

August 16, Ordinary 20A (Genesis 45:1–15)

Joseph's actions and emotions seem to be a muddled mess of revenge and grief.

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [August 2026](#) issue

Published on August 10, 2026

“I just know that this means that there’s someone better out there for you,” Becky said to me as we stood in the church parking lot. A week before, I had informed my congregation that my husband and I were divorcing. I’m sure she intended to encourage me, but in that moment her words seemed flippant and out of touch. She was jumping ahead of me and assuming that everything would turn out alright.

With the benefit of hindsight, Joseph tells his brothers, “And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” At this moment Joseph is at the pinnacle of his career. He is the head of Pharaoh’s household. He is respected and powerful. Timing is everything.

The writer of Joseph’s story goes to great lengths to be sure we know that God is with Joseph at every turn. Every downturn changes course and goes up. Over and over again we read, “The Lord was with him and made him prosper.” But does Joseph see it that way all along? Does he see God at work when his brothers, after conspiring to kill him, give in to Reuben’s squeamishness and throw him in a pit instead? Does he see God at work when he works his fingers raw hunting for a handhold in attempt after attempt to climb out? Does he see God at work when he is sold into slavery, or when he is falsely accused of sexual assault? When he is imprisoned? We have very little insight into Joseph’s inner world.

We do see Joseph weep. First, when his brothers have come to Egypt for grain. They do not recognize him, but he recognizes them and demands to see their youngest brother. When they say to one another that they are paying for what they did to him, he turns from them and weeps. He weeps again when he sees his brother Benjamin, and again when he admits to his brothers who he is.

We can’t see inside Joseph’s heart, but we do watch his actions. At first he toys with his brothers, which is both understandable and cruel. He accuses them of being spies, puts them in prison, keeps Simeon as ransom for their return. When they bring Benjamin with them on their second trip to Egypt he plants a precious silver cup in their sacks of grain so he can accuse Benjamin of stealing.

His actions and his emotions seem to be a muddled mess of revenge and grief. Perhaps he is working through the trauma that he has managed to survive. Feeling the weight of what he has lost, acknowledging what has been done to him.

Researchers in the field of narrative psychology have found that one of the most important choices we make in how we tell our life stories and make meaning of them is where we start and stop the different chapters. Do I tell the story of my marriage as, *I thought I was happy, and then it all came apart and I’ve been single since*. Or do I say, *When my marriage ended suddenly, I started thinking about what I really wanted in my life. Now I have a life I never expected, and I am truly happy*. They call stories that start in pain and suffering but end in joy or lessons learned “redemption stories.” Is that what is happening here?

It takes a long time for Joseph to get to this place where he no longer needs the past to be any different than it was. The story started when Joseph was 17 years old, when he dreamed of greatness, and 30 years old, when he came into power in Pharaoh's household. There have been seven years of abundance, and when Joseph gives his brothers a place to live in Egypt, there have been two years of famine. In all, 22 years have passed since his brothers betrayed him.

There is not a template we can impose on each other for how to navigate deep wounds. We can't push someone ahead of where they are and force them to get to the point where they say, *I can see how this was used for good*. It takes time for healing and seeing how God was at work. It takes time for us to do our own inner work.

Joseph has changed. He does not say to his brothers when they come to him for help, "See? My dreams all came true! You are bowing to me." Instead, he sees God using him to preserve life. His life is now about more than himself and his own greatness. It is about serving others. Perhaps this is the evidence that God is with him. In that way, it is a redemption story. Not because it all turns out, but because Joseph is changed.