

The Test of Love

Genesis 44

How Joseph's brothers must have rejoiced as they headed for home! How light their hearts must have been in verse 3, especially when they remembered the first such trip they had taken. For on that occasion, they had been forced to leave their brother Simeon in an Egyptian prison. But on this journey, Simeon was free to travel with them – and was no doubt embellishing his stories of his imprisonment.

Yes, on their first trip home they had no idea how they would ever get more food once the supplies they had purchased had run out. For the ruler of Egypt had required them to bring their youngest brother Benjamin back with them if they were ever to trade with him again – and they had been certain that their father would never let them do that.

But at the time of verse 3, their future seemed secure. It turned out that their father Jacob had allowed them to take Benjamin back to Egypt after all. And when the ruler of Egypt had seen Benjamin, he had not only been satisfied that the brothers were not spies. No, he had entertained them with a lavish feast. As a result, they knew they were welcome to come back to Egypt if they ever needed more food.

So, how light their hearts must have been, how free from fear or worry! How they must have looked forward to seeing their father, bringing him not only food to sustain his household, but also Simeon and Benjamin, both of whom Jacob had been prepared never to see again. The ship of their destiny serenely progressed upon a calm sea and under cloudless skies.

And then it struck a reef. For when Joseph's steward overtook them, he had accused them once again of theft. Oh, they had protested, insisting on their scrupulous honesty. But the steward had insisted that one of them had in fact stolen Joseph's silver cup. Certain of their innocence, they had opened their sacks – only to find that very cup in Benjamin's sack.

And so, Benjamin had been arrested, and as had and his brothers returned to Joseph's house, they had good reason to fear that he would have been kept as a slave in Egypt the rest of his life – in fact, they might all have ended up in prison.

Yes, it would be easy for us to imagine the brothers being angry – perhaps even angry with God. "How can You let this happen?" they might have prayed. "We didn't do anything wrong, and now we have been arrested. Why don't You keep bad things like this from happening? Why don't You protect us?" And in the midst of your own disappointments and frustrations, maybe you've prayed that same sort of prayer.

But notice what the brothers did instead: they tore their clothes in a sign of grief. They packed up all their stuff and went back to Joseph's house without compulsion. They stood before the ruler of Egypt, not in anger, but in contrition and humility. In fact, in verse 16, Judah said that their sin had been found out. In fact, he went so far as to say that they all deserved to be punished for their sins, to remain in Egypt as slaves.

What was he talking about? After all, we know that none of them had stolen the cup. Instead, verse 2 tells us that Joseph had planted it in Benjamin's sack. So, what sin were Judah and his brothers confessing?

Well, the reason they were willing to accept slavery for a theft they did not commit was because they knew they were guilty of a much greater sin: many years before, they had sold their brother Joseph into slavery. More than that, they knew that God is righteous and that God will not leave the guilty unpunished. So they saw God's justice being worked out through their suffering. That's why Judah said that God had discovered their sin.

And so perhaps we can see in Judah's words part of the answer to our own questions about God's justice. For don't we often ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" But maybe that's not the right question after all. For are there any completely good people? I mean, have any of us really kept all of God's commandments? How many of us have really loved Him with all we are and all we have – or have we held something back from Him, giving our time and attention and even devotion to other people or things? How many of us have really loved our

neighbors just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves – or do we continue to hold out on them, putting our own wants ahead of the needs of others?

Yes, since we've all pulled away from God and from one another, since we continue to cut ourselves off from the only source of life and light and truth, do any of us really deserve to be living right now? For back in the Garden of Eden, God made it clear to Adam that the punishment for any breach of God's law was death. So, since all of us have sinned, the only reason that any of us are still alive is because of God's forbearance and grace.

So, if we were really honest about our spiritual condition, when we face injustice and unfairness, we would share the reaction of Joseph's brothers. We would come before God not with angry self-righteousness, not insisting on whatever rights we think we might have, but with humility and confession. In short, we would share the attitude of Judah and his brothers.

But of course, the ultimate irony is that the ruler of Egypt before whom Judah unburdened his soul was actually the very Joseph against whom he and his brothers had committed their greatest sin. And so, Joseph had an opportunity to pay his brothers back for the years of misery they had caused him. He could have made them his slaves, inflicting on all of them exactly the same punishment he had received at their hands.

But Joseph didn't do that. Instead, verse 17 says that, he put his brothers to one last test, just to make sure that they were, after all, truly repentant.

For repentance involves more than just expressing sorrow for our sins. It even goes beyond mere confession of sin. Repentance means turning your life around, turning away from sin and rejecting its power over you, and turning to God, living only according to God's will.

That's why Joseph gave his brothers an opportunity to repeat their great sin. For in verse 17, he says that all of them could go in peace back to their father. They could take the food they had bought. They could take Simeon, who had been in prison. But they had to leave Benjamin in Egypt.

Oh, how easy it would have been for the brothers to go along with Joseph's plan! After all, they hadn't forgotten that Benjamin had become their father's new favorite. Joseph himself had reminded them of that fact at the great banquet the night before, when he had given Benjamin five times as much food as any of them had received. No, Benjamin couldn't have been very popular with the rest of his siblings – after all, he was only a half-brother to any of them.

And wouldn't it have been easy for Benjamin's brothers to rationalize abandoning him in Egypt? After all, as far as they knew, maybe he had stolen that cup after all. If so, why should they stick their necks out for the little thief? And they could have reminded themselves of their urgent need to get back home. For didn't they have wives and children who would starve if they did not return soon with some food? And they could always tell their father truthfully that it was the ruler of Egypt who had forced their hand. Yes, how easy it would have been for them to repeat their sin against Joseph and leave Benjamin to be a slave in Egypt!

I wonder how well we would do if God were to put us to such a test of our repentance. No, we may not be callous bullies, like Joseph's brothers were. But don't we all have our pet sins, the ones we confess over and over? For example, are we any better than Jacob was where it comes to playing favorites? Are we any better than Joseph's brothers where it comes to jealousy? How about deception? How about being willing to let other people suffer in order to save our own skins?

So, how would we do if God tested us on our weak points? If God gave us an opportunity to demonstrate our repentance and our faithfulness to Him, would we pass the test?

So, isn't it amazing that Judah did? For he was certainly no angel. After all, back in chapter 37, he was the one who had made the suggestion that the brothers sell Joseph into slavery. And chapter 38 recalls how he refused to keep his vow to his daughter-in-law Tamar to provide a husband for her.

And yet, it was selfish, jealous Judah who managed to pass the test Joseph set for all of his brothers. For although they were all willing to confess their sin, and perhaps even to repent of it, it was only Judah who demonstrated truly faithful, unconditional, self-sacrificial love.

For in verse 32, Judah recalled the promise he had made to his father Jacob, that he would stand as a guarantee that Benjamin would return safely. And in verses 30 and 31 he makes it clear that unless Benjamin went back to his father, Jacob would have died from grief. But why would Jacob have been satisfied to lose Judah if he could keep Benjamin? Judah tells us in verse 20, when he describes Benjamin as “a little one; and his brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother, and his father loveth him.” Yes, when we hear such words, it would be easy to think that Jacob didn’t have any other sons.

And so we see that Jacob continued to sin against Judah and the rest of his brothers, clinging to his sin of favoritism, caring only for Benjamin and neglecting the rest of his brothers. That had to hurt Judah, knowing that as long as little Benjamin came home, his father wouldn’t care if all the rest of them were slaves in Egypt.

And yet Judah was willing to do just that. He was willing to keep the vow he had made. He was willing to sacrifice his own freedom in order to bless his undeserving, sinful father, even though he knew that his father didn’t really care about him at all. That is true love: faithful, unconditional, self-sacrificial love.

And isn’t that the same kind of love that Judah’s descendant Jesus showed to all of us? For didn’t Jesus also make a promise to His Father, a promise to stand in the place of all of His people? And in spite of how we have continue to sin against Him, in spite of the coldness of our love for Him, didn’t Jesus love us enough to lay down His own life so that we might live? Wasn’t Jesus willing to take on all the pains of death and Hell, the suffering of being separated from His Father so that undeserving sinners like us might be restored to a right relationship with Him?

Yes, that’s the kind of love that Jesus has for sinners like Jacob, and for sinners like us. And that’s the kind of love He showed to His disciples as He washed their feet, knowing that those same feet would abandon and betray Him that very night. And what did Jesus tell those selfish, jealous, unworthy sinners? “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (John 13:34 NAS).

Yes, Judah went beyond sorrow for his sin. He went beyond confession of his sin. He even went beyond rejection of His sin. For he truly turned to God, walking in the way of Christ, giving faithful, self-sacrificial, unconditional love to those who are undeserving. Yes, Judah truly passed the test. Will we?