

Genesis 42: Joseph Tests His Brothers

Observations

Confession

The famine did not only touch Egypt, but it extended into the land of Canaan (Genesis 42:5). Jacob hears about grain being sold in Egypt, so he sends his sons to get some. Jacob observes unusual hesitation in his sons. He says, "Why do you just keep looking at each other?" (Genesis 42:1). They were looking at each other because they remembered how they sold their brother Joseph to be an Egyptian slave. This was perhaps the first indication of guilt setting in and the awful thought that they might even encounter their brother if they go to Egypt. They were in no hurry to go there.

When you have wronged someone, and you know that they are going to be where you are going, you are not so eager to go there. The knowledge and, certainly, the sight of them would only remind you of your guilt. We want to hide our guilt, not be reminded of it. Yet, the Scripture teaches in Proverbs 28:13, "Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy." Scripture teaches in Matthew 5:23-24,

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

We are called not to conceal our guilt but to make it right. Most often, getting it right involves an acknowledgement of wrongdoing along with an appeal for mercy. So, Scripture also teaches in 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Favoritism

Joseph's brothers are compelled by their father Jacob to go get some grain from Egypt so that they will not die. Ten of the brothers go, but Jacob holds Benjamin behind because he is fearful for his safety (Genesis 42:4).

Is Jacob's fears warranted? Benjamin is certainly the youngest, but he is not a child. He's likely around 24 years old at this time. Perhaps Jacob never learned the harm that showing favoritism among his children can cause. He appears again to be showing favoritism toward his youngest, just as he did to Joseph. Both of these kids were born to his most loved wife, Rachel. Trying to protect Benjamin was unreasonable and communicated a favoritism that could stir resentment from his brothers. In this whole affair we will find that Jacob is the most unspiritual of the lot.

God clearly commands us, "But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers" (James 2:9). James wrote with respect to favoritism for the rich over the poor, but can we not apply this to favoritism of one child over another? God is impartial (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25) and commands us to be impartial, that is, to treat people and make judgments based on a righteous standard, not on selfish preferences or sinful prejudices.

I think the Bible uses the term "favoritism" or "partiality" rather than "discrimination," although the terms are similar, because all favoritism is wrong whereas all discrimination is not. We discriminate between right and

wrong, true and false, wise and foolish, etc. These are righteous and objective judgments, but favoritism by definition suggests judgment based on a subjective, personal preference rather than on what is righteous and true. When discrimination becomes favoritism, it is also wrong.

Conviction and Repentance

When the brothers get to Joseph, he recognizes them immediately (Genesis 42:7). They looked the same as they had when he last saw them some twenty-two years before. Their appearance was the same, but had their hearts changed at all? The brothers did not recognize Joseph at all (Genesis 42:8). Joseph takes the opportunity to test his brothers. From the first, they do not start off well. When Joseph accuses them of being spies, they declare, "Your servants are **honest** men" (Genesis 42:11). Honest? The Jewish Bible translates the term "honest" as "upright." "Your servants are upright men." Upright? These men who massacred a whole village for the crime of one man? These men who plotted to murder their own brother and then sold him into slavery and then lied about it? I would consider them far from honest or upright!

I have been among those critical of Joseph for testing his brothers in the way he did; however, upon deeper consideration, it appears it was not done out of spite or for revenge but to lead them to repentance. His repeated kindness to them (e.g. only holding Simeon and returning their money) and his deep emotion toward them (Genesis 42:24) suggest he had already forgiven them and understood God's sovereign purposes in what they had done (Genesis 45:5-7; 50:20). And here, then, by God's providence Joseph had the opportunity to lead his brothers to genuine repentance.

Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies. In order to test their honesty, he insists that one of them bring their youngest brother to him. He would hold the rest of them hostage in prison. He keeps them all in prison for three days to think about his proposition. After three days, he steps back from his harshness and simply asks for one of them (it would be Simeon, likely the ringleader in the conspiracy to kill Joseph many years before) to stay hostage until they returned with their youngest brother (Genesis 42:24). Why? Because he "feared God" (Genesis 42:18). Remember, Abraham lied about Sarah because he figured Pharaoh had no fear of God. Isaac thought the same thing. So then this expression, "I fear God," should have given hope to the brothers. This was a word of kindness. Just as only keeping one brother was an act of kindness. Suddenly, this turn of events pricked the guilt that the brothers felt about what they did to Joseph. They say to each other, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother" (Genesis 42:21-22).

Scriptures teaches us, "God's kindness is intended to lead us to repentance" (Romans 2:4). It is the Holy Spirit, who convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8). Perhaps Joseph's kindness and sternness have pricked the conscience of his brothers. They remember their sin against Joseph.

So, were Joseph's brothers repentant here? I think not. Their words appear to express regret rather than true repentance. Even so, Joseph was deeply moved (Genesis 42: 24). Yet, he has enough possession of mind to continue with his plan. He binds Simeon "before their eyes" (Genesis 42:24b). Yet, he does them a kindness by returning their money back in their bags. But the brothers, already on edge about this mission, does not see this as a kindness but as a harbinger of doom from God. They say, "What is this that God has done to us?" This is their first invocation of God's Name.

Regret alone is not repentance, for repentance involves a complete change of mind. For us, when we say we repent, we're not saying that we will never sin again. We are admitting that we are sick, but we cannot heal ourselves. We are sinful, but we cannot save ourselves. The change of mind is from dead works to faith (Hebrews 6:1). True repentance, therefore, involves faith in the One, who can truly deliver us from our sickness, from our sins and from our sentence of death. Salvation requires repentance and faith because they are two sides of the

same coin, a genuine recognition of need inextricably connected to a trust in the only One who can meet that need, namely Jesus Christ.

Despair vs. Faith

Later, after they report everything to Jacob their father, they find that not just one but all of them got their money returned to them in their bags. Again, rather than rejoicing, they are “frightened” (Genesis 42:35). In the context of a distrustful benefactor, Joseph, this is not good news. How are they to demonstrate that they are “honest,” “upright” men when it appears like they took back their own money. Their father Jacob also recognizes this and directs his ire at his sons: “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!”

We say, “When it rains, it pours. If something can go wrong, it does.” Oftentimes, we have an exaggerated view of calamity. We have a chicken little attitude: “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!”

Reuben does not help the situation by offering his two sons in death, as if killing two of Jacob’s grandsons would make him feel better about losing his sons. Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go with the brothers. His favoritism is revealed in his expression, “His brother is dead and he is the only one left” (Genesis 42:38). What about Simeon? If Benjamin does not go back, Simeon’s fate in the Egyptian prison would be sealed. His affection does not seem to extend the same way toward Simeon as toward Joseph and Benjamin.

Also, Jacob says, “You will bring MY gray head down to the grave in sorrow” (Genesis 42:38b). He casts blame at the brothers, who are innocent of this matter. He seems also more concerned about his feelings than the rest of his family. Jacob demonstrates how NOT to handle calamity. And in the ensuing chapters, he will not get any better.

How do we handle suffering and calamity? Hopefully, not like Jacob: “Woe is me! The whole world is against me!” During this same period, the age of the patriarchs, we have a contemporary of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who had a very different response.

Job was a blameless and upright man, who feared God and shunned evil (Job 1:1). God would use him to demonstrate a right response to suffering and calamity. God pointed Job out to Satan and encouraged him to test him. So Satan destroyed his sheep, his camels, his servants, and all his children. Job’s response? The inspired writer records in Job 1:20-22,

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will depart.
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised.”

In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Job’s response was to worship God!

Then, after this, Satan got another shot. God again pointed out how Job stayed faithful in spite of Satan inciting God against him. Those who argue that God is not responsible for harming innocent Job must contend with what God says here in Job 2:3, “though you incited ME against him to ruin him without any reason.”

Satan then says that Job will fold if he were allowed to strike his flesh and bones. God permits him but orders Satan to preserve Job’s life. This exchange reveals that there is no cosmic duality between good and evil. God is

sovereign, and even Satan, the prince of evil, is subject to Him. Satan can only do what God allows him to do. And Satan does.

Job's wife folds under the pressure, telling Job to "Curse God and die!" Job, wise as well as upright, responds, "You foolish woman!" No, he doesn't say this. He tactfully responds, "You are talking LIKE a foolish woman (or like one of those foolish women)" (Genesis 2:10). He then explains, "Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?" The inspired account again confirms, "In all this, Job did not sin in what he said" (Genesis 2:10b).

John Piper famously said, "God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him." The other day I had the privilege of hearing him speak on the providence of God. And he added to this statement, "God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him, **especially in suffering.**"

When we treasure God in suffering, people are more convinced that we are truly treasuring God. It is less convincing when there is simply prosperity. That is why when you read Hebrews 11, the chapter on the heroes of faith, all of these demonstrated faith in the midst of adversity. The pantheon of faith concludes with,

Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground (Hebrews 11:36-38).

Will we have Job's attitude toward suffering and calamity or Jacob's? Paul was no stranger to suffering (2 Corinthians 6:3-10), yet he says of them, "Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 5:16-17). Again, he writes, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

God gives us prayer as our shield against anxiety (Philippians 4:6-7). He gives us Christ as our example, "who for the joy set before Him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). The very next verse says, "Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:3).