

Prayer

Great and powerful Lord, listen to the cries of those who call on You for help when they are assaulted by evil, disturbed by lies, frightened by wickedness, troubled by slander or gossip, or disturbed by the malicious deeds of others. Deliver them from the hands of the enemy, and show them Your salvation through the power and authority of Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Books

Pray against Satan's use of books and all manner of printed material to fill people's minds with violence and sexual deviancy. Pray not for censorship but for wisdom, intelligence and love.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for Afghanistan, for the rule of law and democratic processes*
- *Pray about the greed and godlessness within our world today*
- *Give thanks for good food, blessed and shared with others*

Meditation

Tell us, preacher, what God has said;

Show that you have searched your soul to bring His Word to us.

Don't tell us stories about yourself;

Inspire us with your testimony of the wondrous work of God.

Don't preach the latest opinions of Scripture;

Expound the Word, and explain its depth and power to save.

Don't assess the relevance of the Gospel;

Explain how Christ loves and saves a bruised and hurting world.

Don't invite us to respond to your sermon;

Offer the love and grace of Jesus, whose heart is open to all.

So, preach a sermon from your heart;

A word to awaken the saints and quake the very gates of Hell.

Bible Study - Genesis 42:18-38

¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, 'Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison. The rest of you may go and take grain for your famine stricken households, ²⁰ and then you must bring your youngest brother to me. This will verify your words, so that you will not die.' And they agreed to do this. ²¹ They said to one another, 'Sadly, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother. We saw the distress of his soul; he begged us but we would not listen. This is why this distress has come upon us.' ²² Reuben retorted, 'Didn't I tell you not to wrong the boy? But you wouldn't listen, so we are now paying the price for his blood.' ²³ They did not realise that Joseph understood them, as he spoke with them through an interpreter. ²⁴ Then he turned away from them and wept. When he was able to return, he spoke to them again; he had Simeon singled out and had him bound before their eyes.

²⁵ Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, and to return every man's money to his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. When this was done for them, ²⁶ they loaded their donkeys with their grain, and left. ²⁷ Then at their lodging place, as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder, he saw his money at the top of the sack. ²⁸ He cried out to his brothers, 'My money has been put back; here it is in my sack!' At this their hearts sank, and trembling, they turned to each other saying, 'What is this that God has done to us?'

²⁹ When they came back to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them. They said, ³⁰ 'The man who is in charge of the land spoke harshly to us,

and thought that we were spying out the land. ³¹ But we said to him, "We are honest men, we are not spies. ³² There are twelve brothers, sons of one father; one is no more, and the youngest is with our father in the land of Canaan." ³³ Then the man in charge of the land said to us, "This is how I will know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, take grain for your famine-stricken households, and go your way. ³⁴ Bring your youngest brother to me, and I will know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will return your brother to you, and you may go about your business in the land."

³⁵ As they were emptying their sacks, there in each one's sack was his bag of money. When they and their father saw their moneybags, they were dismayed. ³⁶ Their father Jacob said to them, 'You are bereaving me of my children! Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All is set against me!' ³⁷ Then Reuben said to his father, 'Put him in my care, and I will return him to you. You may take the life of my two sons if I do not bring him back to you.' ³⁸ But Jacob replied, 'My son will not go down with you. His brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey you intend to take, you would bring down my grey head down to the grave with sorrow.'

Review

There is an extraordinary mixture of emotions within this part of the story of Joseph and his brothers. In each part, there are contrasts of understanding and misunderstanding, flashbacks to the past that create confusion, and much uncertainty about motives of almost everyone involved. If we did not believe that God was in control of everything, then this would indeed be an incomprehensible story!

At the beginning of our passage, all Joseph's brothers had been thrown into prison with the threat that only one of them could return to Canaan to return to their father Jacob (42:14-17). At this point, Joseph had his brothers in complete submission, just as in Joseph's famous dream (37:7). However, without Benjamin, the picture was not complete, so Joseph changed his mind and released all the brothers except Simeon, and after listening in to their conversation (42:21-23) he sent them back to Canaan. It was an extraordinary sequence of events, and we are caught up in the intrigue of observing Joseph listening in to what his brothers were saying as they struggled with their predicament. Joseph clearly felt the pain of his brothers, who are unaware that their brother knew everything they are saying! Joseph was moved to tears when he heard for the first time that Reuben had tried to save him from his brothers when they sold him into slavery, all those years ago (42:22). Why then did Joseph not reveal himself, and why did he test them in such a terrible way?

The hard but necessary question was this. Had the brothers changed sufficiently to become the 'good men' they claimed to be? Words were not enough, and the brothers were clearly under practical and spiritual pressure to show that they had changed and become men worthy of the call of God. When Jacob heard that Simeon was taken it reminded him immediately of the loss of Joseph (42:36), and he reacted immediately with words that are very similar to those spoken when he learned of Joseph's disappearance (see 37:35). Did this mean that Jacob suspected all along that Joseph's loss was due to some trickery on the part of the brothers? This is certainly likely, and while the family in Canaan had food to eat, Jacob would not allow the brothers to return with Benjamin and, for a time, he forfeited Simeon rather than contemplate the loss of Benjamin, his heir.

Jacob was not yet ready to believe his sons. This is particularly true in the strange story of the money in the grain sacks, replaced on the orders of Joseph (42:25). At least one of the brothers discovered his money on the first night they rested during their journey home (42:27), but the matter was not spoken of again on the journey. It seems that the brothers were too traumatised by what had happened to know what they should do. When they reached home, however, and told their father a somewhat sanitised version of what had happened to them (not mentioning that they had been in jail themselves, see 42:30-34), the matter of the money in the sacks suddenly reared its head, as if they had forgotten all about it (42:35)! This made the brothers appear very guilty before their father. Did he think they had sold Simeon? Were his suspicions aroused yet again about what had happened to Joseph? Nothing was clear, nothing was explicit, and everything was uncertain, and we are held in suspense just as we supposed the story was about to resolve!

This is the power of the story, and it forces us to wonder what must be done by the brothers for them to prove to their father at least that they were honest men and worthy of his forgiveness. The tragedy of the whole story is that our passage ends with Jacob standing in the way of what we all know is possible, which is the reconciliation of the family. The past sins of the brothers still holds the family in its grip, and something special will be needed to break the deadlock!

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Joseph's deception of his brothers
- The strange tale of the money in the sacks – what does it mean?
- Jacob's refusal to accept the deal

Going Deeper

Each stage of this story has details which add to its uncertainty, but yet they also add to the coming together of feelings, recollections, hopes and dreams which eventually bring the whole family together in reconciliation. Our study goes on to explore more of these twists and turns.

Joseph deceives his brothers.

Joseph had been in Egypt a long time and was quite capable of hiding himself from his brothers both in presentation and in language. The brothers were completely fooled. Those of us who read the story can see how their simple protestation of honesty left them wide open, and Joseph took full advantage of the situation. Firstly, Joseph said to his brothers that he had changed his mind about sending them back home (42:19), giving the reason 'for I fear God'. This would have been something of a shock to the brothers, who would not have expected to hear reference to God alongside a turn of phrase that was part of their own inheritance. People believed all manner of things about God and gods in general, even in Egypt; but to 'fear God' was a characteristic Hebrew expression that was probably recognisable despite being conveyed to them through translators.

As the Old Testament says in many places, to 'fear God' means to be someone who has compassion and acts with generosity towards the poor and disadvantaged (Job 29:12-13. Prov. 3:20,30), and this is what Joseph then demonstrated in his dealing with the brothers, making grain available to them for their 'famine-stricken households' (42:19). This immediately triggered a response from the brothers who talked amongst themselves, believing they could speak without being overheard. Their guilt about Joseph soon surfaced (42:21) and though it is likely that the brothers said much more, they also revealed they had not acted in unity when Joseph was sold into slavery (42:22) Reuben, the eldest, upbraided his brothers. They had also seen Joseph's 'distress'; a distinct and rare word in Hebrew which is usually used in poetry and drama, but indicates that they all understood something of Joseph's suffering.

All this was too much for Joseph, who left his brothers to weep and gain his composure before singling out Simeon. He could hardly retain Reuben, the eldest, who had just confessed his disapproval of what happened, so he chose the next eldest in order, Simeon.

Coming home, and the strange tale of the money in the sacks

It seems as if there are as many theories about the money left in the brother's grain sacks as there are commentators upon the story of Joseph! The provision for the brothers was generous, and this very generosity should have caused the brothers to think, for they were even given what they needed for 'the journey' back home (42:25): this was special treatment. However, the panic this created in the brothers (42:28) made them think again that God was doing something, but they did not know what it was. At least in this, they were on the right track.

Some suggest that the way the money was left in the sacks was a reflection of the price paid for Joseph when he was sold into slavery, and certainly, Jacob made this connection when he saw it (see above). Others have suggested that according to family law, Joseph was bound not to take money from his own brothers, and was therefore signalling his presence and identity; a hint they were unable to recognise or take. The other main suggestion is that although Joseph was indeed selling grain to people who came to him, it would have been considered inhospitable to take money from anyone who was a guest. Maybe Joseph's was attempting to signal to the brothers that they were more to him than wandering tribesmen; but they did not understand this.

The brothers interpreted every sign, however, as an indication of God's wrath, such was the guilt with which they lived. As we read the story we hear the inner conflict they experienced; on the one hand they uttered words to try and convince first Joseph (hidden in disguise) and then their father that they were honest men; and on the other hand, they interpreted every strange event that happened to them as some act of God's judgement upon them. They knew they had done wrong to Joseph, and their guilt was heavy on them, even though they did not recognise him.

Jacob's refusal to accept the deal

When the brothers reported their adventures to their father, they missed out the difficult parts. They told Jacob that they were accused of spying; an accusation that was plainly false, and even their father could accept that! However, they did not tell Jacob the difficult details, even saying that Simeon was retained by Joseph personally (42:33) rather than admitting the truth, which was that he was thrown into prison as a human guarantor and hostage for Benjamin. They even told their father that if all went well, and all

conditions were met, then they would be able to trade in Egypt; to 'go about your business in the land' (42:34).

None of this satisfied Jacob, who was completely unwilling to accept the deal conveyed to him by his sons. He did not trust them. Jacob likened Simeon's loss to that of Joseph, heaping further blame and guilt upon his other sons, though Reuben tried to defuse this by offering his own sons as hostages to their own grandfather for Benjamin's safe return! The situation was ludicrous and Jacob would hear none of it. He bemoaned what had happened to him, and preferred to accept what had happened in the hope of riding out the drought, without having to sacrifice his youngest and dearest son, Benjamin, or the life of anyone else.

This was not God's plan, however, and everything we have read today is but a preparation for what comes next. We even realise that it was necessary for the famine to last seven years, for if it had been only a year or so, Jacob's family would not have had to consider going to Egypt again, and Jacob would have accepted what happened, though fully suspicious of his sons complicity in the disappearance of Joseph and Simeon. Jacob was a very sad man indeed!

Application

The whole of today's long and somewhat repetitious story is about the paralysing effects of guilt. Everything was affected by this guilt, and the brothers appear to have no way to deal with it; it trapped them. We feel that they could have been helped by their father, but he remained the 'victim' who was forever wronged by what had happened. They needed to be helped by Joseph, and he had indeed set before them a path towards further engagement and possible reconciliation, but they were trapped by their allegiance to their father's decisions to stay in Canaan.

It is the very nature of guilt to trap people. Guilt is precisely that feeling of having no way to resolve a situation, and the story of the brothers is a typical story of sin and its consequent guilt. The one help we all have is that we know that the story will resolve by the grace of God and the forgiveness of Joseph; but in the meantime, the brothers are aware of God's presence in judgement, but they cannot understand what is going on.

This should tell us that when we feel guilty or when we try to help people who have sinned and feel guilty, God may have a plan to help, but it is not always obvious. The whole of this story tells us that we need to keep faithful to the plot of God's 'storyline' for dealing with problems, even though it may seem very strange. Frequently, this will involve facing the people we have wronged, the things we have done wrong or events in which we have messed up badly. We cannot change the facts of what has happened; but God can lead us into reconciliation and beyond this into the repair of our souls so that we may be healed of guilt. Clearly, there is a long way for this story to go, but it is becoming more obvious that God's intention throughout this long and complex story is to show something of what it means to deal fully with sin and guilt. Although we would like this to be so, the effects of sin and guilt do not just disappear, they need us to work at them so that by God's help, we may be victors.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the different possible reasons for Joseph's change of mind about the punishment of the brothers. With which do you agree?
2. Discuss why you believe that Joseph placed the money back in the sacks of the brothers. With which do you agree?
3. How do people deal with guilt today? Does the church offer a ministry which will help people deal with guilt, or do we not want this?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

All too often, we do not wish to deal with problems; sins and troubles for which we are responsible which lie in the past. When we hear a preacher who tells us that Jesus 'wipes the slate clean' we are relieved, believing that we will not have to face dealing with the past, and we lock it all away inside. This is not the way of the disciple. If there are 'skeletons' in our cupboards then God will work unceasingly, and sometimes over a long period, to enable us to face these skeletons and deal with them properly. God does not avoid doing what is necessary to deal properly with problems; particularly problems due to relationships. He deals with them.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Ask yourself carefully whether there are any issue in your past that have not been dealt with properly before God. You may have asked yourself about this many times before, but it is always worth your while going back to this question and searching your soul. God may have something still to do to help you and this will liberate you if you release it into His hands.*
- *Pray that God will help those you love to face the problems they have and the guilt they bear. Guilt can completely block some people's ability to relate to others, and many think that their problems cannot be dealt with. The story of Joseph says that it is possible.*

Final Prayer

Save us, dear Lord, from assuming that we know what we are doing, and in this way, failing to let You be a true part of our daily lives. Give us the true humility that welcomes Your presence and takes Your advice at all times, because we know Your voice and we trust You. Save us dear Lord; AMEN
