

Prayer

We rejoice in You, Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour. You are both the Temple and the Priest; You are the King upon the throne and the Servant in the courtyard; You are our Guide along life's pathway and the wounded man who heals. You mean more to us than can be understood by those who place their trust in mere humanity, for there is only one God, and we have found Him in You, Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Trees

Trees play an important part in the ecology of our planet, yet few people give them much thought. This week we will pray about our responsibility to manage the trees in our environment.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those involved in the Jaycee Dugard kidnapping*
- *Pray for statesmen who do their best for the good of all*
- *Give thanks for the joy of sharing meals together*

Meditation

Jesus, be merciful, Lord Jesus, hear the cries
Of those whose lives are blighted or controlled
By the fearsome power of a broken heart;
Of hopes all lost, of emotions ripped by strife.

Too many harbour inner brokenness;
Wounded souls; they do their best to carry on.
They need a hand of love to grasp and hold,
For life's true loves seem irretrievably lost.

Then, encultured by the 'sick list' life,
A counsellor confirms the awful truth,
That only when they face the 'pain too painful'
Can human help begin to ease their suffering.

Christ, be merciful, Lord Jesus, hear the cries;
Come break the torrid grip of Satan's vice
Which turns a troubled life into earthy hell:
Release heaven's mighty power to save!

Come not too late by now, as needed,
And by Your sacrifice and endless love,
Bind up the torn and hopeless human heart,
Love it! Heal it! Save it! Lead it on to glory!

Bible Study - Genesis 45:1-15

¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself in front of those nearby. He shouted, 'Send everyone away from me.' So no one was with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and then all the household of Pharaoh heard about it.

³ Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph! Is my father really still alive?' But his brothers were unable to answer him as they were astounded at his appearance. ⁴ So Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' They came closer, and he said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ After all this time, do not be distressed or upset with yourselves because you sold me here, because God sent me ahead of you so that lives could be saved. ⁶ For there has been famine in the land for two years, and for five more years there will be no ploughing or reaping. ⁷ God sent me ahead of you to secure a remnant on earth and keep alive within you the prospect of a great deliverance. ⁸ So it was not really you who sent me

here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, master of his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry back to my father and tell him, "Your son Joseph says this: God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me without delay. ¹⁰ You will settle in the land of Goshen where you will be near me, you and your children and grandchildren, your flocks, your herds, and all you have. ¹¹ Because there are five more years of famine to come, I will provide for you there. Then you, your household and all you have, will not fall into poverty."

¹² 'Surely now your own eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is really I, Joseph, who speaks to you now. ¹³ Tell my father how greatly I am respected in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.' ¹⁴ Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, while Benjamin wept as well. ¹⁵ And he embraced all his brothers and wept over each of them. After this, his brothers talked with him.

Review

It hardly requires anyone to expand upon the extraordinary events described in this passage of Scripture. The story tells itself with a personal passion that is rare in scripture. After all Joseph's testing and brinkmanship and all the polite faithfulness of the brothers under extreme stress of the circumstances they faced, the time for revelation and reconciliation, heralded by six chapters of Genesis, had at last come..

While Judah spoke (see previously, 44:18-34) Joseph remained silent. Eloquently yet plainly, Judah conveyed the truth about the state of his family to Joseph. On the one hand, he spoke of the heart wrenching and terrible dark secret of the disappearance of Joseph that had haunted his father Jacob, and the other hand, he described the changed heart of the brothers. In order to demonstrate his sincerity he was prepared sacrifice his own personal liberty in order to save the young Benjamin, Joseph's own younger brother. The speech pulled all the right heartstrings and forced Joseph's hand. He threw out the courtiers who surrounded him (45:1) and burst out his dramatic confession 'I am Joseph!' (45:3). It was all too much for the confused brothers (45:3), so Joseph had to take the initiative and speak to them personally and with honesty to make them believe him. This is something that can hardly be done through words, but is normally conveyed within the 'body language' of people; it is indicated by Joseph's words 'come closer to me ...' (45:4). Then, by the time that Joseph had finished his speech (45:13), the reconciliation between the brothers needed no words, and they embraced with brotherly affection. Love transforms everything.

In the previous study of Genesis 44:18-34, we saw how in hindsight, Gospel principles can be seen within Judah's speech. We observed redemption through undeserved suffering on behalf of another, as in Judah's desire to be a slave in the place of Benjamin; and we also saw solid evidence of how God had His hand on everything, despite the suffering and distress of the brothers. Despite everything that was happening, the small family tribe of the people of Israel (Jacob) was being saved by God from obliteration through famine.

With the revelation of Joseph in our passage today, the evidence of God's providential hand is made crystal clear. Joseph now declared his belief that God's guiding hand had sustained the family through the awful experiences of the last two decades; 'God has sent me ahead of you so that lives could be saved ... to secure ... the prospect of deliverance!' (45:5-7). On the basis of this profound revelation, Joseph was able to forgive his brothers for their evil deed in selling him as a slave; and his brothers could receive this forgiveness as changed men. Here are Gospel themes in abundance; reconciliation through forgiveness and love, deliverance through faithfulness across the generations, and the revelation that God works through a small 'remnant' (who was Joseph, see 45:5-7), so that the wider family of His people could be saved.

All in all, we should not be surprised that this is the case. We must think of the book of Genesis not merely as the first book of the Bible, but as a book in itself. It begins with the story of Creation, followed immediately with the tragedy of the 'Fall' whereby sin separates God from the pinnacle of His creation, humanity. After its dramatic beginning, the bulk of the book of Genesis is then focussed on the story of God's choice of a man named Abraham and his family, through whom he had chosen to work to overcome the tragedy of the 'Fall' and bless the whole world. Because of human sin, He did this through a Covenant which He instituted and to which Abraham (and Isaac and Jacob in due time) responded by faith. The saga ended with a story of grand reconciliation that restored God's family, and repaired their unity and faith.

Joseph's great story is an example of how God brings salvation to His people; but it is not just a story about forgiveness and reconciliation. It is prophetic of God's 'salvation history', tracked through the whole Old Testament and completed in the New Testament through Jesus Christ.

Going Deeper

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

- Joseph reveals himself
- Joseph's speech

- The recognition of the brothers

Going Deeper

In the further Biblical study, we will go through the speech of Joseph, stage by stage, and see how the Gospel principles emerge within the text. Doing this does not mean that we gloss over the incredible nature of what happened, but it shows the whole event in a new light and brings parts of the story into focus in a way that is liberating, for without the Gospel, some things remain hidden; and some of these verses are certainly mysterious!

Joseph reveals himself (45:1-4)

The story of Joseph's revelation of himself to his brothers is a wonderful description of the contradictions of real life, rarely conveyed in fiction with the subtlety of real life. Joseph threw out all his courtiers (45:1) in order to reveal himself to his brothers in private. We wonder whether any of Joseph's servants and courtiers have already worked out what is going on: they know he is a Hebrew (41:12 etc.) after all! We can imagine them taking up places just beyond any line of sight, listening to all that went on. Certainly, his weeping, if not his cry of revelation 'I am Joseph' was heard, and even we are told that the court gossip machine conveyed the news to Pharaoh even whilst the event took place (45:2)!

It can be hard to come to terms with genuine 'good news'. For example, the early disciples were said to be very fearful when Jesus was raised from the dead (John 20:19, Mark 16:8 etc.). In this story the brothers could not make a quick transition from the horror and fear of their situation before the grand Vizier of Egypt (as in the whole of chapter 44), to the news announced so dramatically to them that this same man was the brother they had sold into slavery! The dramatic news came to them suddenly by the words 'I am Joseph!' More than one of them must have wondered whether they would be executed summarily for their past misdemeanours!

Such thoughts would have been momentary, and we can only guess at them from the point of view of our common humanity. However, after his self revelation, Joseph immediately asked again about his father. Judah had already spoken about him at great length in his speech, more than a dozen times (44:18f.), so although most Bible translations say 'is my father still alive?', but there is a small nuance to the text that is worth noticing. In the Hebrew of the text there is a small emphatic particle (connecting word), which makes me confident to translate this 'is my father really still alive?', as if Joseph was saying to his brothers; 'you're not just kidding me about this are you?' However, at this point in the story the brothers were still dumbstruck and could not respond. They had not yet reached the place where they could give a simple answer to the question; they needed more from Joseph to be confident that it really was him. Joseph then invited the brothers to come closer so that they could see him and perhaps even touch him. It was an inspired moment, and as Joseph continued to speak, this gave them time to observe him and take in the enormity of what had just happened. Doubtless, Joseph addressed them now in their mother tongue to reassure them. Scripture does not say this, but the story would make little sense unless this was what happened.

Joseph's speech

Everything Joseph said from verse 4 to verse 13 rested upon his first insistence; God had worked through all that happened to ensure the greater good of the family. Gospel themes abound in what Joseph says here. The first theme is the idea that God 'goes ahead' of His people in order to act providentially in caring for them and others (45:5). For us, this is a principle of mission and service; for Joseph and his brothers, this was the only way they could make sense of what had happened to them.

The second theme is the idea that God works through a 'remnant' (this means a small sample of the larger group) by acting providentially through them for the good of all. For us today, the principle of the remnant is close to the ministry of Christ, who was Himself the remnant of God's people through whom God acted for the salvation of all people. In the Old Testament, this theme is far too large to discuss here, but it is essential to our understanding of the prophets, especially Isaiah. The principle of the 'remnant' is not well understood today, as you can easily find out by reading verse 7 in different versions of the Bible (they are all very different) and comparing it with my own translation (see above). The idea of the remnant enables us to perceive within this story God's fore-planning of deliverance and salvation.

(In many commentaries on Genesis, some play is made of the meaning of verse 8, which appears to describe the formal role of Joseph as, 'father to Pharaoh, master of his household and ruler over all Egypt'. Why should Joseph say this to his brothers? They knew this already, so why the grandiose speech and manner? The relationship of Joseph to Pharaoh may have been outlined clearly as grand Vizier in the words of the Egyptian language. However, in Hebrew, it appears that God had given Joseph authority over Pharaoh! He even ruled Egypt for him as his 'father'!

The remainder of Joseph's speech concentrated on his demand that his father join him in a part of Egypt called Goshen, where Joseph felt safe in offering them his care and provision during the remaining years of famine. There is considerable disagreement about where 'Goshen' is, but it is commonly reckoned to be in the east of the Nile Delta where there was good grazing. Moreover, depending upon whose 'chronology' (time-dating) of Egypt you believe, this part of Egypt was well occupied during the reign of the Hyksos Kings of Egypt (the earlier half of the second millennium BC), when a number of significant city sites were built in the North East of Egypt.

The recognition of the brothers

After this appealing and deeply human speech, affirming the work of the God in whom their family believed, the brothers were won over. They were caught up in the rejoicing and emotions of the occasion (45:14,15). It is sometimes true that reconciliation and forgiveness are not made from the words that people can say; indeed, we all know that saying 'sorry' is part of forgiveness, but more accurately, it is part of the road of forgiveness which is complete when people demonstrate through their actions that forgiveness is given and/or received.

Here, forgiveness broke out amongst the brothers because of their common acceptance that God had been behind everything. Forgiveness was not so much the result of the efforts of Judah or Joseph, but the hand of God, recognised by both parties. They had much to talk about (45:15)!

Application

God's eternal purpose is reconciliation between Himself and all His Creation, and with the proviso that He has given all humanity the choice whether to accept Him or not; He will fulfil His purposes. This is the amazing truth of the whole Bible, and it is signalled in its very first book; Genesis. Few people to whom I have mentioned these things previously believed that Genesis prefigures the Gospel through the story of Joseph. We do not have a full story of the work of the Messiah in Genesis, but we do have many of the elements of His work; doing the will of the Father; sacrifice for the salvation of others, the prevenient (going before) work of God, His providence, endurance for the sake of God's greater purposes, and so much more.

This passage reminds us, however, that although God's hand is on His people, there are always things that we must do ourselves, such as offering and receiving forgiveness. Together, that is, with the power of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, as in this story, these things are publicly dramatic, but often they are dramatic only in a very private sense. Joseph wanted the meeting with his brothers to be entirely private, but the good news of his reconciliation was broadcast before he could tell the story himself. That is often the way of human affairs. What we should never forget is that forgiveness and reconciliation between people is always related to the forgiveness God offers us, and also to the reconciliation we may have with God our Father. In this, the story of Joseph is quite clear.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. If Joseph had not revealed himself at this moment of time because of the pressure of Judah's speech, what do you think he was planning next?
2. Read through the speech again and discuss the way in which God's providence was at work through the whole story of Joseph.
3. Do you believe that the final verses of this text really describe reconciliation, or are the brothers truly convinced? If so, by what?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Do you find it easy to offer forgiveness? I was once present at a Synod of African clergy where there had been deep divisions between people over many years. After speeches asking the Lord to intervene, the whole assembly was overtaken by a sense of God's presence in which people began to walk about and forgive one another across the previously resolute divide. The meeting dissolved in praise and worship to God, and little business was done for the day! This does not often happen in Western countries because people fear loss of dignity if they 'let go' in such a way before God. Are you really prepared to stand down from your principles, if God calls you; and forgive?

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on who you feel it hard to forgive? What would be the cost of forgiving this person? Would they respond or understand? Pray and ask the Lord to help you face any issues of unforgiveness there may be in your life.*
- *Pray for the people in your own life who have difficulty with forgiveness and unforgiveness. Pray that God will work in the long term to resolve such division and separation.*

Final Prayer

Great Lord and Master; we are amazed at the complexity of our lives. So much happens to us that we cannot remember everything that happens to us each day! Help us to remember what is spiritually important and to forget what is best put behind us; and give us the grace to know the difference! AMEN
