to tell you a story about a student I had a handful of years ago. I was teaching a 3D modeling and animation class where students spent the semester creating animated video shorts. It was a difficult project, took a lot of time, and only a handful of students were ever able to produce truly impressive results. One of those students was from China. He sat in the front row. While most of the students listened more or less intently to me as I taught them, he spent every class working on his semester project, with his head in his notebook computer, typing and moving his mouse around at a wild pace. He never looked up at me. He never raised his hand, never spoke to another student, or even responded if I said something to him. I quickly realized that he was apparently on the autism spectrum,

someone whom I presumed had Asperger's. I have had other students in computer science who were on the autism spectrum. But this student was unique in two ways. First, in class, he absolutely never looked me in the eyes. Second, he was astonishingly gifted. He created an animation of a robot climbing up the side of an elaborate building. It was extremely realistic and complicated, and far, far more sophisticated than what other students in the class were producing. It was also his first animation project.

One day I was standing in the front of the class lecturing. He always sat in the front row, with the power cord of his machine running from his computer to the electrical socket in the wall behind me. I was walking back and forth, gesticulating, when I happened to trip on his cord. His machine went flying off his desk, tumbled onto the floor, and bounced off the carpet. I immediately stopped talking, squatted down, and picked up his computer. I checked it out and it did not seem to be damaged. What's interesting is that he did not react. He just sat there, looking down at his empty desk, with his hands frozen in the air, his mad typing suspended. I put his machine back in front of him and tried to tell him that it was okay, that he could keep working. But he didn't respond. Then another student, a young man, stood up and told me that this student was autistic. I nodded. The student who had stood up took both of the hands of the student with autism in his hands and placed them back on his keyboard. After a couple seconds, the student began working on his project again, at the same rapid pace – as if nothing had happened. I continued lecturing.

The reason I bring this student up is that there are those who theorize that Joseph from the Old Testament also had Asperger's. Now, academics love to build complex arguments about biblical characters, taking things out of Scripture and interpreting them in light of modern scientific knowledge. It's a very common thing to do, and quite frankly, I dismiss most of these arguments. So, I'm certainly not saying that I think Joseph was autistic. But here are some of the traits of Joseph that some so-called experts have said make it seem like Joseph might have had Asperger's. Most of them fall in the realm of Joseph having a lot of social challenges. There are Bible passages that some say suggest that it was difficult for him to read social cues, that he didn't understand the feelings of others, and that he had an unusual attachment to animals and inanimate objects. He had some repetitive behaviors and obsessive routines, they claim. He had his own private way of looking at the world, and had a very rigid way of looking at truth. He rarely picked up on nuances. One argument is that when Joseph first meets with the Pharaoh, the Pharaoh realizes that Joseph could be extremely valuable to Egypt, but he anticipates that Joseph will be vulnerable to being manipulated and tricked by others, so the Pharaoh takes his own signet ring and gives it to Joseph and clothes him in fine linen garments, and then personally puts a gold chain around Joseph's neck. He then gives Joseph a title, equips him with servants, and finds him a high born, very emotionally strong Egyptian wife who will be able to help him negotiate social situations. Only with all of this in place does the Pharaoh feel he can turn Joseph loose to travel around Egypt as an

important official. The way the Pharaoh accommodates Joseph is reminiscent, in an exaggerated fashion, of the way a person who is in truth very gifted but is on the autistic spectrum might well excel in life if they are only given the appropriate protections and support in life.

The point is that we all know that a certain percentage of the population – the estimate is around fifteen to twenty five percent – has some sort of substantive disability. If it is true now, it was probably true during biblical times. But there is a difference between modern people and people in the ancient world. Only in very recent times, namely in the middle of the twentieth century, did we start labeling people as having Asperger's. Autism itself didn't begin to be isolated until the beginning of the twentieth century. So, to the people of the ancient world, Joseph was just a little different than other people. The Pharaoh saw him as very useful; it was simply necessary to do a few things to make sure that nothing would stand in the way of Joseph being able to perform to his highest ability in an advanced society.

Not long ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus, and we will soon celebrate his resurrection. We might want to remember that the person who is thought to have been a forerunner of Christ, a sort of Old Testament version of Jesus, might also have been someone who had a disability that today would have labeled him by many as not employable, as someone who wouldn't be able to contribute much to society. But in truth, he was a genius, an incredibly gifted person who rose from slavery to the highest

levels of influence in one of the most powerful empires of the time. He was also a very godly man, a deeply good person who, like Christ, forgave those who wanted him dead. It's a lesson for all of us, that before we judge someone as being in some way inferior, we might think that if we just helped them out a bit, they might become one of the greatest servants of God - and thus become a powerful servant of humanity. Joseph went from being a condemned slave to being the biblical figure who put the Israelites on the path toward establishing Israel and the Jewish faith generations later.

But looking at this more broadly, we should remember that none of us are out of the running when it comes to what we can do for God and for God's people, despite whatever limitations we may feel we have. Joseph was subjected to horrific treatment by the people who should have loved and treasured him, and there are those who believe that he had a significant disability. Yet he became the forerunner of Jesus Christ and a father of the Chosen People. No matter what we think our limitations are, no matter how bad we think our place in life is, no matter what the rest of society thinks of us, we have an opportunity to use our lives to serve. One way we can do it is through this church, which has outreach programs that are out of proportion with the size of this church. Most of all, we can be confident that God has a plan for us. And we can live knowing that we are meant to serve in some useful way.

And here is something to think about, in case you think you are getting to be too old to contribute significantly. There are many people in the Bible who served God in

their advanced age. The bible makes this point in a very colorful way by giving people extremely advanced ages, perhaps to drive the point home that older folks can be useful folks. Noah was said to be 600 years-old when he built his ark, and he lived to be 950. Moses visited with God on Mt. Sinai at the age of 80, then died young, at 120. Abraham didn't even get his name Abraham, which means "father of many nations", until he was 99, and then he died relatively young at the age of 175. More realistically, the Apostle Paul was roaming the vast, dangerous roads of the Roman Empire by foot, spreading the Word until he was about 65, we think, and to the best of our knowledge, he was evangelizing until he died.

So, in sum, Joseph taught us the secret of discovering our inner gifts so that we can serve God and our church to our fullest ability. The secret was to have unwavering faith in God. And by choosing faith, Joseph also chose joy. Joseph, as a teenager, was sold into slavery by his brothers. He spent many years in prison after this. But he stayed positive, never became embittered, and eventually forgave his brothers. He might have had significant interpersonal limitations, but he rose to a position of great trust and great power. If he was indeed autistic, then he also taught us the importance of supporting others in their struggle to serve and to discover their true skills.

Joseph taught us that no matter what happens to us, no matter what our limitations might be, if we remain forgiving and faithful, we will find ourselves living in joy - and we will find ourselves serving God in magnificent ways. Joseph became a father of

God's Chosen People, and his bones were eventually brought to the promised land by his descendants. We must remember that by living with forgiveness and faith, we can live in the Kingdom of God now and forever - and we can bring others into that kingdom.

Now, you may be wondering what came of my student with autism. I don't know what he did with his life after he finished my class. But I can tell you that at the end of the semester, everyone presented their projects live in class. Another student presented the project of the student who apparently had autism while he sat there silently. Later, I approached him in the hallway. I told him that he had done beautiful work, that he was very gifted and that it was an honor to have had him in my class. I didn't expect him to thank me for what I said. I figured he would just stand there and then when I had stopped talking, he would walk away. But what he did was, for the very first time, look me directly in the face for just a second or so, and he nodded very slightly. Then he walked away.