

# *The Slow Burn of Forgiveness: St. Joseph Preaches Lives Forgiveness*

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On the one hand, in our present moment, forgiveness seems like *the most impossible of things*. There is so much to forgive, after all, likely too much. It seems that anywhere—everywhere!—one looks, there is offense of one sort or another, and if you don't see it yourself, someone will happily (or angrily) point it out to you. Forgiveness feels impossible in the face of mountain range upon mountain range of wrongdoing, whether it is malevolent or inadvertent, malicious or truly naïve. There's room for all of that and more in what might appropriately be called the Swiss Alps of Sin.

On the other hand, forgiveness seems like *the most important of things* right now. True, there is much to forgive—more than one can stomach—but forgiveness seems to be an imperative if there is to be any movement forward of any sort, let alone reconciliation. Indeed, it may be that forgiveness is the only thing that can prevent an already individualized, technologized, and violent society from moving into permanently warring factions, whether the weapons of choice be of the semiautomatic or social media variety.

The sheer amount of what needs forgiveness is what makes it so impossible but also so important, so incredible to envision but also so imperative to enact. If we are honest, the latter halves of these dyads—the importance and necessity of forgiveness—seem outweighed by the former: the impossibility and incredulity. Our worlds seem already engaged in World War III+, after all: the cuts are too deep, the wounds too profound (and intergenerational) to be healed, the fissures too wide to be bridged. And so forgiveness feels—maybe even *is*—unimaginable. Outrage is the order of the day. At our most sober, least-defensive moments, we understand why that is the case, why indignation, not generosity, is the default option of so many of our friends, let alone our enemies.

The preacher faces a real conundrum at this point: forgiveness is, on one hand, nonnegotiable, and on the other, incomprehensible. Those guilty of wrongdoing (that would be *all* of us in one form or another, though certainly not in the same form or to the same degree) are often recalcitrant or just plain ignorant about their (our) misdeeds. Neither excuse is acceptable. Those who have been aggrieved (that, too, would be *all* of us in one form or another, though certainly not in the same form or to the same degree) are often too hurt to imagine reconciliation, certainly no quick one, not without payback of some sort—that, too, makes sense to us in our least defensive moments. Whatever the case, however the matter is parsed or filleted, preachers now face *the impossible necessity of forgiveness*. How might, or rather, how *must*, we preach forgiveness when it is so essential and simultaneously unimaginable?

- The good news is that preachers make their living navigating sticky problems and tricky tasks, though this one may be among the most imposing we have ever faced. In this particular case, the matter at hand is central to Christian faith and practice. If

forgiveness proves unattainable, the Christian faith loses all credibility. The stakes are high.

- The good news is that preachers have a vast host of resources at their disposal when it comes to forgiveness. Forgiveness is central to Christian faith and practice because it is central to Scripture. The vast host of resources begins (if not ends), ultimately, with the Bible, a word that is technically plural (*the books*) since what Scripture offers us is a literary anthology. Said differently, the Bible is a toolbox full of implements just right for this task with others spot on for that task—including the task(s) of forgiveness. The resources run deep.

There is obviously not space here to explore the full range of “forgiveness tools” in Scripture, let alone across the full sweep of Christian theology.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I propose to look at one biblical account, the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50, to see what it might teach us about forgiveness. It is my contention that this unit—among the most dramatic in all of Scripture—reinforces the hard facts of forgiveness, including its seeming impossibility, but also, and finally, how forgiveness may be enacted and achieved.<sup>2</sup> Along the way, the Joseph story offers insights into forgiveness, both its process and, belatedly, its preaching. Advance warning: neither will be easy.

### *Joseph: Much to Forgive (Genesis 37-41)*

We do not read very far before we encounter troubles in “the story of the family of Jacob” (37:2a). Joseph is 17 years old but not yet above tattling on his older brothers (37:2b-c)—though the nature of his “bad report” about them to his father goes unspecified. Already, Genesis has conveyed a great deal of information: the problem of forgiveness, in this case, is very much a familial one, even a fraternal one—one made yet more complex by a mixed family (none of his older brothers is a full brother). Of course the situation also involves the parents, which is the focus of the next verse, where we hear, with no trace of deception, that Jacob “loved Joseph more than any other of his children” (37:3a). This favoritism is concretely manifested and paraded about for all to see in the so-called “coat of many colors” (37:3b; 23). Whatever the precise nature of this phrase (which is unclear),<sup>3</sup> the situation is crystal clear to the brothers. They see what is going on, that Joseph is favored, which leads to their hatred of him, and another fact—namely, that they simply “could not speak peaceably to him” (37:4).

All of this is all too familiar to our own experiences with families, whether our own or others’. Things get worse when young Joseph has a dream about his brothers that makes them hate him “even more”—a point that is underscored twice (37:5, 8). The last verse is emphatic in other ways, too, beyond the repetition. “So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words,” it reports. Still further, his brothers are said to be jealous of him (v. 11a). This is a fragile and multifaceted situation involving Joseph’s *words* (v. 2) and his *dreams* (vv. 6-7), but also his father’s *favoritism* (v. 3) and his brother’s hatred and jealousy. This is the kind of situation that is likely to erupt.

But before it does, Joseph dreams again and shares the latest installment with his parents, now implicated in his grandiosity. Jacob isn’t impressed with the vision and rebukes Joseph in terms not unlike his brothers (cf. v. 10 with v. 8). Even so, much like Mary later, his father “kept the matter in mind” (v. 11b; cf. Luke 2:19, 51).

This brief delay segues directly into the next episode where Joseph’s brothers spy

him coming to them from afar—on a mission from his father no less!—and “conspire to kill him” (Gen 37:18). The escalation is shocking as is the emotional distance evident in their speech: this is no longer their brother, Joseph. Instead, “Here comes *this dreamer*...let’s kill him...and we will see what becomes of his dreams” (vv. 19-20). It is only Reuben’s intercession that saves Joseph’s life. Joseph is stripped of his in-your-face robe and thrown into an empty pit. The brothers, remarkably, then sit down for a meal: betrayal is taxing work! If Joseph’s braggadocio is off-putting, their callousness is astonishing. Judah comes up with a new idea, quickly seized upon by the rest, to sell their (half-)brother, recognized as their “own flesh” (!), into slavery (v. 27). Human trafficking is horrific; human trafficking of a teenager who is your own sibling is another level of horror.

This, then, is the opening and terribly revealing vignette about Joseph and his brothers. In brief, there is much to forgive here, and on more than one side, beginning with Joseph. Sure he is young and certain things lie outside of his control—things like his birth order, his father’s feelings, his dreams. But some things *are* within his control: what he says *about* his brothers and what he says *to* his brothers (and his parents). Joseph, that is, isn’t altogether innocent, but he’s also not altogether guilty either. Things are usually muddier than that, though the narrative seems to suggest he is more innocent than guilty, even if not yet very shrewd; he’s only 17 after all! What lies completely outside of Joseph’s control, regardless, is his brothers: how they react to him, and especially how they react to his relationship with others, particularly in this case, his father. Joseph cannot control his brothers’ hate or their jealousy, which eventuates in the worst of designs: murder (only narrowly avoided), human trafficking, and deception of an aggrieved father. Whatever debts Joseph may have incurred in his more annoying moments pale in comparison to what his brothers have done to him. His fraternal abuse becomes a pattern as he goes from one trafficker to another, ending up enslaved in Egypt (v. 36; 37:1).

#### *Joseph: Slow to Forgive (Genesis 42-44)*

Much happens to Joseph during this time needn’t detain us here. Instead, to continue our investigation of this story’s pertinence to forgiveness, we may proceed to the next major turning point, which is when Joseph’s family back in “Canaan-land” experiences a famine and the brothers must come to Egypt in search of food (42:1-5). Joseph recognizes them immediately (v. 7a), but instead of revealing himself, “he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them” (v. 7b).

Several things are worth reflecting on here. First and foremost, Joseph turns out to have been right: his brothers do indeed gather around him and bow down to him, exactly as his dream prefigured (v. 6; cf. 37:7). The brothers hated Joseph for that dream, but it comes about quite irrespective of their dislike for it (or for him). Joseph does indeed now “reign over” and “have dominion” over them (see 37:8). The brothers don’t know that yet, of course, because unlike Joseph, they don’t remember their brother (42:8). In fact, one may wonder if the brothers could have recalled any of Joseph’s youthful affronts which pale in comparison to their horrendous acts. Joseph’s memory, regardless, is *long*; that is how it often is with those who have been deeply wronged. They seldom if ever forget. So Joseph not only recognizes his brothers, despite the many years that have passed, but he also remembers his dreams (v. 9). The interface of those two things, his brothers and his dreams, were what put Joseph

where he now sits in Egypt, outside the family, thanks to his brothers. The question at hand is, given where he now sits—in *Egypt*, yes, but also in *power*—what will he do with the interface come back around? What will be the outcome of the equation “his brothers + his dreams” now that it is in his hands, not theirs?

Second, the text moves immediately from Joseph’s memory to his harsh treatment of his brothers, accusing them of espionage.<sup>4</sup> As is so often the case with Hebrew narrative, we don’t know what is going on in Joseph’s mind at this point.<sup>5</sup> The narrator doesn’t specify any of that, and so preachers should beware of doing too much of it themselves.<sup>6</sup> What *is* clear is that once the brothers mention their youngest brother Benjamin, though not by name—who is also Joseph’s only full brother by his mother Rachel—his harsh treatment turns quickly into an elaborate scheme to get Benjamin to Egypt (vv. 15-16, 18-20).

Third, the brothers may have forgotten what Joseph did to them, but they haven’t forgotten what they did to Joseph. At first they report only obliquely and euphemistically that one of their brothers “is no more” (v. 13). But then, after a few days in prison (v. 17), they are ready to face the facts: “we are guilty for what we did to our brother” (v. 21; CEB), they say, and they admit that they did not listen to Joseph’s anguish and pleading—two details absent from Genesis 37 but certainly imaginable from that account. Unbeknownst to the brothers, Joseph can understand (v. 23) every word they are saying. He is overcome by it and must turn away because he cannot control his emotions (v. 24). When he has regained his composure, he selects Simeon (a name derived from the same verb used in vv. 21 and 23) to remain in prison while the rest return to Canaan for Benjamin.

Fourth, there is no dodging the fact that Joseph puts his brothers through a series of harrowing experiences once they show up at his feet. Much takes place here involving harsh words, political accusations, and imprisonment, not to mention a trip to and back from Canaan (42:26-43:34)—all of it replete with high drama, and all of it arranged by Joseph. There can be little doubt that Joseph’s desire to see his youngest brother could have been accomplished more quickly. The many steps, tests, and machinations Joseph orchestrates may be seen as no small instance of payback on his part. Joseph, or so it seems, is taking his sweet time exacting some sweet revenge on his treacherous brothers. And why not? It seems long overdue. Sometimes, after all, when there is much to forgive, it feels like simply *too much*. Other options present themselves in such a scenario, options that are far less forgiving.

We mustn’t forget what has happened to Joseph *since* his enslavement and arrival in Egypt. In spite of these circumstances, or despite them, Genesis repeatedly asserts that God “was with” Joseph during this time (39:2a, 3a, 21a, 23a)—a notice that usually introduces a comment about Joseph meeting with some sort of success (39:2b, 3b, 21b, 23b). In fact, God’s presence with Joseph is something of an empirical fact: even non-Israelites like Potiphar and Pharaoh are aware of it (39:3; 41:38). This situation is not lost on Joseph, either, who gives credit where credit is due (41:16). What has happened to Joseph in the meantime, therefore, is no small degree of maturation. Still further, given the mention of God in these events, we might say that here is a case of *theological maturation*, perhaps even *growth in grace*. Joseph could easily have ended up embittered and in prison forever, after all. But he didn’t. The low point in the pit turned out to be just the first of several trying times, but Joseph—because of God—has come through many dangers, toils, and snares.

But all of that hangs in the balance once the brothers arrive. Joseph has been strategically “with God,” and God has been helpfully “with him” ever since he left his brothers’ company. But here is a new test, perhaps the worst he has faced—one not entirely unlike Genesis 22, another climactic trial of faith that is equally family-centered. Given all that has happened, the history and the hard feelings, it is easy to see Joseph’s response to his brothers as nothing more than a “three-chapter assault” on them.<sup>7</sup> Family often brings out the worst in us; it may be the ultimate testing ground of forgiveness. But Joseph has come a long way from that first pit and his brothers’ mistreatment of him. So, instead of imagining that the theologically-mature, wise, and virtuous Joseph loses all of the above qualities in what takes place in these three chapters, perhaps we would do better to find here a story about Joseph shifting into low gear as he starts heading up the Swiss Alps of Sin. The Mount of Filial Treachery may be the hardest to summit, and if and when he gets there, it surely won’t be because it was fast or easy.

So, yes, Joseph is likely *in process* in these chapters: forgiveness of the most atrocious, most difficult wrongs can be interminably slow,<sup>8</sup> a slow burning in our souls that we wish would go one way or the other and be over as soon as possible: full forgiveness forever or a resignation to eternal estrangement. Joseph’s way is the tricky middle way—for him *and* for his brothers, since it may be that Joseph’s elaborate tests may be a way for him to gauge if they, too, like he himself, have changed. They didn’t experience the pit, but have they nevertheless also gained wisdom and virtue? Have they, too, matured theologically? Their confessions in jail seem to suggest as much (42:21-22); no wonder Joseph is overcome with emotion even if he is not yet ready to make full amends.

#### *Joseph: Abounding in Steadfast Love (Genesis 45-50)*

That comes later, and in more than one installment. Full amends are only serially, which is to say, partially achieved in process because (once again) the deepest forgiveness is a slow burn. Genesis 43 recounts the return of the brothers to Egypt, this time with Benjamin, much to Jacob’s distress (see 42:29-38; 43:13-14), but much to Joseph’s joy. He is, again, overcome with emotion when he sees his youngest brother (43:30). But Joseph’s forgiveness engine isn’t yet out of low gear: he has one more test in mind, even worse than the one with Simeon. This time he hatches a plan to imprison Benjamin (44:1-17). The plan accomplishes its purpose, or at least it leads to an outcome that is revealing even if it isn’t the one Joseph originally envisioned or intended. Judah intercedes on behalf of Benjamin. Judah reprises an earlier role here: back in Genesis 37, he had interceded for Joseph, but that initial outing was of dubious merit. It came only after Reuben, who deserves the credit for sparing Joseph’s life. Judah agrees but is far more pragmatic, downright fiscal: no profit accompanies Joseph’s death, he notes (37:26). And, since profit is clearly on his mind, Judah immediately suggests selling Joseph, which is exactly what they do for twenty pieces of silver (37:27).

But that was a long time ago. Judah has changed—perhaps by learning, already back in Genesis 38, that he can be wrong and that other people like Tamar are “more righteous” (38:26; CEB). Judah no longer thinks of enslavement, but *being enslaved*, no longer considers profit, but *loss*: the loss to Jacob should Benjamin not return, but also the loss he is willing to incur himself to prevent that from happening. He offers

himself, vicariously, as Joseph's prisoner in Benjamin's stead. Judah has matured; he has grown in grace. He is now willing to take a place in the pit himself, voluntarily. No wonder Joseph is overcome yet again and this time gives in, finally revealing himself to his brothers who are "dumfounded" (45:3, NJPSV). The brothers are sufficiently stupefied that Joseph has to repeat his self-revelation again, this time adding a reference to the 800-lb. gorilla which had been present but which is suddenly visible to everyone in the room: "I am your brother, Joseph, *whom you sold into Egypt*" (v. 4). Given this added detail, perhaps what the brothers felt already in Joseph's first revelation, was not confusion but something more like dismay (NRSV) or even terror (CEB). But no matter: Joseph has finally shifted his forgiveness out of low gear. At this point, right after acknowledging the bone of contention, "*whom you sold to Egypt*"—a phrase that indexes the mountain of wrongdoing the brothers are responsible for—Joseph crests the summit. He comforts his brothers, telling them to not be distressed (presumably with reference to him) and not to be angry with themselves (obviously with reference to them), quickly adding a stunning theological claim: it was *God* who *sent* him ahead of his brothers *to save lives* (v. 5). The brothers are apparently still speechless because Joseph repeats the claim, with a remarkable and overwhelming shift of attention from the brothers' *selling* to a matter of *sending*—mission—that is overwhelmingly God's doing and for good:

whom *you* sold (v. 4)  
because *you* sold me (v. 5a)

*God* sent me *to preserve* (v. 5b)  
*God* sent me *to preserve* (v. 7)  
not *you* who sent me, but *God* (v. 8)

After this, and some more important details (vv. 9-13), Genesis reports that Joseph hugged Benjamin and wept with him, before kissing all his brothers and weeping with them too. Then, "after that, his brothers talked with him," something that they haven't done, as brothers, since he was seventeen years old and down in the pit waiting to be sold. But Joseph isn't done: he gives his siblings gifts and provisions, and, since he is wise with a wisdom that can only come from forgiveness, he urges them not to quarrel as they return to Canaan to fetch Jacob (v. 24). Let bygones be bygones, in other words. If the one who has been offended is no longer keeping score, the offenders don't need to do that either.

At this point, things seem to have reached a happy conclusion. Joseph is now on the downslope and coasting. But of course such a judgment is premature. There is more than one mountain in the Swiss Alps of Sin. Once again, forgiveness feels impossible and thus too good to be true even when we have experienced it in some fashion. And so it is that after Jacob's death (49:33), the brothers worry that their father was the only thing holding this family together. They are concerned that Joseph bears a grudge and is ready, now, finally to pay them back in full (50:15). They concoct their own ruse, saying that it was Jacob's last wish to beg forgiveness for their *crime* (twice) and the *wrong* they did in *harming* him (50:17). That the verse is overloaded with confession is readily apparent even in English. What is not apparent in English is how the brothers' speech makes strategic use of prayer language, especially via

the unusual Hebrew particle *ānnā*, which is otherwise used only in direct prayer to God (Exod 32:31; 2 Kgs 20:3; Isa 38:3; Jonah 1:14; 4:2; Pss 116:4, 16; 118:25; Dan 9:4; Neh 1:5, 11). Joseph knows what they are doing and weeps once more (50:18). This is another revelation, not of Joseph to his brothers but of his brothers to him, in which they reveal how their contrition is mixed up with deep fear and real concern over painful payback. That is how it so often is, even with (in)sincere repentance. Offended parties are often hurt by abuse of power (crime, wrong, harm). When forgiveness is on the table, suddenly the tables are turned, and the wronged hold all the power, even if it is only the power to give or withhold forgiveness; the offenders are rightly worried, perhaps feeling disempowered for the first time in their lives (or at least in this relationship or situation). The Joseph story, as well as the resurrected Christ's words to the apostles in John 20:23, suggests that the power to forgive (or not) is among the greatest that exists.

The brothers, upset and worried as they are, understandably misread Joseph's tears. They up the ante: "we are your slaves," they say. Like Judah back in chapter 45, all of them are now willing to face the very same fate they subjected Joseph to so long ago.

But Joseph knows that he isn't God—they shouldn't be praying to him (50:19)! Nevertheless Joseph behaves very much like God, the Lord who abounds in steadfast love and forgiveness (see Exod 34:6-7a), by offering the brothers reassurance in the form of a phrase that is often used in oracles of divine salvation. "Do not fear," Joseph says, and repeats it for good measure (50:19, 21; cf., e.g., Exod 14:13; Num 14:9; Deut 20:3; 31:6; Josh 10:25). In between these two assurances, he repeats his hard-won theological interpretation about all that has transpired between him and his brothers:

*you intended harm*  
*God intended good*  
*to preserve numerous people* (50:20).

The drama of Joseph and his brothers comes to a conclusion on two notes. Joseph's last word is his promise to provide for his brothers and "your little ones" (*tappēkem*; 50:21a). The mention of toddlers here is striking since it is later generations that so often bear (and perpetuate) the ill-effects of their predecessors' *lack* of reconciliation. Joseph's forgiveness nips all that in the bud—or in diapers. The bad blood stops with this generation, not the next one. Indeed, there is no bad blood even now in this generation, between the twelve sons of Israel. For this reason the final note comes when the narrator explicitly names what Joseph is doing, in the process providing language for what Joseph did earlier in chapter 45: he is *reassuring* his brothers and *speaking kindly* to them (50:21b). This could also be translated as "Joseph comforted them and spoke to their hearts." This is intimate language, altogether suitable and indicative of family at its best—a family that has also experienced the worst.

### *On Preaching and Living Forgiveness*

What can be learned from St. Joseph, patron saint of forgiveness? Much and in every way. The head of the list is that forgiveness is difficult. We must never be trite about that, especially in the pulpit. It may take many, many years before forgiveness

is slowly, serially achieved—and even once a place of forgiveness is reached, it may need repetition, reinforcement, and re-assuring at key junctures.

One of the central ways Genesis underscores how difficult forgiveness is to achieve is by placing the issue squarely within the family, even siblings. Despite what Christian “family friendly” media might suggest, families are not always wonderful places of safety and strength. They can also be places where forgiveness feels—and truly *is!*—impossible. But with God all things are possible. So it is that Genesis also reveals that forgiveness is achievable after all and also that it is necessary, to preserve life within the family, its next generation(s), and indeed many, many others (45:5b, 7; 50:20). It would seem that forgiveness in close quarters is practice for forgiveness in larger arenas. Both will be difficult, the former no less than the latter. Be that as it may, forgiveness at close range is a foretaste of and perhaps necessary prelude for any sort of forgiveness at longer range. We may believe forgiveness is necessary, but it still feels impossible. Perhaps one way forward is to attempt it first and foremost in smaller venues, in more limited circumstances. Then again even the smallest of stones can create expansive ripples in a very large pond.

Beyond its familial setting, Joseph’s story shows other ways that forgiveness, if and when achieved, will be hard—and in more than one way. The prompting need for forgiveness is itself hard, always unpleasant. No one *wants* to be wronged, whether in large or small ways. Subsequent to the offense, there may be a lot (years!) of *working through*, on the part of both the wronged and the one(s) who has wronged. The former may put the latter through some paces (cf. Gal 6:1). The latter may have some things to prove! But the former, too, may have some things to learn. Either way, low gear is the only way to surmount the highest of mountain ascents.

It is of great importance to observe that what St. Joseph the Wronged—the one cast into a pit and sold as a slave—comes to learn is a profoundly theological interpretation of what has been done to him *and* how he has come through it on the other side. Joseph’s statements of divine providence are justly famous, but they are precisely that: *his* statements. They are not, interestingly enough, statements made by the narrator, who is not shy about noting God’s presence with Joseph; neither are these statements made by God. Instead, Joseph’s assertions regarding God’s designs in 45:5, 7, 9; and 50:20 are decidedly his own. On the one hand, perhaps that means we shouldn’t make too much of these statements in constructing some larger theology of God’s sovereignty. On the other hand, in making these claims, one can see St. Joseph once again functioning as a privileged interpreter of God’s acts and ways as he did so effectively with Pharaoh’s dreams. Indeed, Joseph may, at the very end of Genesis, be the best example of what it means to be in the image of God (*imago Dei*) because he *images* God.<sup>9</sup> Unlike another violent brotherly exchange in another (the very first!) family, Joseph’s actions don’t end in fratricide, but in forgiveness.<sup>10</sup> In fact, he proves remarkably like God vis-à-vis Cain by providing for the wrongdoer(s) and by choosing another, non-violent way.<sup>11</sup> The point, regardless, is that those who find themselves wronged and now in a place to forgive (or withhold) may very well need a theological interpretation or theological reason to do so. That may be as simple as the idea that it is a divine command to forgive (see, e.g., Matt 18:21-22, 35; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37; 17:3-4; cf. Matt 6:12, 14-15; Luke 11:4) or that we who recite the Creeds confess that we believe “in the forgiveness of sins.” Alternatively, following Joseph’s lead, the theological rationale may be considerably more elaborate than

that. Whatever the case, it is important that the wronged come to such theological interpretations *themselves*. We must not impose it on them cavalierly, especially if “we” are the ones who have done them wrong! Whatever the case may be, the Joseph story shows how important it is to put *wrongdoing and forgiveness* within a larger theological framework, one that may explain in some mysterious fashion what has gone wrong (and why), which may also be why forgiveness may now be extended.

Finally, Genesis shows that not only is forgiveness possible—imaginable after all; Genesis also shows how necessary it is. The story of Cain and Abel, and somewhat later, that of Jacob and Esau, show how truly dangerous human relationships can be. Joseph’s forgiveness takes a markedly different route. If he hadn’t forgiven his brothers, all would have been lost. The story of Jacob’s family could have been ended with a few easy strokes of an Egyptian sword. St. Joseph chose the better way.

### Notes

1 Among others, mention should be made of L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

2 Some of what follows depends on prior work: see Brent A. Strawn, “From *Imago* to *Imagines*: The Image(s) of God in Genesis,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Genesis* (ed. Bill T. Arnold; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); idem, *The Old Testament: A Concise Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 47; and idem, “Genesis 45:3-11, 15, Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (Commentary 1),” in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Epiphany* (eds. Joel B. Green et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 255-57. Preachers will find excellent resources for the preaching task in the following treatments of Genesis (in chronological order): Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 288-380; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37-50: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), esp. 573-615; Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 311-89; Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Genesis 25B-50* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Hellwys, 2020), 243-76; and Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 285-308.

3 See Arnold, *Genesis*, 318-19; Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 37. The point seems to be that the robe sets Joseph apart, in part, perhaps, because it is a luxury item—one which his other, hard-working siblings wouldn’t be able to enjoy.

4 Joseph twice accuses them of attempting “to see the nakedness [*erwäh*] of the land” (42:9, 12). The phrasing is odd, with *erwäh* occurring elsewhere in Genesis only in the strange incident recounted in 9:22-23. “The nakedness of the land” is clearly a military designation of some sort, meant to indicate Egypt’s vulnerability (cf. Isa 20:4; Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 108), but one wonders if there is an echo here back to Joseph’s own mistreatment since he was “stripped” of his robe, since that verb appears to imply Joseph’s nakedness in the pit (cf. Lev 6:14; 16:23; Ezek 26:16; 44:19).

5 For the typical sparseness of Hebrew narrative, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (rev. ed.; New York: Basic, 2011).

6 If (or more likely when) preachers *do* engage in some of this, they should consider “subjunctivizing” it, adding appropriate hypotheticals or modals: “*perhaps* Joseph thought...”; “I *wonder* if Joseph considered...”; “Joseph *may* have felt...” The force may be lost on many listeners, but such formulations make clear that the preacher’s “gap-filling” is not the same as what the biblical text *actually* says (or does *not* say).

7 John C. Holbert, “Genesis 45:2-11, 15,” in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Old Testament and Acts* (ed. Roger E. Van Harn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 201), 74.

8 Note, for instance, the dynamics of judgement and forgiveness and the aftermath(s) in Exodus 32-34, on which see Brent A. Strawn, “YHWH’s Poesie: The *Gnadenformel* (Exodus 34:6b-7), the Book of Exodus, and Beyond,” in *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading* (eds. J. Blake Couey and Elaine T. James; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 237-56.

9 In addition to the other connections already mentioned, not the fascinating statement that Joseph

“remembered the exodus” in Heb 11:22.

10 See the helpful study by Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis* (Siphut 7; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

11 See further David L. Petersen, “Genesis and Family Values,” *JBL* 124 (2005): 5-23, who has noted non-retaliation as a primary way of handling family conflict in the family stories of Genesis.