

## Prayer

Dear Jesus, give me a heart that is wise in discernment. In each situation I face, help me to identify the difference between what is right and what is wrong, so that I do not find myself wandering down evil pathways inadvertently. May I be quick to accept the good and reject the wrong, so that I grow in grace and holiness. Thank You dear Jesus, my Lord and my Saviour: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Church ministry

*Pray for those who teach the next generation of Christian leaders in theological training institutions around your country. Pray that they will be taught with spiritual integrity.*

### On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for the joy of work and achievement
- Pray for agencies that distribute food to people in need
- Pray for the work done by Christians in Muslim countries

## Meditation

Have you seen the power of the Lord,  
doing wonders in the world?

Have you listened to the Word of the Lord,  
telling you about eternal truth?

Have you accepted the love of the Lord,  
freeing you from all your sin?

Have you felt the touch of the Lord,  
bringing peace into your soul?

Have you heard the voice of the Lord,  
speaking wisdom to your mind?

Have you known the presence of the Lord,  
giving comfort to your spirit?

Have you accepted the coming of the Lord,  
which is promised in His Word?

For if you have, my friend, you have lived!

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## Bible Study - Genesis 43:16-34

<sup>16</sup> When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, 'Take the men to my home, slaughter an animal and prepare it, because they are to eat with me at noon.' <sup>17</sup> The man did as Joseph ordered, and took the men to Joseph's house. <sup>18</sup> They became apprehensive when they were taken to Joseph's house, thinking, 'This must be because of the money put back in our sacks the first time. We have been brought in so that he may take advantage of us, assault us, make us slaves and take our donkeys.' <sup>19</sup> So they approached Joseph's chief steward and spoke with him at the entrance to the house. <sup>20</sup> They said, 'We beg you, my lord, we only came down the first time to buy food; <sup>21</sup> and when we stopped to lodge for the night we opened our sacks, and found each one's money in the top of his sack, the full amount of our own money! We have therefore brought it back with us, <sup>22</sup> and have brought down with us more money to buy food. We have no idea who put our money in our sacks.' <sup>23</sup> He replied, 'Peace, don't worry; your God and the God of your father has surely put treasure in your sacks for you; I received your money.' Then he brought Simeon out to them.

<sup>24</sup> The steward brought the men into Joseph's house, gave them water to wash their feet, and obtained fodder for their donkeys. <sup>25</sup> Then, they made the present ready for Joseph's coming at

noon, as they had already heard that they would dine there. <sup>26</sup> When Joseph came home, they presented to him the gifts they had brought to the house, and bowed to the ground before him. <sup>27</sup> He asked about their wellbeing, and said, 'Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?' <sup>28</sup> They said, 'Your servant our father is in good health; he is still alive.' And they bowed their heads in respect.

<sup>29</sup> Then, as Joseph looked around and saw his brother Benjamin, the son of his own mother, he said, 'Is this the youngest brother of yours, the one of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!' <sup>30</sup> With that, Joseph was deeply moved with affection for his brother and hurried out on the verge of weeping. He went into a private room and wept there. <sup>31</sup> Then he washed his face, reappeared, and taking control of himself, said; 'Serve the meal.' <sup>32</sup> They served Joseph by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who were there ate by themselves (the Egyptians would not eat with Hebrews because it was offensive to them). <sup>33</sup> Now when the brothers were seated before Joseph, according to their age and birthright from the oldest to the youngest, they looked at each another in amazement. <sup>34</sup> Portions were also taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as much as anyone else's. Then they drank and made merry with him.

## Review

The brothers returned to Egypt without difficulty, but when they arrival, found themselves completely confused. On their first journey, they found themselves facing a resolute and obstinate man, the Vizier of Egypt, who had challenged them and refused to accept that they were not spies. Now, before they had even met the same man again, and we who read the story know full well that this is Joseph, the brothers found themselves in receipt of Egypt's 'red carpet' treatment and were invited to this man's personal house! Was this a trick? We who read the story are as confused as the brothers who came this second time because we do not know what Joseph was doing or why.

The troubled brothers urgently spoke to the senior steward of the Vizier's household. They made a full confession about the money they had found in their sacks, but were reassured (43:23) that nothing was wrong! The story continues to unravel through the ensuing encounter and meal with Joseph, who was still hidden from them by disguise, surprising us frequently by unexpected twists and turns, but ending up by describing an evening of hospitable (and drunken) camaraderie (43:34)! A casual reader might think that the stage would now be set for the final reunion of the brothers, but this was not to be. The last time that the brothers had a meal together, Joseph had been thrown into the bottom of a pit, and was shortly sold into slavery (37:24,25); a fact that should warn us of more intrigue to come before the final revelation and reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers.

Here in this passage, the confusions and contradictions come thick and fast. The brothers were received with all the intricate care of eastern hospitality; the best food to eat (43:16f.), water to wash their feet and fodder for their donkeys (43:24f.). Then, hidden within the steward's response to their anguished explanation of the money they returned, the brothers were offered the traditional oriental greeting of 'peace', and in verse 23, the use of the traditional Hebrew greeting 'shalom' was no accident. The steward's words summarised what was going on in the whole passage. God, the God of the brothers, was responsible for everything that had happened and was about to happen. When Joseph arrived for the meal, he quizzed the brothers about their father; but why should a man as busy as the Vizier of Egypt be concerned about this? The brothers bowed in humble respect, including Benjamin, and therefore fulfilling Joseph's first boyhood dream (37:6).

Joseph cast his eyes towards Benjamin. He spoke words which were, even through an interpreter, very close to a traditional Hebrew blessing (as recorded in Numbers 6:25), and was so moved to tears he had to leave the room (43:30). The brother's were still confused and petrified, but how much longer would Joseph hold out? Then in the serving of the meal, Joseph pre-arranged for the brothers to be seated in birth order, serving Benjamin a huge portion of food, indicating great favour. Meanwhile, Joseph held himself aloof as did the other Egyptians, following the well documented Egyptian practice of separating themselves from all foreigners. It is hard to envisage how Joseph could have held his secret through an entire evening of drinking and making merry!

The heart of this passage lies in what was said by the steward (43:23) who acknowledged God's control of events. We know that God's purpose throughout everything that happened in the Joseph story was to create the opportunity for restoration and reconciliation, but such changes in human relationships could not just happened because of people's wants or feelings. In general, things change for the better in human relationships when people do things that are right and that overcome the problems of the past, for example, through offering or receiving forgiveness. Even today, we make the mistake of believing that love, reconciliation and happiness will break out simply because of our hopes or the words we say, or even

through pleading for what is right. However, God's way is to work through every aspect of human life. In general, relationship breakdown (as with Joseph and his brothers) is a result of many negative things working together such as words, feelings, attitudes and specific events. It is not surprising therefore that reconciliation comes most frequently as a result of many positive things working together, words, feelings, events etc. This passage describes the beginning of this, but although we would like to see instant results, much more had yet to fall into place.

### ***Going Deeper***

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

- The arrival of Joseph's brother in Egypt
- A strange meal and its meaning

## **Going Deeper**

God was at work in the lives of all the family of the people of Israel (Jacob), and He also used others like Joseph's household steward. As we study this passage further, we will begin to see how and why God was working in this way to achieve the reconciliation His family needed and pave the way for His people to grow into a nation and find their own identity.

### ***The arrival of Joseph's brother's in Egypt***

The change of attitude that the brothers found when they returned to Egypt was beyond their comprehension. This was because God was at work through Joseph to show clemency to the brothers. He treated them with respect because they had done what he asked of them by returning with Benjamin. The reception reads as if it was a plan that the steward knew about, and as soon as Joseph saw that Benjamin was indeed present, the plan was put in action. According to human wisdom, we might expect Joseph's earlier frosty reception of the brothers who had so grievously wronged him. They deserved to know the truth of what they had done, and face their guilt by being made subservient to Joseph. Indeed, we might expect that Joseph, not Judah as we saw in yesterday's study, might become the future leader of all Israel. Surely Joseph's dream of the bowing down of his brothers would indicate this?

But such thinking is human thinking. Joseph had reached the maturity of knowing that although he possessed all the power in the world (as it then was), reconciliation before Almighty God, the God of his forefathers, could only be based upon a mutual recognition of equality before God. His dream was not a dream of a final outcome, but part of the process which would lead to reconciliation. All Joseph's actions up to this point in the story were designed to make the dream come true; not because he wanted to gloat over the obeisance of his brothers, but because he knew they had to reach that point of honest humility before others and before God.

The brothers arrived at Joseph's house full of apprehension and humble apology. They sincerely thought that they would be taken captive once they came to Joseph's house and sought re-assurances from the steward before they entered the gates (43:19f.). Grand houses such as those occupied by Viziers of Egypt had their own dungeons in which prisoners were held; indeed, Simeon had been in Joseph's dungeon since the earlier visit. The idea that the steward knew Joseph's plan for his brother's return, and possibly knew everything that was going on is indicated by the words he said in verse 23. The words 'your God and the God of your father' seem to indicate more than astute service to his master Joseph. He knew the full story, and played out his part to achieve God's purposes as well, producing Simeon without further instruction from the busy Joseph, as the brothers obediently came into the house.

### ***A strange meal, and its meaning!***

The meal was preceded by the careful presentation of the gifts brought for Joseph and ordered by his father Jacob. What happened was powerfully ironic, as through these gifts, Jacob paid homage to his own son, in anticipation of the honour he would one day pay to Joseph by acceding to his request to come to Egypt (45:25-28). As the gifts were presented, the first dream was completely fulfilled (see above), and Joseph knew that the first phase of his mission was complete.

Joseph was formally introduced to his brother Benjamin. Again, we do not know the nature of the disguise which prevented Benjamin from recognising his own brother, but Joseph was well experienced in speaking Egyptian, and from our understanding of Egyptian culture, it would not be surprising if someone of Joseph's stature was screened or dressed in a manner which made it difficult to make normal facial recognition. Surely, we might think, the emotions of such a moment would be appropriate for a striking and effective reunion? But no, Joseph resisted this. Something more had to happen before reconciliation could take place (the fulfilment of the second dream; 37:9). For this reason, we should not think of Joseph's hurrying out to weep (43:30) as a mere reflection of emotion. It is included in the story to show that Joseph was not out of

control of his emotions, but in control of them. The success of God's work within the whole family depended upon Joseph waiting on God for the right moment, and it was not yet.

The details of the seating arrangements at the meal should have been enough to indicate to the brothers that Joseph might indeed be the man with whom they were dealing. For the reasons given, the Egyptians ate by themselves and not with either the brothers or with Joseph (43:32). This tells us that the Vizier (Joseph) was obviously not an Egyptian, and this must have been obvious to the brothers as well! Lastly, the multiple portion of food given to Benjamin was itself a sign, for all the brothers knew that Benjamin had one brother who they had sold to Egypt!

We cannot blame the brothers for not recognising what was going on underneath their very noses! It is often the case that God's ways are often standing right before us, yet we fail to 'see' them because if we knew them, we would scarce believe what the Lord was doing. We know that the purpose of God in bringing His people to Egypt was to enable them to grow into a distinct people. In our passage today, there are some clues as to why Egypt may have been God's chosen means for this important development. In the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38), it appears that the Canaanites were all too eager to intermarry with Jacob's sons, and the result would have made it very difficult to maintain a distinct identity. In Egypt the people who lived there largely isolated themselves from foreigners, keeping themselves at a distance (we shall see more of this later in Genesis 47 and 48). It was much more likely that God's people would retain their identity as a growing nation in Egypt than in Canaan.

## Application

We often describe God's ways as mysterious; but like it or not, we are all caught up in them. In Christ we have access to the Father and have a more complete understanding of the way that God achieves His will on earth. It remains true, however, that we often fail to see what the Lord is doing, and we have to trust God in the midst of the most difficult of situations in order to find our way forward. This is not exceptional discipleship, but normal discipleship. Family difficulties such as those within the family of Jacob, the infant 'people of Israel' have always been some of the most awkward. However, this story reminds us that words or feelings or even dramatic gestures are not enough to bring about the reconciliation for which we long. Firstly, we need to be submissive to the Holy Spirit who does God's work in us and in our midst. Secondly, we must accept that the breakthroughs do not come when we expect them, but in God's timing which is often a mystery to us. Given this, two things are important; faithful service to God, and faithful service to those with whom we have personal difficulties which need to be repaired for the sake of our families or the family of the people of God.

The world today is a strange place, but the Lord can use it to help His people and even bring reconciliation between the many parts of His church which are riven apart. I firmly believe that the Lord is working to bring His church, His Bride together even in our own times. I also believe that the reason we do not see exactly what the Lord is doing is because our own religious sensibilities get in the way, and we discount too much when thinking and praying about what the Lord can do. He can do anything, and our task, like Joseph, is to be obedient.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the way in which God is at work within this passage of the story of Joseph.
2. Why do you think that the brothers do not perceive that the royal Vizier might indeed be Joseph?
3. What prevents us from seeing what God is doing in our own midst today? Discuss the possibilities.

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*You may have found yourself in circumstances that are quite strange, and you do not know what the results will be of what you are doing! I have certainly found myself in such situations, and I have kept myself keenly attuned to what is happening in order to try and work out what is happening. At times like these, our contact with the Lord is most important, because we need to be ready to hear His voice telling us what is right or wrong at a moment's notice. I do believe that he will keep us from harm's way if we are actively listening to His voice; moreover, we have a greater chance of knowing what He will do to change things for the better.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *How often have you been in a situation in which you have not been able to see or understand what is going on? How has the Lord been able to lead you through this, and what have you learned about it? It is important to learn the lessons from our experience so that we move forward in faith. In relation to this passage of scripture, we would all prefer to be counted as a 'Joseph' rather than 'the brothers'; however, we often more like the brothers.*
- *Pray for any people you know who are trapped in personal difficulties at home or at church from which they find it difficult to find any escape route. Pray that the Lord will bless them with answers to their prayers.*

## **Final Prayer**

Bless us all, Lord Jesus, each one of us who calls on Your name for help and strength. You are the source of all our joy, You are the well-spring of our hope, and You are the foundation of all that is good in us. Lead us on to greater things and in due time, bring us to Your home in glory: AMEN

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