

Genesis 42-44: Jacob, Judah & Joseph

SYNOPSIS

The brothers leave Joseph with the intent of proving their honesty by bringing their youngest brother Benjamin with them on their next visit. Yet, when they stop to rest, one of them finds that his money has been returned to him. Rather than rejoicing in their good fortune, they are distressed because they might now be considered dishonest thieves. In their first invocation of God's Name, they cry out, "What is this that God has done to us?"

When they come to their father Jacob and report to him all that had transpired, they experience another shock. Not one but all of their money has been returned to them. Now their distress turns to outright fear. And their father Jacob thinks the worst: "You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!" (Genesis 42:36). Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go. He is the "only one left" of the sons of his favorite wife Rachel, who died prematurely. The favoritism that jump-started all of these events is still there.

Yet, God's sovereign purposes would push Jacob to change his mind, for the famine was still severe and they had eaten up all the grain they had bought from Egypt. Jacob can procrastinate no longer. He tells his sons to go and buy "a little more food" (Genesis 43:2), as if a little food may not require Benjamin's presence.

Judah provides the voice of reason, confronting his dad's pride and procrastination: "Send the boy along with me and we will go at once, so that we and you and our children may live and not die...As it is, if we had not delayed, we could have gone and returned twice" (Genesis 43:8, 10). Unlike Jacob's selfish and proud perspective, using, "I", "me" and "my," Judah uses "we, you, and our." Moreover, unlike Reuben, who offered his two sons, Judah ups the ante and offers himself to be held to account if Benjamin is not restored safely back to Jacob.

Faced with the prospect of starvation, the adamant refusal of his sons to go without Benjamin, and Judah's reasonable and committed plea, Jacob resigns himself to let them go. Jacob is not demonstrating strong leadership here but timid fatalism. He agrees because he has no other choice. He would have preferred the brothers to have lied about their younger brother (Genesis 43:6). An even now, he reverts to his old tricks again to gain a handle on the situation. Just as he did with Esau, he would bribe Pharaoh with his gifts. Even when he utters a benediction on the mission, it comes short of a real prayer and is fraught with fatalistic doubt: "If I am bereaved, I am bereaved" (Genesis 43:14).

The brothers take their youngest and go to Egypt. They are fearful, so that every kind act by Joseph only adds to their foreboding. They are only a little relieved when the steward assures them that he had received their money from the first transaction. The steward expresses more faith than they, for he explains, "Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks" (Genesis 43:23). Simeon is released. They are called to dine with Joseph in his house. Joseph inquires about their father's health. And when he sees his brother, not having seen him for over twenty-one years, he is moved to tears, so that he has to hide himself. He has not yet ascertained if the brothers' hearts have changed.

When Joseph finally sends them away, he makes sure that his cup is placed in Benjamin's sack. Then the steward is sent after the brothers to confront them and to accuse them of stealing. The brothers return. Joseph gives them the opportunity to forsake Benjamin, even as they forsook Joseph two decades before.

But Judah answers on behalf of his brothers and intercedes for Benjamin and pleads on his behalf so that Judah, not Benjamin, might take the punishment and remain as Joseph's slave. The brothers have changed!

LESSONS

Jacob provides us an example of how NOT to respond to adversity.

Here are ten questions that you might ask yourself to see if, like Joseph, you are not trusting God:

- (1) Are you governed by irrational fears? (42:4)
- (2) Do you have a negative, pessimistic attitude? (42:36, 38)
- (3) Are you self-centered? (42:36, 38; 43:6)
- (4) Do you blame others for your problems? (42:36; 43:6)
- (5) Do you stubbornly refuse to admit you are wrong? (42:38)
- (6) Do you yield reluctantly because you have to? (43:11a)
- (7) Do you exclude God from the events of your life? (43:12b, contrast 42:28 and 45:5-9)
- (8) Do you rely on human schemes rather than the grace of God? (43:11-12)
- (9) Do you resort to God last, as a hope, but fail to really pray? (43:14a)
- (10) Do you stoically resign yourself to fate? (43:14b)

Yet, we have such great promises from God:

Romans 8:31-32 – “If God is for us. Who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also -- along with Him – graciously give us all things?”

Romans 8:28 “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

1 Corinthians 2:9-10 “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived – the things God has prepared for those who love him – these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.”

Ephesians 3:20 “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”

Hebrews 13:5-6 “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid, what can mere mortals do to me?”

When things seem to be against you, trust in the God who is for you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you face adversity, how do you respond?

Whether you have lost a job, lost a loved one, failed in a project, given a rotten presentation, faced betrayal, seen your children make poor decisions, how have you responded? Has your first response been to think the worst or the best? Did you immediately try to take control of the situation or did you go to prayer? Did you change your priorities (e.g. stop attending church or Bible study or doing your devotions, etc.)? Share your testimony of how you have handled adversity and how you might handle it differently today.

2. How can planning and preparation be made consistent with waiting on and listening to God?

Oftentimes God does not share with you His specific will in advance. As such, how do you trust Him? When you pray, “if it is your will,” does it seem like a cop out to you? When are your actions prudent and when are they presumptuous, and where does contentment come into the picture?