

## Prayer

Praise You, Jesus Christ, for the simple things of life which give us joy; for the gifts of song and music, for the pleasure of spending time with those we love, for the delights of offering worship to You, and for the happiness we know when doing Your will. Dear Jesus Christ, in the midst of trials or distress, remind us of these joys and sustain our spiritual health, we pray: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Church ministry

*There are some parts of the world where there are many people offering for ministry within the church, elsewhere there are few. Pray that God will raise up leaders for His people.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for agencies that distribute food to people in need*
- *Pray for the work done by Christians in Muslim countries*
- *Give thanks for all that the Lord has been able to do through you*

## Meditation

The love of God delights us

Like the smile of a baby and the grasp of its hand.

The love of God surprises us

Like the joy of meeting a close friend unexpectedly.

The love of God enlightens us

Like the brilliance of the sun that brings the daily dawn.

The love of God embraces us

Like the feelings of a parent whose passion is eternal.

The love of God encourages us

Like the words of a parent, proud of our achievements.

The love of God strengthens us

Like the presence of an expert, teaching and inspiring.

The love of God empowers us

Like the meal of 'bread and wine' that feeds our souls.

The love of God means everything to us.

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## Bible Study - Genesis 43:1-15

<sup>1</sup> Now the famine in the land became more severe, <sup>2</sup> so when they had eaten all the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, 'Go again, buy us a little more food.'<sup>3</sup> But Judah said to him, 'The man solemnly swore, "You will not come into my presence unless your brother is with you."<sup>4</sup> If you will let our brother come with us, we will go down and buy you food; <sup>5</sup> but if you will not let him come, we will not go down, precisely because the man said to us, "You will not come into my presence unless your brother is with you."'

<sup>6</sup> Israel said, 'Why did you put me in this evil position by revealing to the man that you had another brother?' <sup>7</sup> They replied, 'The man kept asking us about ourselves and our family. He said, "Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?" Now, what we said to him was in answer to these questions. How could we know that he would make the demand, "Bring your brother down here"?' <sup>8</sup> Judah then made this appeal to his father Israel: 'Send the lad with me, and we can get on our way so that you, we and also our children may live and not die. <sup>9</sup> I will guarantee his safety personally, and you can hold me responsible for him. If I fail to bring him back and return him to your presence, then let me bear the blame forever. <sup>10</sup> Now if we had not delayed, we could have been there and back again twice over.'

<sup>11</sup> Then their father Israel said to them, 'If it must be so, then do this: take some of the best fruits of the land in your baggage, and take them down to the man as a gift; a little balm and honey, gum and resin, pistachio nuts and almonds. <sup>12</sup> Take double the money with you, for you must return the money that was placed in the top of your sacks; perhaps it was a mistake. <sup>13</sup> Take your brother as well, and get on your way back to the man; <sup>14</sup> may God Almighty grant you kindness before the man, so that he may release both your brother and Benjamin. As for me, if I must suffer the bereavement of my children, then so be it.' <sup>15</sup> So the men took with them the gifts and double the money, and Benjamin as well. Then they went on their way down to Egypt, and presented themselves to Joseph.

## Review

This is the record of a painful conversation between Jacob (Israel) and his sons, in which the old man finally came to terms with the inevitable. The land was in the grip of drought and there was no future for God's Covenant people unless Israel was prepared to trust the future to 'El Shaddai' (43:14), the God who promised a glorious future for His people in a Covenant with His forefathers (17:1, 28:3, 35:11). It was only possible for the brothers to go to Egypt and purchase even a 'little more food' (43:2), if Benjamin went with them as demanded by Joseph; still known only to the rest of his family as 'the man'. Jacob had to trust both his God and his sons by handing Benjamin over, and allowing him to go to Egypt. For him, it was like losing his most precious son and heir; it was a test of faith no smaller for him than the test of his grandfather Abraham who was told to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah (Gen 22).

This passage is full of interest, which bubbles sometimes just below the surface of the narrative. It reads simply enough, and we can easily see how the old man Jacob finally gave way to the pressures of the drought, and let Benjamin go with his other sons to Egypt. Earlier, Reuben had tried to persuade Jacob to let Benjamin come with them to Egypt, giving his own two sons as a 'guarantee' for Benjamin's safety (42:37). Finally, Judah offered himself; but by then they had eaten all their remaining stocks of food and feelings ran high as the family pushed Jacob to accede to the inevitable. At this point, our reading hints at the story of Jesus; for Jacob did not believe he would see Benjamin again, and his son had to be given over to God if the family were to survive. This is prophetic of God's greater plan of salvation in which God handed over His own son Jesus for the greater good of the salvation of humanity; it is not an exact parallel, but it allows us to see how God's plans are signalled throughout scripture.

It is highly significant that Judah was the one who spoke up and acted as the leader of the brothers at this point. The leadership of Reuben, the eldest son, had failed. He did not follow through his plan of saving Joseph in the first place (37:29f.) and constantly bore that guilt (as is clear in 42:22); and his earlier offer for the return to Egypt was rejected out of hand by Jacob. Judah took the initiative early in the story (43:3) and followed this through by taking personal responsibility for Benjamin and the success of the journey to save the family (43:8-10).

Terrible things happened during droughts in ancient times. There are distressing stories of the cannibalism of children even in the Bible (e.g. the siege of Jerusalem; Lamentations 2:20, Ezekiel 5:10). This fact gives an uncomfortable edge to all the references to 'children' (42:8,14) in this passage. The famine had reached the point where Jacob knew that the survival of the whole family, especially the children, was at stake, and his first suggestion to his sons that they go to Egypt to buy food was feeble (43:1). He knew he would have to face what had already been told him, and that Benjamin would have to go to Egypt if he was to have food. In a strange twist to the tale, we notice that Joseph was first packed off to Egypt in a caravan train containing gum, balm and resin (37:25); but now, the family would only be reunited by the brothers going to Egypt in a caravan containing 'balm, gum and resin' (42:11)! They also took some other fruits of the land (probably nuts) which were scarce because of the drought.

Jacob was resigned to the necessity of the journey and he ordered the gifts and the return of money found in the sacks of grain. It was all he could do to try and alleviate his fears. Money was no longer an issue, everything depended upon his release of Benjamin.

### **Going Deeper**

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

- Judah's rise to dominance
- Judah's persuasion of Jacob to let Benjamin go
- The preparations for the journey

## Going Deeper

The rise of Judah is important for the whole story of Israel, and there were historic reasons why Jacob did not trust Reuben. His attitude towards the brothers is more complex, however, as we find out by digging further into the story. It is nevertheless hard for us to understand the extreme pressure of the drought. Through our knowledge of Joseph in Egypt, we know about its intensity. Jacob did not.

### ***Judah's rises to dominance***

Each of the sons involved in this story had 'history'. All we need remember is that the first four sons of Jacob (born to Leah) in turn were Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. The last two (born to Jacob's favoured wife Rachel) were Joseph and Benjamin. The rest do not appear in this story by name; and although Levi is not mentioned, he is still significant. The whole story revolves around why it is that Judah becomes the leader of the tribes of Israel, despite his somewhat casual approach to his own family and God's Covenant as reported in Genesis 38.

In addition to what we know about Reuben as a leader from the story of Joseph (see above) and his personal weakness, Reuben is recorded as having committed a heinous sin against his own father by sleeping with Bilhah, Rachel's maid, after the death of Rachel (35:22). It was a serious fault which his father held against him to his dying day (49:3), declaring him to be 'as unstable as water' and denying him the rights of the firstborn because he 'went up onto his father's bed' (49:4). Jacob would never listen to Reuben, as is made clear throughout the story of Joseph.

The two brothers who came next were Simeon and Levi. These two were responsible for the massacre of Hamor (34:25f.) an incident which compromised Jacob's first settlement in Canaan and forced him to move south to Hebron. Jacob regarded them as violent, and cursed them on his deathbed (49:5). At this point in our story, Simeon was incarcerated in Egypt, and plenty of people have commented on Jacob's apparent lack of interest in his fate; this may explain it. Judah was next in line after Simeon and Levi, being the one brother not born of Rachel who was respected by Jacob (see 49:8-12). His name means 'praise the Lord' (29:35). The rise of Judah is important for the story because from this point onwards, Judah leads the way and despite his past sins (Gen 38) becomes the 'favoured son' of Jacob and the most important of the tribes of Israel.

### ***Judah persuades his father***

In this story, Judah deals with his own father in a frank and direct way. He also takes personal responsibility for his decisions, knowing that unless he does so, the whole of God's small 'chosen' family will die out. We who know the story also know that in fulfilment of Joseph's dream, he will have to bow down before Joseph in Egypt before the family can be re-united. The Lord's forward planning for His people is something of a mystery, but if we take the story as a whole, we can see that no-one becomes great without becoming a servant first. We are able to recognise this is a significant Gospel theme which is unexpectedly found here in the story of the rise of Judah, and is found throughout Scriptural.

After Judah intervened and spoke firmly to his father about what would have to be done, the other brothers weigh in to the discussion (43:7f.). Jacob complained bitterly at his dilemma, and the manner in which he was being forced to part with Benjamin against his will; his retort to his sons was to ask why Benjamin had been mentioned to 'the man' (Joseph) in the first place. Verses 7 and 8 contain rebuttals from the brothers without us knowing who said what. However, if you read chapter 42 (from verse 7 onwards) you will find that Joseph did not ask direct questions about Jacob or his younger brother. The brothers had volunteered this information in an attempt to prove to Joseph that they were honest men, not spies. Jacob had a fair point, but he had not been present when the brothers were begging for their lives before the grand Vizier of Egypt. His criticisms were not going to stop the unravelling of this story in exactly the way that Joseph planned!

We are, however, tempted to wonder whether some in the family might be suspicious of all that had happened, for the detailed requests revealed in this passage of Scripture were very close to the reality of Jacob's life. As we saw yesterday (42:36,38), Jacob appeared to be suspicious about what had actually happened to Joseph and his son's involvement in his disappearance.

### ***Preparations for the journey***

It is interesting to discover that once Jacob heard Judah's appeal (43:8-10) and accepted what he said, he took the initiative in preparations for the journey to secure provisions for the whole family. He ordered a gift for 'the man' in Egypt consisting of standard items of trade, balm, gum and resin (see above) and also the foodstuffs of honey and various nuts. In the circumstances of drought, there was little more that could be offered, and the value of the trading items was probably low because of the breakdown of normal trade and business which would have accompanied a significant drought such as this.

Jacob saw to it that the money for the first grain purchased was returned, and gave the brothers the appropriate money for more. He did not want the brothers to be accused of being spies again, and sought to ensure that they were as presentable as possible in the circumstances. Despite the consternation of the first

return of the brothers at the discovery of the money, Jacob offered a brief note of hope, saying about the money 'perhaps it was a mistake'.

As the brothers left, including Benjamin, Jacob called on the God of his father's, 'El Shaddai', God Almighty. This was the revelation of God to Abraham when the Covenant was fully revealed and circumcision was instituted (17:1 – see 43:14). Here, and for one brief moment, we are reminded that Jacob was concerned about the Covenant and his relationship with God over which he had previously fought (32:30). Jacob had been penniless and hopeless once before when he had left Canaan, and now he had to trust God yet again as he sent his sons away from Canaan and off to Egypt. Trust is perhaps harder when you have to leave everything in the hands of others, however close, rather than pursue the adventure yourself.

## Application

It is certainly true that the story of Joseph contains glimpses of the Gospel, and in this passage, we have seen two hints. Firstly Jacob's handing over of his son for the greater good of the whole family; secondly, the fact that although Judah was the 'rising star' of leadership amongst the brothers, he would still have to show humble obeisance to Joseph in fulfilment of the Lord's dream and vision given to Joseph when he was a youngster (37:6). God's ways are not our ways, as Scripture repeatedly illustrates, and they frequently involve contradictions which seem very confusing to ordinary human logic. In this case, gain at the cost of great loss, and service as the mark of true leadership.

The church today needs to regain an understanding of how God works in human affairs. The stories about what happens to people in church today are sometimes as circular and unbelievable as the great story of Joseph in the final chapters of Genesis! However, if we put aside our dependency upon the normal human processes of logic and listen to the Spirit, we can find out what God is doing. God's church is crying out for people who are prepared to lose all in order to gain the world, and leaders whose sole motive is pure service. This is the seedbed of Christian renewal, just as Judah became the tribe of David, and the 'Son of David' became the 'Messiah' who was Christ. We should have the greatest vision for the humblest and most godly of approaches to Christian service.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. When you read this story, do you feel for Jacob or for the brothers? Discuss your reactions within your group.
2. Do you find it easy to find the 'Gospel' with passages of Scripture such as this, which appear to have little to do with it? Why? Or, why not?
3. Read through the passage and see what you can spot within the text which might be called 'sacrificial'. What can these passages teach us?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*I have certainly known what it is like to be 'forced into a corner' in order to do something which is necessary or right, but which is very difficult for you to do! These moments can prove to be some of the most important for our spiritual development, as they were for Jacob in this story and for the brothers. However, we often reach such crises because we have not 'read the signs' God has given us by His Spirit. The Christian disciple does everything possible to follow the guidance of the Spirit, but knows that there will be times when God has to force us to do His will because we have not listened, or we have not been in the right place at the right time.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Are there any circumstances in which you feel constrained because you have few options? Pray about these, and ask the Lord to help you discern whether these are happening because the Lord needs you to learn some important lesson of faith. Our hardest tests are sometimes most important.*
- *Perhaps unknown to yourself, you may be placing other people in a position they feel is difficult or untenable, and certainly a severe test. Accept the responsibility to pray for those who bear the consequences of your actions, at home or at work.*

## **Final Prayer**

Almighty God, we do not understand the mysteries of Your grace. Show us how to live in a way that is realistic, but also responsive to the leading of Your Spirit. May we be prepared to give all in Your service, and always do Your bidding. Thank You, Almighty God for Your revelation and for Your guidance: AMEN

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