

What An Attitude!

Genesis 44 - 45:15

Introduction

I read a story that especially attracted my attention. It was the story of a tough young Marine who was twenty-four years of age. This Marine had already survived two years of cruel POW treatment, but had remained a model prisoner. The reason for that was the camp commander had told him that he would release him if he cooperated – so he did. In fact, this young Marine became a leader in camp reform thought groups. He did everything that he was told to do, until finally, it dawned on this young man that his captors had lied to him. They had no intention of letting him go. With that new knowledge dawning upon him, he went to his cot, curled up, refused any encouragement, any food, any offers of help, and simply lay there sucking his thumb. Three weeks later, he was dead.

When I read that story, I thought of a young twenty-eight year old who was imprisoned, betrayed, and forgotten. He was imprisoned due to false accusations. His own family had turned their back on him. If anyone had a right to curl up on a cot and say, “No,” to the world and, “Let me die,” it would have been this young man.

Yet, you may remember the story of the way this boy was finally let out of prison. As a thirty year old, he finally stood before the Pharaoh. He then became second in command of the entire kingdom.

At that point, we almost held our breath, didn't we? We wondered, “Now that he is in command, what will his first acts be? Will he make Potiphar swing from the gallows? Will he take that woman who made a miserable mess of his life, and put her up there too? Will he immediately send for his brothers in Canaan, bring them to Egypt, and torture them to death?”

If he had done these things, we would have said, “Well, they got what they deserved; they got everything they had coming to them.”

Yet, as you may remember, he came out of prison, after two years of almost solitary confinement, and had somehow, by the grace of God, forgiven. Now he

stood in the court of Pharaoh as a man who was committed more to God than ever before.

Now we do not know, from the text, that his path ever crossed the paths of Potiphar and his wife, or the cupbearer, who had forgotten him in prison. We would assume, however, that they did. We do know, from several chapters in the text in fact, that his path crossed with his brothers, the men who caused it all to happen. Today we will look more closely at the way this man, Joseph, handles his brothers.

Let me tell you, as you may already know, Joseph is not out to kill his brothers or to reap vengeance on their lives. In fact, I think, he is trying to see whether they have an attitude of repentance; an attitude of acknowledging of God. That is the reason, I believe, that he brings about this final test that we will study today.

He has given them the test of honor. He has given them the test of honesty. He has given them the test of humility. Now, this last test involves silver in the sack. He, in fact, intends to bring his youngest brother, Benjamin, to the same place that he was twenty-five years earlier.

A Test of Character From Joseph

Let us look at Genesis, chapter 44, verse 1. Joseph is giving instructions.

Then he commanded his house steward, saying, “Fill the men’s sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man’s money in the mouth of his sack. Put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, . . .”

All of the rulers in Egypt had silver cups. These superstitious rulers believed that by watching the movement of the water, by dipping certain things in it, they could somehow divine the future. Although we know that Joseph did not do this, it seems that everyone assumed he did.

This was a very special cup. Joseph says, “Take that cup and put it in Benjamin’s sack.”

Then, he told his steward to follow the brothers and have them search their sacks. The steward catches up with the men and, of course, they claim their innocence. In verse 9, they even go so far as to say,

With whomever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord's slaves.

Let us stop at this point for a moment. Imagine what these brothers could have done if they had not changed. Joseph is trying to discern whether his brothers are really different; whether somehow, in all of the events that have occurred over the last two years, they have begun to acknowledge God in their lives.

You may remember that for prophecy to be fulfilled, the family of Jacob must move back to Egypt. Prophecy declared that they would turn from a small tribe into a mighty nation in the land of Goshen. For that to happen, there needs to be reconciliation among all of these brothers. And, for that to happen, these brothers have to come to a point where they admit their guilt before God. So Joseph, in all wisdom, and I think, being directed by God's Spirit, is providing the arena; setting the stage to discover whether or not they will, in fact, admit their guilt before God.

Possible responses

Now, when Benjamin's sack is opened, the silver cup is discovered. If these brothers had not changed, I think they could have responded in two ways. Let me give them to you.

Repeat

1. First, they could have repeated what they had done with Joseph.

In other words, they could have said to each other, "We potentially could be slaves of Pharaoh, but we're not guilty. Let Benjamin take the due penalty of what he probably did. I'm sure he must have slipped it in his sack. Let him go back to Egypt. Let him be a slave."

Remember, twenty-five years earlier they had sent their brother Joseph into Egypt as a slave because they were so jealous. Now their lives are on the line. Will it make a difference?

Rationalize

2. They could have repeated their error or secondly, they could have rationalized.

Before, they were sending Joseph into Egypt just to get rid of the pesky dreamer. Now, however, they could have said, "We've got hungry families back in Canaan. We have a helpless father. We have wives and children who are waiting for our return. We've got five good reasons to let Benjamin go into slavery."

I think these brothers could have rationalized their way out of this, but they did not. Verse 13 tells us that after they found the cup in Benjamin's sack,

Then they tore their clothes, and when each man loaded his donkey, they returned to the city.

Tearing their clothes was unusual; it was a sign of grief. In other words, they have changed. Now, they are acting like brothers; they are sticking together; there is family identity; they are all Jacob's sons. They are going to bear this together, so they head back to Egypt.

A Plea of Exchange From Judah

Now when the brothers get back to Egypt, it is interesting that Judah steps forward as the spokesman. Twenty-five years earlier, it was Judah who had said to his brothers, "Hey, I've got a great idea! Let's sell this little dreamer. Let's get rid of this beloved son of our partial father. Let's send him to Egypt by selling him to the Midianites."

It was Judah's idea to sell Joseph. Now, twenty-five years later, he steps forward as the spokesman. Note verse 16a.

So Judah said, "What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? . . ."

He is saying, "There is circumstantial evidence that we can't deny. But we are innocent!"

Then note the next phrase in verse 16.

". . . God has found out the iniquity of your servants . . ."

That's it! That is exactly what Joseph has been waiting for. His brothers finally reach the point where they admit their guilt. There was a vertical awakening; there was a realization that they had sinned against *God*.

It is interesting that they said, “We’re innocent, but God has discovered our guilt.”

What were they referring to? In their minds, they were plagued by their guilty consciences, as we have studied in a previous discussion. Joseph, through certain circumstances, brought that awake. Now, it is fully open; it is now bared; it is admitting itself. I think, therein lies part of the cure.

Chuck Colson, who is one of my favorite writers, wrote a story of a time when he served as a Marine lieutenant. He was brand new to the job and was filled with the pride of that position. He was leading a platoon of forty grimy, sweaty men on a training mission on an island that was part of a satellite of Puerto Rico. The men had been told that when they were on this island among the impoverished, poverty stricken people, they were not to buy or trade. They were to leave the people alone – but this command was expected to be ignored.

On the second day of maneuvers, they happened across an old man leading a scrawny donkey. On the back of that donkey were two ice filled sacks of cold drinks. All of the men headed toward this old fellow, pulling money from their pockets, ready to buy. Colson thought, “Here is a chance to really show off.”

He said, “Sergeant, arrest that man.”

The sergeant looked at him in disbelief, but began to carry out the order.

Colson then, trying to further impress the men, said, “Confiscate the contraband.”

The men applauded as they took the sacks of ice and cold drinks and drank them all.

When they were finished drinking the drinks, Colson said, “Release our prisoner.”

The old man, ignorantly and naively figuring his life had been spared, slunk away with his scrawny donkey. Although he had lost perhaps his life savings and his livelihood for many months, he was thankful his life had been spared.

When Chuck Colson writes of his former life before he found Jesus Christ, he says, “The thing that marks my mind is not the spectacular crimes of Watergate, it is there on that island, in cruelty, taking from that man what we did not deserve.”

If you line these ten brothers up, you would see: a man who is involved in an incestuous relationship; a man who is a fornicator; a man who is guilty of murder. These brothers were guilty of every heinous

crime that you and I are guilty of. Yet, when they acknowledge their guilt before God, what are they thinking? They are thinking, “Oh, God has finally uncovered our guilt of selling our brother; our father’s favorite son.”

Three obvious developments

Let me give three obvious developments in these brothers.

Admission of their guilt

1. The first is the admission of their guilt.

In other words, the admission of their guilt before God. This is a vertical awakening.

Respect for their father’s feelings

2. Secondly, there is a respect for their father’s feelings.

This is a horizontal awareness. Judah begins to say things that cause Joseph to tremble with excitement and emotion. Look at verses 18 through 20.

Then Judah approached him, and said, “Oh my lord, may your servant please speak a word . . . My lord asked his servants, saying, ‘Have you a father or a brother?’ We said to my lord, ‘We have an old father and a little child of his old age. Now his brother is dead, so he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.’”

Notice how tenderly Judah refers to Benjamin. Before, it was, “Joseph, the favored son, how we hate him.”

Now, with compassion, he says, “Oh that young lad, how his father loves him so.”

Continue to verse 27.

Your servant my father said to us, “You know that my wife bore me two sons;”

For the first time, Joseph is going to hear the alibi. Note that he has not known for twenty-five years, what his brothers told his father. He has never known what his father thought happened to him, and I am sure he must have wondered what was going on in Canaan. For the first time, he hears. Look at verse 28.

. . . I said, “Surely he is torn in pieces,” and I have not seen him since.

Imagine being Joseph, hearing the account of your own demise – knowing that you are still alive. I think it is at this point that Joseph begins to tremble with emotion. His emotions are rising to the surface. All along, he has kept a stony face. When he has had to weep, he has run out of the room. Now, however, it boils to the surface.

There is respect for their father’s feelings.

Compassion for their younger brother

3. Thirdly, there is compassion for their younger brother.

Oh what a difference this is in their lives. Look at verse 32.

For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, “If I do not bring him back to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever.”

Judah continues in verse 33.

“Now, therefore, . . .”

“I’ve got a better idea. I’m not going home to bear the blame before my father. This is the plan . . .”

“. . . please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers.”

What a change! What an awakening on the horizontal level! Now, ten stubborn, selfish brothers are concerned about their father’s feelings. And Judah, who was the mastermind behind selling Joseph, now says, “Let me take Benjamin’s place. I’ll live as a slave for the rest of my life.”

An Announcement of Identity From Joseph

Judah’s words are exactly what Joseph has been hoping to hear. Now, he cannot stand it any longer.

In the first verses of chapter 45, we are told that he says, “Send everyone away. Get all of the Egyptians out of the room.”

Then he weeps so loudly that the Egyptians hear it. He breaks down right in front of these bewildered men.

Look at verse 3a.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! . . .”

“Ana Yowceph,” he cries out in Hebrew, “Ana Yowceph!”

These brothers probably stepped back, “Where did this man learn Hebrew? And he says he’s Joseph!”

Joseph, through his tears, says, “Ana Yowceph.”

I happen to believe that these men were so terrified, from what the text says, that they probably came near to fainting. It says in verse 3b,

. . . they were dismayed at his presence.

They were dismayed – or terrified – at his presence. I think, there was some skepticism also. With their rough beards and Hebrew clothing, these brothers were looking at a clean shaven Egyptian man with the headdress of a Egyptian prime minister. Joseph was decked with jewels and fine raiment. He was also soft, while they were rough. They probably thought, “This couldn’t be our brother. This can’t be Joseph. It’s another trick. He has found out somehow.”

I want to suggest to you that something happens at this point, as others have suggested before me. Look at verse 4a.

Joseph said to his brothers, “Please come closer to me.” . . .

“Come closer” is the Hebrew word “nagash,” which is not just to come closer geographically, but to come closer in the sense of intimacy; in the sense of kissing. He says, “come closer,” and in saying that, I think Joseph revealed to his brothers the sign of the covenant. I think he pulled back his garment and revealed to his brothers that he was circumcised. That was the proof! No Egyptian would go through that right; only the Jew. This was the symbol that they were sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Joseph says, in verse 4,

. . . “Please come closer to me.” . . . “I am your brother Joseph . . .”

He is telling them, “I’m a son of Jacob.”

I think now, they turned white because they recognized the truth.

Many references to God

Joseph will go on to relieve their minds. He will give repeated references to God. Let me read them.

- Verse 5, “. . . *God sent me . . .*”;
- Verse 7, “*God sent me . . .*”;
- Verse 8, “*it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me . . .*”;
- Verse 9, “. . . *God has made me lord of all Egypt . . .*”.

Joseph gives all of the obvious references to the fact that God was involved.

Ladies and gentlemen, Joseph is giving us tremendous practical theology. It is in believing, “I am who I am because of God”; in believing, “I am where I am because of God,” that we gain a tremendous sense of security.

He says, “It wasn’t you who sent me here – it was God. God put me in Egypt. Although it looked as if you were the ones behind it, if you took a step back now and looked over all of the events, you’d see the hand of Elohim.”

That is great security to believe, “I am where I am because of God.”

It not only produces great security, ladies and gentlemen, it produces tremendous humility. In the next two phrases Joseph goes on to say, “God made me.”

Nowhere in the text do you get the idea that Joseph steps back and says, “Hey guys, let me tell you how I did it. You thought you sold me here as a slave, but I’m the prime minister! Let me tell you all of the steps that I took.”

No. Believing, “I am what I am because of God,” will not only produce security when things are rough, but humility when things are going well.

So Joseph gives the news to his brothers that he is, in fact, Joseph. He then tells them the plan in verses 10 through 13a.

You shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children and your flocks and your herds and all that you have. There I will also provide for you, for there are still five years of famine to come, and you and your household and all that you have would be impoverished. Behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth which is speaking to you. Now you must tell my father . . .

“Go back and tell our father that I’m alive.”

An Expression of Forgiveness From Joseph

What happens next is beautiful. It is an expression of forgiveness from Joseph. Look at verses 14 and 15.

Then he fell on his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers and wept on them, and afterward his brothers talked with him.

The Egyptians, with their ears to the wall outside wondering what in the world is going on in there, hear weeping, laughing, the shuffling of feet as Joseph goes from one brother to the next, weeping on them and embracing them.

You do not hug an enemy; you do not get close to someone you despise; you do not embrace someone you hate. Joseph starts with Benjamin, takes him in his arms, and they weep on each other’s shoulders. It had been so long since they had seen each other. Then he moves to Judah. Imagine that! He probably says, “Judah, I know that you sold me and it was your idea, but I forgive you.”

He embraces Judah and then, moves to Simeon. He goes down the line to Zebulun and Levi and all of the brothers. He hugs them and weeps and says, “You are forgiven.”

I cannot imagine.

Joseph kisses them, as verse 15 tells us, and afterward, after all of that is over, they sit down and talk with each other. It is a sign that they are together again. “Boy, we’ve got twenty-five years to catch up on. This is all that’s happened back in Canaan.”

Joseph is intensely concerned about his father, “Is he still alive? Is he well?”

He tells them of all of the things that have happened to him, perhaps. Maybe, at that time, he calls his wife and says, “Honey, come on in here. Here are my two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. God has been good to me.”

Then, he sends them out to go get Dad.

Application – Adopting Joseph’s Attitude!

Let us ask why Joseph was a great man. Was it because he was prime minister? No. Was it because Joseph somehow accomplished an incredible administrative feat that would save a nation from

starvation? No. Joseph was great because his attitude revealed two very special things. Let me give these, by way of application.

Forgiving of those who deeply hurt

1. First, Joseph was very forgiving of those who had deeply hurt him. This attitude of forgiveness is an ability directly related to seeing God at work through people.

In other words, if we live and adopt Joseph's attitude, we throw that "black list" away. However, it always wants to creep back into our lives; we keep coming up with names. We think of some individual and imagine their face on the wall. We speak to them, we preach to them, we tell them what we would like them to do and how they wronged us. Joseph threw the black list away.

My boss, who overlooked me – his name is erased. My spouse, who has done me so wrong – their name is erased. That child, who didn't turn out as I wished – their name is erased.

The ability to forgive those who have hurt us is directly related to seeing God at work in and through people. They are the tool that God is using in our lives.

Loving God regardless of circumstances

2. Secondly, Joseph was capable of loving God regardless of circumstances. This attitude is a direct result of seeing God at work through events.

Turn to Genesis, chapter 50. Jacob dies and the brothers start to get squeamish again, thinking, "Now that he's dead, perhaps Joseph is not sincere."

They send a messenger to Joseph saying, "Joseph, remember that Dad said, 'Don't hurt them when I die.'"

Joseph sends a message back to them. In fact, he weeps before them and actually speaks to them personally.

Look at verses 18 through 20a.

Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good . . ."

What a position to live in! What an attitude to have! All that has happened, you meant it for evil. You meant it to happen for my detriment, but now, as I step back, I can see God meant all of this for my spiritual good.

Harold Kushner wrote a book that was an instant best seller, entitled, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. It was on the New York best seller list for fifty-two straight weeks. It sold a half million copies in hardback before going into a paperback edition.

Kushner, who was a rabbi, had lost a son in death. The basic premise of his book is that God is all-loving, but He is not all-powerful; God is good, but He is not sovereign; this is a big universe and sometimes things get out of control. His solution is that we need to love God anyway and forgive Him for His limitations.

We might say, "I'd never think that way."

Yet, don't we live like that at times? We think, "God, where'd You go? How could this have happened if You had been involved in my life?"

Our real estate dealings have led me across the path of a man who has lost three children. Yet, when you speak to him, he, as a believer, never refers to God in anything less than terms of sovereignty and love. That is a great man.

I wonder how much like Joseph we really are – able to forgive those who hurt us deeply; able to translate, in the events of our lives and through the people in our lives, that God is at work. How much like Joseph are you?