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Genesis 50:15–26 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.

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.

Joseph: an autistic genius?

When most Christians think of the biblical name Joseph, we think of the earthly father of Jesus. But there is another Joseph in the Bible, in the Book of Genesis.

Here's a quick overview. Joseph was one of Jacob's twelve sons. Jacob was the brother of Esau. Jacob became the father of the Israelites and Esau the father of

the Edomites. 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 he became an official under the Pharaoh. 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, Jacob's other sons came to Egypt to plead for food. They met their brother Joseph and did not recognize him. When Joseph became convinced that his brothers were no longer evil, he forgave them and invited their families to live in Egypt. These families grew to be a major branch of the Israelites, the people of God. Joseph was fundamental in the eventual formation of Israel. He rescued his people from starvation. He chose to bless those who had cast him into slavery.

Here is the point of me telling this story: Joseph is often seen as a sort of Old Testament equivalent of Jesus Christ. There are indeed many parallels between Joseph and Jesus Christ. Both were said to be beloved by their fathers. Both were envied without any true justification. Both foretold the day they would be rulers. Both were accused of being wild dreamers. Both were said to be sent by their fathers to protect others. They were both rejected by their people and condemned to death. In the process, both were stripped of their clothing. Jesus

and Joseph were both sold for silver. They both resisted temptation, were falsely accused, foretold the future, provided for people who were in need, became servants, resisted temptation, and reconciled people with God. So, although Christians don't focus much on Joseph of the Old Testament, he was actually a very important biblical figure, one who is said to have 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 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, 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 presume had Asperger's. I have had other students in computer science who also seemed like they might be on the autism spectrum. But this student was unique in two ways. First, 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 a brick 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 next to 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 his computer up. 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 autistic student's hands in his and placed them back on the 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 up this student is that there are those who theorize that Joseph from the Old Testament also has 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. I'm certainly not saying that I think Joseph was indeed autistic. But here some of the traits of Joseph that some so-called experts have said make it seem like Joseph must have had Asperger's. Most of them fall in the realm of Joseph having a lot of social challenges. There are bible passages that might suggest that it was difficult for him to read social cues, that he didn't understand the feelings of others, that he had an unusual attachment to animals and inanimate objects. He had some repetitive behaviors and obsessive routines, they say. He had his own private way of looking at the world, and a very rigid way of looking at truth. He never picked up on nuances. One example 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 buys Joseph very classy clothing, gives him a title, equips him with servants, and finds him a 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. The way the Pharaoh accommodates Joseph is reminiscent of the way a person who is actually very gifted but is on the autistic spectrum will actually excel in life once they are 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 percent – has some sort of substantive disability. If it is true now, it must have been 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 just important 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.

We have recently celebrated the birth of Jesus; we might want to remember that the person who is thought to have been a forerunner of Christ, an Old Testament version of Jesus, might have also been someone who had a disability that today would have labeled him as possibly not employable, as someone who wouldn't be able to contribute much to society, and as someone to

be pitied. But in truth, he was a genius, an incredibly gifted person who rose from slavery to the highest levels of power 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. Joseph went from being a condemned slave to being the biblical figure who put the Israelites on the path toward gaining the Promised Land 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. 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 rather dramatic 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 life to serve. One way we can do it is through this church. We can do more than just come here every Sunday morning. We can lift ourselves up to God every single day. We can be confident that God has a plan for us. And by the way, there are many people in the Bible

who served God in their advanced age: Noah is one. So was Moses. Abraham.

The Apostle Paul was roaming the Roman Empire spreading the word until he was an older man.

Now, you may be wondering what came of my autistic student. 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, after everyone had presented their projects in class – and another student presented his while he sat there silently – 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, walk away. But what he did was, for the very first time, look me directly in the face, for just a few seconds, and then nodded very slightly. Then he looked away. I left. Please pray with me.

God, our goal as people of faith is to serve you. We do that by serving your people. We ask that you present us with opportunity. We admit that we can be slow to see opportunity, so you might have to hit us over the head with it. But you created us with gifts and skills that are unique to each of us. Your church is under threat right now, around the world, but largely in this country. Our goal is to rebuild it, to renew the kingdom of God on earth. We seek to do this with

whatever abilities we have. We want our generation to be the generation that ushers in a resurgence of faith among your people. Lift us up and let us be empowered by your grace working within us. Let us be anchors of a new church. No matter what disabilities we might have, no matter what hidden geniuses we might be, we can act together to regrow our global church.

And God, Joseph taught us the secret of discovering our inner gifts so that we can serve you and our church to our fullest ability. 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. This is because he had faith in God. He trusted God. 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 you 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. May we remember that by living with forgiveness and with a joy in our faith, we will live in your kingdom forever.

Amen.