



## First United Church of Oak Park

### **They Were Stuck**

Genesis 45

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Joseph and his brothers. The events of this family drama resonate for centuries, shape the people of God irrevocably, set to spinning the wheels of divine liberation. But it all started with a terrible act, born out of simple human vice.

Joseph's brothers were jealous because he — the youngest child — was the favorite son. The reason didn't matter so much as the reality. This favorite son made the other brothers wild with jealousy. He seemed to know too much about the future, saying he would himself be prosperous beyond belief and the brothers would all rely on him. Just jealousy, an ordinary human failing.

For no other reason, the brothers decide to be rid of Joseph forever. They sell their brother into slavery, in faraway Egypt, a land of wealth and power. One evil led to another evil, because to cover it up, they told their father that Joseph — the favorite son — had been killed. What were they supposed to say? We sold your favorite son to slavery? They were stuck.

Their evil deed just kept coming back to bite the brothers. Their father in his grief chose the next-youngest-to-Joseph son to be the new favorite, but this time his love was tinged with paranoia, certain that misfortune and death would claim this son, too. The brothers could do nothing to alleviate their father's misery. Because what were they supposed to say? Your fears are unreasonable because actually Joseph is alive, we sold him into slavery and faked his death? They were stuck.

Bad just turned to worse as the world fell apart, all seeming to hinge on the moment of the brothers' evil deed. Even the natural world seemed to conspire to return evil for evil against the brothers. All the crops stopped growing, the rain stopped falling, the livestock wasted away. A famine came upon the entire land. Their father summoned all the brothers and told them they had to go, to travel to buy food to keep them all from perishing.

And the one place that still had food? The one place the brothers could go to avoid perishing from hunger? Egypt. Of course, the site where they had sold their brother into slavery, the site of their greatest evil, this was the one place that still had food. It would be tempting fate to go to Egypt of all places for deliverance from evil. But how could they object to their father's plan? What were they supposed to say? We actually probably shouldn't go to Egypt because that is where we sold your favorite son into slavery? They were stuck.

Their father sent all the brothers to Egypt to buy food — all except the next youngest to Joseph, of course. Their father was too paranoid about evil coming to him to let him go anywhere. As soon as the brothers cross into Egypt, even more evil befalls them. They can't just go to a market and quietly buy food and leave. No, they are found out as foreigners and hauled before the governor himself! The brothers were totally reliant on the goodwill of this man, prosperous beyond all belief, who seemed to know too much about the future. The governor accused them of being spies. They said, no, no, no, we're not spies, we're just eleven brothers trying to get food to survive the famine.

Oh? Eleven? The governor says, I only count ten. Bring me this eleventh brother, then I'll believe your story. But that's exactly what they couldn't do. Their father wouldn't let the next youngest to Joseph out of his sight. But how are they supposed to explain that to this governor? We can't bring you the eleventh brother

because our father is paranoid something bad will happen to him because we sold our other brother into slavery and faked his death? They were stuck.

But at least the governor let them buy a little food on their way out of the country. Not a lot, but enough to last a little while. But on their way back home to try to somehow get this next youngest to Joseph, they find that the money they thought they had used to buy food was still in their bags. They had all the food, all right, but they had the money, too. They didn't know how it happened, a lot was going on, but now they had accidentally robbed the governor! So even if they did convince their father to let the next youngest to Joseph come to Egypt, what were they supposed to tell the governor? We didn't mean to rob you? They were stuck.

Nothing was going right, everything was going wrong and it all traced back to this one evil deed.

The famine stretched on and on, and the meager food stores they had accidentally stolen from the governor of Egypt ran out. And they had no choice. All eleven brothers — including the next youngest to Joseph — all went to Egypt to appear before the governor one last time. And there they stood, standing before the governor, prosperous beyond all belief, a man they were totally reliant upon who seemed to know too much about the future, a man they had accidentally robbed. It seemed the most certain result would be that they would be thrown out on their ears, or worse, shut up in prison to die.

And all this misfortune traced back to that one evil deed. Evil it seemed bred more evil in an unbreakable sequence leading to a terrible moment of crisis when it would all come crashing down on the brothers, when the governor finally spoke: He burst into tears, and he said, "I am Joseph, whom you sold into slavery into Egypt! Do not be distressed or angry. You intended evil, but God has turned this into good. Through me, God will preserve our family's

life. You will settle in the best land, you will want for nothing. I will provide for you. Your troubles are over.”

The brothers couldn't say a word. What were they supposed to say?

Joseph and his brothers. The events of this family drama resonate for centuries, shape the people of God irrevocably, set to spinning the wheels of divine liberation. It all started with a terrible act, born out of simple human vice. But that isn't how it ended. Their evil deed was returned to good. The very person who had most reason to curse them blesses them instead. And it's all because of God, he says. When was the last time these brothers would have dared hope for anything from God?

We see in this family drama the truth that wrongdoing has consequences — that evil does lead to more evil with regret as its only native produce. But we see, too, revealed the arc of God's goodness in the world. We see traced the line of divine intention and how it passes through human wickedness.

Human wrongdoing and human error are powerful, terrible. But they are not the only power in the world. God is capable of acting in the world, of turning evil into good in unexpected ways and deliverance in moments of greatest crisis. God's purposes are not defeated by human wickedness. We can in faith and submission do much to advance the cause of God's blessing. This is because God is good, and would withhold no good thing from human persons, least of all the chance to co-create with God the beloved realm. But do not be mistaken. God works through humankind because God chooses to do so, not because God's arm is too weak to do the work Godself.

As we live through times when bad turns to worse and then turns to the worst, as we suffer through times when the consequences of human error pile upon us like an avalanche, in these most

terrible days, remember the story of Joseph and his brothers.  
Remember, and have faith in God.