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## God Is: Active and Available

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TEXT: Genesis 45:1-11 (ESV)

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

So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 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. 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 tarry. You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.’

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Dear friends,

Have you ever had something happen in your life and when you look back at what led up to it, you saw God's hand at work? We have a story like that before us today: the story of Joseph. On the surface, it's a family story; a story about dreams and a "Technicolor Dreamcoat", as Andrew Lloyd Webber saw. But it's much bigger than that. It's a God story: God at work, preserving, protecting, providing for his own. It's also a very long story. It covers 13 chapters of Genesis. So instead of reading it, which our time constraints won't allow, I'm going to tell you an abridged version of the story of Joseph and God. We're introduced to Joseph when he's a teenager of 17. Son of Jacob, also called Israel. Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. He showed him all kinds of favoritism over the others, even had a special coat of many colors made only for Joseph. Of course, you can imagine Joseph was hated by his brothers, not only for his favoritism, though, but also for his tattling on them when they did wrong. And worst of all, for his telling them about his grandiose dreams of greatness with them bowing down before him someday. They seethed with hate. One day their hatred got the best of them, and they grabbed Joseph and sold him as a slave to some Ishmaelite traders headed to Egypt. They then went home and told their dad that a wild animal had killed their brother. Their father was devastated, he never got over this.

In the meantime, down in Egypt, Joseph was sold to be a servant to a rich man named Potiphar, who is captain of the guard for the pharaoh, the king. Scripture tells us that the Lord was with Joseph, and so he proved to be a real blessing to Potiphar. In fact, Joseph ended up being promoted by Potiphar to run the whole estate for him. Joseph's future looked bright. But did I mention that Joseph was very handsome? Oh, he was, and Potiphar's wife noticed that. One day when her husband was gone, she attempted to seduce Joseph. But knowing that this was wrong in God's sight, he said "no" and escaped from her, but he left behind his coat as he ran. She was so angry at this rejection, she took revenge on Joseph by telling her husband that this Joseph tried to sexually assault her. She held up his coat as proof Potiphar had Joseph thrown into pharaoh's prison, but again we're told that the Lord was with Joseph. Soon the warden saw this young man was gifted and he made him his assistant to oversee the prison.

It just so happened that one day the pharaoh got angry with his chief bearer and his chief baker over some offense they'd done against him, and so he had them thrown into the prison where Joseph was confined and Joseph just so happened to be put in charge of watching over them. One night, both men had strange dreams – dreams were taken seriously back then. They were talking to one another about them in the morning,

looking quite disturbed. Joseph asked them why they were looking so troubled, and they told him: they'd had these dreams and they couldn't figure out their meaning. Joseph said, "Do not interpretations come from God? Please tell them to me." So they told Joseph. First he listened to the cup bearer's dream, and told him that he would soon be released and restored to his cup-bearing position in the pharaoh's court. He also asked him to talk with Pharaoh about getting Joseph out of prison. The Bakers said, "Hey, listen to mine now." Joseph listened to his and told him that he would soon be executed by hanging. Sure enough, just as Joseph said three days later, the baker was executed. The cup bearer was released from prison and restored to his old job. But unfortunately for Joseph, this cup bearer forgot about him.

Things looked rather bleak for Joseph, but still the Lord was with Joseph. Two years passed and it just so happened that the pharaoh himself had strange dreams that disturbed him and no one in the land could interpret them. The chief cup bearer then remembered Joseph and his abilities to interpret dreams, and he told Pharaoh about Joseph, and he was brought to the pharaoh who questioned him about his abilities to interpret dreams. And Joseph explained this gift was from his God. He then asked the pharaoh to tell him his dreams. The Pharaoh told him two dreams: seven plump cows being devoured by seven thin cows, and then seven ears of good grain swallowed up by seven ears of blighted grain. Joseph said, "This is really one message: that there will be seven years of bumper crops, followed by seven years of drought and famine over all the land. And that pharaoh had better get ready for this famine now, while things were looking good." He had to appoint a discerning and wise man said set him up over the whole land of Egypt to run some sort of grain storage program. Lo and behold, who do you suppose the pharaoh picked to run this program? Joseph. In fact, he made him second in command over all Egypt. A slave at 17 now has become vice president by age 30. Things happened just as Joseph said: seven years of plenty, then the famine came not only in Egypt but over all the Earth. But in Egypt, there was much grain in the storehouses for the Egyptians. There was so much grain. In fact, that word got out to other nations around them who were not prepared, and people came flooding into Egypt to buy grain. The economy boomed. Joseph was on the front lines, overseeing the distribution of grain. He was running the whole thing. He is a success story.

Now, you might think that's the end of the story, but it's not – there's more. You see, back in Canaan, the Promised Land, where Joseph's from, the famine has put Joseph's family in dire straits. They're out of food. And when word got to them that Egypt had

grain to sell, Joseph's father, Jacob, sent all but one of the sons, the youngest one named Benjamin, down to Egypt to buy food and bring it back home in order to survive this famine. Joseph's brothers go. Now the story takes an interesting twist: when they arrived in Egypt, they went to one of the storehouses of grain, and Joseph just so happened to be there that day, and he recognized them as they stood in line to buy grain. And he confronted them. They didn't recognize him, it had been over 20 years. He played a game with them, tricked them, rattled their cages. He accused them of being spies and had them taken into custody for three days. They pleaded with him and explained to him about who they were, about their dad back in Canaan, and then the little brother who was waiting for them to bring grain home. But Joseph acted like he didn't believe what they were telling him, and he took one of the brothers, Simeon, back into custody, and sent the others home with grain and a demand that the youngest brother be brought back to him in Egypt. And he also played another trick on them. He had money stuffed into the grain sacks as well without them knowing it. When they discovered that money, they said, "Oh, no, where did that come from? Now that guy will think we're dishonest liars." When they got home, they explained to their father what had happened and what they were commanded to do: bring Benjamin back with them to Egypt in order to get Simeon set free. Of course, Jacob's distraught and he's lost another son. He's sure Simeon was dead, so he refused to send any of them back with Benjamin – losing two sons was enough. He refused to take a chance of losing another boy.

But the famine got worse, and they ran out of grain. Jacob's forced to send them all back with Benjamin to Egypt. Benjamin and his brothers arrived in Egypt, and Joseph freed Simeon and actually welcomed the brothers to have dinner with him at his house. They couldn't believe it. But Joseph played another trick on them there. He had one of his employees hide Joseph's valuable silver cup in Benjamin's grain sack while they were off eating in another room. The brothers got up the next day, bought their grain and headed back home with full bags. And they were just outside of town when Joseph had them detained and brought back. He accused them of stealing his silver cup from him and they denied it. So they went through the bags. And of course, it was found in Benjamin's bag. The brothers wailed sorrowfully. They bowed down before Joseph and pleaded for mercy, just like his dream. Joseph arrested Benjamin, told him he is going to keep him as a servant. Judah, one of the brothers, knew that he would this would kill his dad, so he pleaded with Joseph to let Judah take Benjamin's place so that his father's heart would not be broken by the loss of the youngest. At this point, though, Joseph

couldn't take it anymore. He broke down crying and he revealed to them who he really was. "I'm your brother, Joseph. Is my father really alive?" The brothers, of course, were afraid when they realized this was Joseph who they sold into slavery. What was going to happen to them? He could have them killed or thrown into prison for the evil they had done to him, and they wouldn't blame him.

But Joseph didn't do that, did he? You might wonder: why didn't he get his revenge? Listen to what he told them:

Don't be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here. For God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and yet there are another five in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on Earth and to keep a life for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me down here, but God.

Wow. Somehow, somewhere along the way, God had opened Joseph's eyes to see the big picture: that God had brought all this about so that his people would be saved. So Joseph sent them home to get their father, Jacob, and return with him. And when they got back to Egypt, the family was given choice land in Egypt for their herds and were well-taken care of. When Jacob eventually died, the brothers were afraid Joseph was going to take revenge against them, but he said, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 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." And Jacob's family, Abraham's descendants, Joseph and the brothers, settled in and were fruitful and multiplied and filled the land of Egypt.

I see two wonderful takeaways that emerge for us as children of God. First of all, that God is active. God was quietly at work in the details behind the scenes: it just so happened God was with keeping his salvation plan, moving along, saving Abraham's descendants from eventual extinction, from famine. This is not a hands-off God that we worship. And as I consider the words of Joseph: "You meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring about that many should be kept alive," I can't help but be reminded of the cross of Jesus Christ. Sinful man meant it for evil, didn't he? But God meant it for good to save many. His death gave us the greatest freedom we can have. We talk about freedom and the Fourth of July, but his death gave us the greatest freedom: freedom from sin and death and the power of the devil. And because he lives, we shall live forever. Like in the Joseph story, God was working out his salvation plan

all along in the cross. And as I read this Joseph story, I can't help but think about the Apostle Paul's reassuring words to early Christians who are going through hard times in Rome. He says, "And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called, according to his purposes."

Jim Lemberg, in his book *Old Stories for a New Time*, shares a memory regarding this truth. He writes,

Long ago I heard an agent pastor preach a sermon about God's guidance. He recalled that as a boy, he once sat on the floor looking up at the bottom side of an embroidery hoop upon which his mother was sewing. Viewed from underneath, the whole thing appeared to be a mess with knots and brakes, twists, turns, threads going this way and that. But when his mother picked him up and he viewed the hoop from the top, he saw how all the threads were woven into a beautiful pattern. And so said this pastor, "It is with God in our lives. He can pick up the breaks, the twists, and we them into a pattern with meaning and even beauty."

The other great takeaway from this Joseph story is: God is available. We see the withness of God with Joseph, as God used him. God never left him. And as God's son or daughter through Christ, hear this and trust it: he'll never leave you either. You're never alone. We follow one referred to as Emmanuel: God with us, Jesus. He's promised to be with us no matter what the circumstances, and that nothing can separate us from his love. Pastor Tim Keller, who's one of my favorite writers and a leading spokesman for the Christian faith, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer last year. I heard him talk about his experience in an interview. He said, "All of my life I've been telling people, 'Is God's will good or not?' On the first day of my cancer diagnosis, my teaching took on a more tangible meaning for me." He then went on to explain,

We all can say that God is available experientially, but it is not until you realize you're not going to get through a day unless you experience God by seeking him in prayer and seeking his presence that you really understand this truth. And then you realize, "oh my goodness, he is there and he's real." Communion with him is really available far more often than I would have ever thought.

Now, I don't know what you might be going through right now, but what I do know from this story today and from Tim Keller and from the promises of Christ, God really is with you. So may these truths about our God that we've learned today encourage you

to trust him and call upon him always as you face the ups and downs of life. Put your faith and hope in him. Let's pray:

*Almighty God and father, use this story of Joseph today to build our faith. And may you give us strength and encouragement to turn to you always knowing that you love us and are there. Thank you for being active and available in our lives. Amen.*