

Prayer

Turn our hearts, Lord God, towards doing the work You require for the growth of Your Kingdom. Give us the grace to accept its difficult challenges, give us joy in doing what is right and just according to Your Word, and give us patience to wait for the seeds of the Kingdom to grow! All praise be to You, Lord God Almighty, for the glories of Your Kingdom: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Church Ministry

Pray about the deep divisions within the church concerning Christian ministry. Pray that churches will be willing to search God's Word for what is right rather than rely on tradition.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the divisive subject of genetically modified crops*
- *Pray for Israel and its surrounding nations – pray for peace*
- *Give thanks to God for the joy of work and achievement*

Meditation

Let the Lord God baptise you in His Holy Spirit!

In the breath of His resourceful power upholding all Creation;
In the Spirit of knowledge and wisdom foreseen by Isaiah;
In the coming of God's harvest of souls prophesied by Joel;
In the authority of Christ to confront and cast out all evil;
In the amazing 'new birth' spoken of by Jesus to Nicodemus;
In the release of pure worship 'in spirit and truth';
In the breath of the risen Christ and the authority to forgive;
In the Pentecostal power to save souls and build the church;
In the apostolic commission to take the Gospel to all the world;
In the anticipation of our spiritual 'resurrection body' at the End!

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Bible Study - Genesis 44:18-34

¹⁸ Then Judah approached him and said, 'I beg you my lord, allow your servant to plead with you in your hearing, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are like Pharaoh himself. ¹⁹ My lord asked his servants, "Have you a father or another brother?" ²⁰ So we told my lord, "We have an aged father, and a younger brother, the child of his old age. His only full brother is dead, so he is the only son left of his mother's children, and his father loves him." ²¹ Then you told your servants "Bring him down to me, so that I may see him myself." ²² So we said to my lord, "The lad cannot leave his father, for if this were to happen, his father would die." ²³ But you insisted to your servants, "Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will never see my face again." ²⁴ When we went back to your servant my father we told him the words of my lord; ²⁵ so when our father said, "Go and buy us a little food again," ²⁶ we said, "We cannot go, and we will only do so if our youngest brother goes with us; for we cannot see the man again unless our youngest brother is with us." ²⁷ Then your servant my father said to us, "You know that my wife bore me two sons. ²⁸ One of them left me, and I think that he was most certainly torn to pieces because I have never seen him since. ²⁹ Now if you take this one from me as well, and he is harmed, you will send me down to Sheol in mourning." ³⁰ Now therefore, when I return to your servant my father and the lad is not with us, then just as his life is bound with that of the lad, ³¹ when he sees that he is not with us, he will die; and your servants will send your servant our father down to Sheol in mourning. ³² Your servant agreed to accept personal responsibility for the lad to my father with these words, "If I do not bring him back to you, then you, my father, may hold me guilty all my life." ³³ So please let your servant remain as your slave in place of the lad; and permit the boy go back with his brothers. ³⁴ For how can I go back to my father if the lad is not with me? I could not bear to see the anguish which would overwhelm my father.'

Review

This speech by Judah is the longest single speech recorded in Genesis. Within it, Judah pleads before the Vizier of Egypt, who, unknown to him, is his own brother Joseph. He pleads not for his own life, but on behalf of his father (44:19,20,34), and offers himself as a sacrifice in the place of Benjamin his youngest brother, to fulfil the penalty that has come on Benjamin after his entrapment by Joseph. The speech demonstrates how far Judah has developed since his youthful days, and at last, this is the proof so desperately needed by Joseph, that it would now be possible to achieve reconciliation with his family. Judah's powerful speech 'saved the day' and paved the way for the turning point of the whole story, Joseph's revelation of himself to his brothers (as in tomorrow's reading). This was the first step in the final act of this great drama, which saw the old man Jacob brought to Egypt together with his entire family.

The closer you look at the speech, the more you will find and the more remarkable it appears to be. At the beginning of the story of Joseph (ch.37), Judah was dominated by self interest and greed, as were his other brothers, indeed, it was he who proposed the selling of Joseph for profit to the Ishmaelite traders (37:26,27) on their way to Egypt. In the one chapter of the story we have not read (chapter 38, about Judah and the rape of Tamar) Judah was described as a disinterested father who was unconcerned about his own family; his appalling behaviour was exposed by the just actions of his Canaanite daughter-in-law, Tamar. With all this in mind, the Judah who presented himself before Joseph as the undisputed leader of the brothers at this moment of crisis was a remarkably changed man. Through all that had happened, God had changed Judah from an irreverent youth to a true leader of God's people.

We might expect Judah to offer a defence of the brothers in the light of the accusations levelled against them. However, he spoke only briefly about the brother's experience in coming to Egypt to buy grain because of drought. The speech dwells on the psychological effect of the whole saga on the brother's father, Jacob. In Judah's mind, he was preparing the ground for an appeal to Joseph to allow him to take Benjamin's punishment on himself. From where he stood, Benjamin had been proved to be a thief, but because of his father's love for him and Judah's love for his father, Judah was prepared to offer himself in his place.

The effect of this on Joseph must have been powerful. He remained silent throughout, allowing Judah to speak at length, but he must surely have been deeply moved to hear something his own father's reactions to his disappearance so many years ago (44:20). He was also able to observe within the speech the full extent of the changes that had taken place within Judah, the man who sold him into slavery, and he must have been touched by the constant mention of his father. We should not forget that many years ago, Jacob and Joseph enjoyed a very close relationship, and Joseph enjoyed the privileges of being the favoured son. He must have longed to see his father and speak to him again, and tell him that he was still alive! He must have longed to make himself known to Benjamin, the only one of the brothers who was technically his full brother.

It is impossible not to notice something of the Gospel within Judah's words. There are no exact parallels to the life of Christ, but the spiritual principles are clear enough. In a godly way, Judah sought not his own will, but to do the best for his father, even though it involved the offering of his life. Judah was also prepared to sacrifice himself for the greater good of the whole family of Israel, and for at least one, specific and guilty member of that family. In doing this, Judah gave the first example in the Bible of salvation through substitution! I could go on, but the point is clear enough. Judah demonstrated elementary Gospel principles within his actions, and this paved the way for God's will of reconciliation amongst His people.

Going Deeper

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

- Judah begins his speech
- The extraordinary features of the speech
- The final plea

Going Deeper

Judah's speech begins and ends with reference to his father, who is mentioned fourteen times in all (in the Hebrew text). Judah could not have pulled more effective 'heart-strings' than these! But the tenor of the speech is judicious in many respects, showing deference to Joseph as well as his father, and portraying the genuine unity of the brothers which contrasted so much with the bickering amongst them when they disposed of Joseph (37:20f.) As we go deeper, we discover that God's work amongst the brothers had clearly transformed the situation.

Judah begins his speech

As Judah requested permission to speak (44:18), he had clearly learned something about the Egyptian way of life, and put into effect a number of ploys to win favour by what he said. We know from ancient hieroglyphics that the Egyptians were flattered by long speeches, and the length of this speech gave the impression of considered and careful thought, and also thorough preparation. A careful look at what Judah

put into the speech and left out of it makes it very evident that it was composed to impress the hearer by appealing to the honourable principle of respect for the aged, in particular, the father figure in a family group.

The speech began with an appeal to the Vizier (Joseph) for a fair hearing, likening him to 'Pharaoh himself' (44:18). It was a good start. Judah proceeded to re-tell the story of their coming to Egypt, but leaving out all the painful experiences of the first visit, when they had been rejected. Instead of attempting to justify the experience of the brothers or proclaim their innocence, Judah tactfully referred to the Vizier's interest in the father of the family and also the younger brother. In reality, this was the issue that had created such confusion and distress within the family when they came home after the first visit (43:6f.), but Judah was not about to discuss this before his Egyptian audience!

Instead, he told the history of his father's two youngest sons, born of one mother, and by describing Benjamin as the only remaining son of a favoured wife, accepted something that had probably rankled with him for most of his life just as it had distressed his own mother Leah. This was the fact that despite the many sons Jacob bore to Leah and to his two concubines, he regarded only the two sons of Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin, as his real heirs. Judah did not know at this point that God's intentions were different from his father's, and that all the twelve tribes of Israel (Jacob) would be blessed! But by being subservient to his own father's wishes, he may well have found the greater blessing of God Almighty!

Extraordinary features of the speech

Judah unwittingly revealed a great deal to Joseph as he spoke. Certainly, he revealed that his father was alive and well (40:20) and that Jacob still retained fierce loyalty to the sons of Rachel, even though one of them was 'dead' (as he supposed). Judah then described with great care and in a section of speech which was probably well-planned, that the life of the old man was 'linked' with the life of the younger son Benjamin (44:20-23). The flow of the speech at this point reflects the concerns of the Vizier and his request to see the younger brother, but in the Hebrew of the text, words are used which indicate the most intimate of human relationships; 'his father loves him' (44:20), 'the lad cannot leave his father, for ... his father would die' (44:22).

After this subtle and sentimental appeal, Judah move on to the need for the family to send for food a second time (44:25f.), and the expected opposition of their father to the need to take Benjamin. However, in Judah's desire to make the most of the speech at this point, he nearly said too much! He reported his father's words about his missing son 'one of them left me ... I think ... torn to pieces ... now if you take this one as well ...' (44:27-29). In these words, there is a hint of suspicion that the disappearance of Joseph was not what it seemed, and the old man Jacob may long have suspected foul play on the part of the brothers! He was certainly highly suspicious of allowing the brothers any responsibility for Benjamin, and this was the reason why the brothers had delayed so long before coming for food a second time, despite the long drought. From the point of view of Joseph, who was listening to all this, what Judah said was pretty close to a both a confession of guilt, and an acceptance that his father suspected that he may still be alive. The dark secrets of the family were gradually being exposed!

The final plea

Judah's final plea was well constructed and well presented. Egyptian culture as well as many other ancient cultures venerated age, and it was an anathema to personally insult one's father, or even the venerably aged in general. Judah pleaded (44:33f.) that his father would suffer terribly if Benjamin did not return to him, and because of this, he requested that he should be made to pay the penalty that Benjamin should pay, by natural justice. Judah ended with a heartbreaking plea; 'I could not bear to see the anguish which would overwhelm my father!'

However, ever since the finding of the cup in Benjamin's sack, it had been made clear that only the thief (Benjamin) would be made to serve the Vizier. We are left wondering whether Joseph's original plan was to take Benjamin to one side and reveal himself to him, his only 'full' brother, before taking further action to reveal his presence to all the rest of the brothers. However, it was not to be. Judah's speech was a masterpiece of controlled rhetoric and I believe it changed the course of events. In our next Bible study we will see Joseph's response; for the speech by Judah cut through to his heart. The changes evident in Judah and the brothers were sufficient for reconciliation to begin!

Application

It seems highly likely to me that this speech was a mixture of care and preparation, and also inspiration from God. Judah had taken from the story only those things that would serve his purpose and yet occasionally, he appeared to reveal more than he intended. Finally, his appeal was deeply spiritual and life changing for all involved (as we will find out tomorrow!). It may seem strange to say that we can learn something about preaching from all this, but I believe Judah's speech contains important spiritual advice. The greatest sermons and speeches in the Bible are a mixture of pure spiritual inspiration and very careful planning or structure. This combination works very differently for different people but the principle is correct. Peter, for example, preached at Pentecost using the structure of Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28,29) which he knew so well because he knew it by heart, and the Holy Spirit used this and Peter's experience to explain the meaning of the passage and apply it to the people who heard him. Something similar can be said for the sermon of

Stephen (Acts 7) which is based upon the structure of Israel's history, with the Holy Spirit speaking through it and through Stephen to deliver a devastating message. Preachers today need to root their sermons in the truths of both God's Word and the history of God's people, both in Old Testament times and in the life of the Church. This can only come through deeper study and sometimes the memorisation of texts and facts; and it is hard work. This will give the essential doctrinal and Scriptural basis for the Holy Spirit to work through the words of a preacher, who, like Judah, must be aware of the cultural niceties of presentation so that the Word can be understood effectively.

The other important features of this passage are the Gospel principles of vicarious suffering (vicarious means 'on behalf of another'), and of sacrifice for the sake of the 'father' (mentioned earlier). It is quite astonishing that these principles, which are essential to our understanding of the Gospel, are to be found in an early form here in Genesis, and from the mouth of Judah, the forebear of David and of Jesus. Such things help us understand that although each book of the Bible was written at various times and for different purposes within Jewish and then Christian tradition, all of God's Word is brought together by the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, with rich strands of guidance and inspiration for us to discover.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Give reasons for whether you believe Judah suspected the Vizier to be Joseph by this point in the story, or not?
2. Under what circumstances might it be right to accept punishment on behalf of another person?
3. Discuss the main feature of Judah's speech and decide what a preacher can learn from it (apart from what I have highlighted above!)

Discipleship

Personal comment:

All who have had to make a public statement, preach a sermon, speak at a meeting, address the press, or any other such activity, will know that it can be very scary when you do such things for the first time. Preaching may well be a natural or spiritual gift for some people, but certainly not all. However, it is best if all of us are prepared to stand up and speak to defend our faith or give a reason for what we believe. We often say that the Christian view is not 'put across' today, but if we are to rectify this, it needs people to be prepared to make public statements. In addition, this needs a combination of inspiration and preparedness!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *How hard do you find it to speak in public? You may be someone who is quite used to doing this, but you may be someone who is quite unprepared to do this. Surely, in God's Kingdom, the one should help the other! If you are a regular preacher, seek to encourage others to speak out about their faith. If you are not, then consider whether you are called to speak out about your faith, and discuss this with someone else within the church.*
- *Pray for God to lay His hand on people who will be the preachers of the next generation. Be prepared to be encouragers of those who speak out God's Word.*

Final Prayer

Great and Mighty Lord; fix my heart on You with such intensity that no evil temptations can shake me. Keep my feet firmly on Your pathway, guide me securely through my troubles, and bring me safely into Your complete salvation and my journey's end. Through Jesus Christ, AMEN
