

We're looking at Genesis chapter 45 and this is the last reading in our series looking at the life of Joseph and we're just reading the first 13 verses of chapter 45.

[Reading Genesis 45:1-13]

We're just going to spend a few moments looking at this Bible passage here.

It's now 22 years since Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. Since then Joseph's life has had massive ups and downs, but at this stage in his life it seems as though everything in his life is looking good: he's got a very important job preparing his adopted country for the coming famine, but he also seems to have a happy family life (he's got two sons by his Egyptian wife), and it just looks as though everything is rosy in Joseph's garden, finally. But I still think he had a nagging concern: How are my father and my mother? How are my brothers? (And we learn later on that actually his mother has died but his dad is still alive.)

As the famine grew harsher it also spread wider and wider across the Middle East, and it engulfed Canaan where Jacob, that's Joseph's father, and the remaining members of his family all lived. So people from the nations surrounding Egypt hear that the nation of Egypt has stores of grain, and so of course, you had people coming and travelling, and going to Egypt out of desperation and asking: "Please! Please sell us grain." We see pictures like that today on our television screens, don't we, when there is famine in one country people going to the borders of surrounding countries and saying "Please! Let us have food. Please let us come into your country." Despite of all our sophistication and technology still these realities are still very much with us today.

And then the next significant moment in this story arrives. Joseph is overseeing the queues of people who are coming to beg to be allowed to buy grain in Egypt, and he sees (in Chapter 42 verse 7) his own brothers – can you imagine Joseph's response: he must have done a double take and perhaps a third take – it really is my brothers! 22 years after he's seen them, but I guess, you always recognise your own family even after many years, and he knew it was his brothers in the queue. But he manages to hide his emotions and pretends to be a stranger to them. Now, why did the brothers now recognise Joseph? Well, of course, Joseph's position put them off: they weren't expecting the brother the sold into slavery to now be the highest official in Egypt; also his clothing (or to be honest, his lack of it, because they didn't seem to wear a lot of clothing in Egypt back then), and even his hairstyle because the Egyptian way, back then, was for men to have their heads shaven and, of course, Jewish men would tend to have a beard. So they don't recognise him for all those reasons, but I think particularly they didn't recognise him because they didn't expect their brother to be in this situation that he finds himself in now.

So there then follows three chapters really of tricks, traps and schemes played out by Joseph against his brothers; he does various things to try and catch them out: he hides a silver cup in his youngest brother's bags of grain that he's given them, and he does various other things – it's all about answering some questions. Remember the last time he saw these brothers they hated him – they might have had good reason because he was obnoxious, and he was very arrogant, but he knows what they did to him, and I think Joseph was doing these things, playing these tricks, and these traps and these schemes, on his brothers to find out the answer to the question: Have my brothers changed, do they regret what they did to me? And the most important question of all: Can I find it in my heart to forgive them? Can I find it in my heart to forgive them? And you know

that's a universal human experience. I don't know about you but I've had situations in my life when people have hurt me; I've had situations where I feel people have treated me really unfairly, and I'm sure you've had those experiences as well. And these questions that I think were in Joseph's mind are the questions that come to us as well: Can I find it in my heart to forgive someone. Not just a minor thing but sometimes people do things that cut us (as they say) to the quick, they cut deep, they hurt, and we carry that pain and that hurt, and the question we ask ourselves is: Can I forgive this person, these people, for what they've done to me? And sometimes, as was Joseph's experience here, it is those who are supposedly closest to us that will cause those hurts: family, close friends, work colleagues that we've trusted; sometimes they are the people who will hurt us the most because they are the ones we've allowed to become closest to us, and then that is betrayed. I think this is the reason we see Joseph in this story vacillating between two extremes:

1. sometimes he is full of suspicion of his brothers and he's asking the question: "Are they still the wicked men they were when they sold me into slavery?";
2. but other times he's overcome, overwhelmed with emotion and a desire to reveal himself, and reveal his identity to his brothers

and so he vacillates between these two positions – he's fighting an inner battle between his desire for revenge and his desire to forgive. And I think that's really honest because I think those are the things that sometimes happen within our minds as well.

In the end Joseph's desire to forgive and be reunited with his brothers wins out. In fact he goes so far as to absolve them from responsibility of sending him to Egypt. He actually absolves them, he not only forgives, he says this wasn't about you, this was about God; you didn't send me to Egypt, God sent me here to Egypt. He says that in chapter 45 at the beginning of verse 8: "It was not you who sent me here but God." So he takes the responsibility off his brothers. You know, a number of times in the previous chapters (we haven't been able to look at in detail) the brothers talk about their guilt at how they had treated their brother Joseph. They felt guilty: on a number of occasions they said "This is why these bad things are happening to us: because of the way we treated Joseph, and now God is punishing us for it." They did feel guilt. But here Joseph is intentionally releasing his brothers from over 20 years of guilt and shame. Imagine the sense of relief that they must have felt; it must have been like this mighty burden that had been on their backs for so many years being taken away, when Joseph said what he did.

So, because of Joseph's influence, Pharaoh generously invites Jacob's whole family to make their home in Egypt. The Pharaoh even provides transport and promises them land. Jacob's family is whole again. And it's interesting that if we trace the family of Jacob through Joseph and then down through his descendants, we find that they are central in the life of Israel, the nation, and that line can be followed down to Jesus. See how key it was that Joseph learnt to forgive. He could've sought revenge for how he was treated when he was a teenager, but God helped him see the greater purpose that he had planned for this family and for the Hebrew people. But we need to recognise this didn't really come about because of Joseph's foresight in his vision; it really came about as Joseph learned through his times of hardship: he learned that the only thing he could do as hardships and troubles and trials came his way was to follow God. And in our times of trouble we may not see the things that are coming, but when they come we also can say: "I choose to follow God; I choose to follow what he would want me to do in this situation." Joseph's readiness to let go of hatred and anger, and instead offer forgiveness is a key part of how he chose to obey God.

I'd like to finish with a story about the famous painter Leonardo da Vinci when he painted his fresco, the famous picture, The Last Supper (he painted it in a church in Milan). And at the time that he painted The Last Supper Leonardo had an enemy who was a fellow painter. Da Vinci had a bitter argument with this man and he really, really despised him. When da Vinci painted the face of Judas Iscariot at the table with Jesus, guess whose face he painted on Judas Iscariot - he used the face of his enemy and he thought to himself as he painted it: "This man, his face will be present for ages to come." He took delight in knowing that others would actually notice the face of his enemy on the face of Judas. As he worked on the faces of the other disciples he often tried then to also paint the face of Jesus, but he couldn't make any progress - it was like he had a block, he just couldn't paint Jesus' face. Da Vinci felt frustrated and confused, but in time he realised what was wrong. His hatred for the other painter was holding him back from finishing the face of Jesus. Only after going and making peace with his fellow painter, and when he repainted the face of Judas as someone he didn't know was he able to finish painting the face of Jesus and complete his masterpiece.

One of the reasons we may sometimes have a hard time accepting the forgiveness of God ourselves is because we find it hard to forgive others. That's why Jesus said, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you..." But that verse follows on and says: "...but if you do not forgive men and women their sins your father will not forgive your sins." And actually I think the reality is: if we can't forgive then we are stopping ourselves being forgiven because we are blocking our own hearts and minds and spirits with hatred and anger so that we can't receive the forgiveness of God.

Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus we pray that you will be with us in our daily lives. We particularly think of those times when we are hurt, when we feel that something has been done to us that is unfair. And it's so easy in those moments to build up attitudes and ways of justifying ourself and denigrating the other person, and building up walls to protect ourselves from the hurt that we feel may come to us again from such people that hurt us. Lord God, we pray that in those moments we will come to you and we will ask you to help us to find it in our hearts to forgive, to look for ways to be reconciled with those who have hurt us. We pray for our nation's leaders and for our world's leaders that they may more show that forgiveness and that grace that is so necessary in our world politics at this time, but actually at all times. We pray that our world leaders will model forgiveness and grace in how they govern. We pray these things in your name, Lord God, amen.