

LET BUY-SONS BE BYGONES

GENESIS 44:1-45:15

In 1981, Mehmet Ali Ağca shot Pope John Paul II. He was sentenced to life in prison. The Pope, who survived the attack, met with Ağca in 1983. After the meeting, the Pope said that he had forgiven Ağca for what he did. Nevertheless, the man stayed incarcerated for 19 years. Finally, in the year 2000, the Pope urged the Italian President to pardon Ağca. He did, and Ağca was deported back to Turkey...where he began serving a prison sentence for a murder he committed in 1979.¹ It was a very public example of forgiveness, but didn't have the happiest of endings.

Imagine if the Pope had met his attacker there in his cell and not only said, "I forgive you," but "come live with me at The Vatican." *That* would've been a shocking forgiveness.

The forgiveness in our text is amazing. The brothers had the greatest guilt. Joseph had the greatest power. No one could fault him for striking them down for what they had done. The stage was set for one of history's great revenge stories. Instead we see one of history's greatest reconciliations.

God has forgiveness ready for every guilty sinner. And, we remember that Jesus spoke about showing mercy and said to we who have been forgiven, "Go and do likewise."

Genesis 44:1-2 - Joseph commanded his steward, "Fill the men's bags with as much food as they can carry, and put each one's silver at the top of his bag. ²Put my cup, the silver one, at the top of the youngest one's bag, along with the silver for his grain." So he did as Joseph told him.

In some ways, Joseph shows us things about how God works. We call this "typology" in the Bible. But, God does not deal with us deceptively. It's hard to know what Joseph was thinking with this deception. But apart from that, we've seen that Joseph is very generous to his brothers. He gives them the grain, he gives them the silver, he throws them a feast. They didn't just get the grain they paid for, but as much as they could carry.² It reminds us that God is tender and generous. He gives us *all* we need, *all* can carry for the journey, *plus* hidden treasure that we don't even know about.

Ambrose, the fourth century theologian, wrote: "*Even though we are unable to see Christ's gifts, nevertheless He is giving them.*"³ We get to discover those gifts and treasures along the way.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, I find it funny that the silver and the chalice are placed specifically at the top of the bags - even after the last trip's debacle, the brothers don't bother to check their bags to make sure everything is in order. The last chapter closed with them getting hammered. Gordon Wenham writes, "*Hangovers in Scripture and in life are often unpleasant.*"

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attempted_assassination_of_Pope_John_Paul_II

² Gordon Wenham *Genesis 16-50*

³ Saint Ambrose *Seven Exegetical Works*

Genesis 44:3-9 - ³At morning light, the men were sent off with their donkeys. ⁴They had not gone very far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, "Get up. Pursue the men, and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid evil for good? ⁵Isn't this the cup that my master drinks from and uses for divination? What you have done is wrong!' " ⁶When he overtook them, he said these words to them. ⁷They said to him, "Why does my lord say these things? Your servants could not possibly do such a thing. ⁸We even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the silver we found at the top of our bags. How could we steal silver or gold from your master's house? ⁹If it is found with one of us, your servants, he must die, and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves."

What is Joseph doing? As a character, he's often put in a category with Daniel as men who have no sins recorded on the pages of Scripture. It's a dumb category because even Daniel spends time confessing his sins in prayer. And we have to admit that Joseph's maneuvers in these chapters are a little weird. It's hard to know what his full motivation was since the Bible doesn't comment on it.

On the one hand, some think he is purely trying to discern the moral character of his brothers and his schemes are like the wisdom of Solomon, revealing their hearts.⁴ There are others who are convinced that Joseph's plan at *this* point is to isolate Benjamin so that he can keep his brother in Egypt and send the rest of the family away - sustaining them with food from afar.⁵ There are some who feel that Joseph is just as much in need of heart transformation as Judah or Reuben - that he's dealing with favoritism and a hard-heartedness of his own.⁶

For their part, the brothers are quick to declare their innocence. They make what is known in the Bible as a "rash vow." "We're so sure you're wrong that if you find the cup, let the man die!"

The Bible gives us quite a few examples of rash vows. Jephthah in Judges is probably the most famous. Then there's Saul, whose vow almost killed Jonathan. Herod, whose vow led to John the Baptist's beheading. Jacob made a rash vow about Laban's household idols in Genesis 31.

Ecclesiastes, Leviticus, and Proverbs all speak about this issue. Jesus spoke directly about making vows in the Sermon On The Mount. Don't make rash vows. Be slow to speak and slower to promise.

Genesis 44:10-13 - ¹⁰The steward replied, "What you have said is right, but only the one who is found to have it will be my slave, and the rest of you will be blameless." ¹¹So each one quickly lowered his sack to the ground and opened it. ¹²The steward searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest, and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. ¹³Then they tore their clothes, and each one loaded his donkey and returned to the city.

Even though we can't be sure of Joseph's emotional motivation, we can see that he is recreating a scenario in which the 10 brothers are pitted against the young favorite, as they had been when

⁴ Derek Kidner *Genesis*

⁵ See Robert Candlish, John Goldingay, Eugene Roop

⁶ Mark A. O'Brien *The Contribution Of Judah's Speech, Genesis 44:18-34, To The Characterization Of Joseph*

they abused Joseph 22 years earlier.⁷ Already we see a difference. *Before* they had debated about what to do with Joseph - most wanting to kill him, one wanting to rough him up but then get him home, others wanting to sell him. Now we see they consistently act as a *unified* group. They act together. They move together. They agree together. As we've seen over the last few passages, these men *are* growing spiritually by leaps and bounds.

Christians are called to unity. We're not always going to agree on everything, but unity is essential. Jesus said that our love for one another should define us.⁸ Paul commanded us to "pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another."⁹ There will be disagreements, even offenses, but true Christianity bears with one another in forgiveness and love, which is the bond of unity.

The brothers didn't start yelling at Benjamin, "This is all your fault!" They moved together. It's remarkable that when the steward said, "Just this guy is in trouble, the rest of you can go," yet all the brothers packed up and went to face the music together.

Genesis 44:14-15 - ¹⁴**When Judah and his brothers reached Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell to the ground before him.** ¹⁵**"What have you done?" Joseph said to them. "Didn't you know that a man like me could uncover the truth by divination?"**

Pagans would use cups like this to pour oil into water or wine into other liquids and look at the patterns on the surface to try to divine the future.¹⁰ But the absurdity of pagan divination is on full display here: If you use the cup to divine, how did you divine without the cup?

Did Joseph do these divination rituals? Lots of scholars try to excuse him from it. We just don't know. The truth is, he's living before the Law - before divination of this sort is prohibited for God's people. I don't think Joseph *believes* he can divine with a cup, but he's also trapped in this Egyptian system. So we don't know what he did and didn't do since there was no Daniel moment where he says to his boss, "Yeah, I'm not doing that."

The brothers don't just bow, they fall down in abject, desperate submission.¹¹ Now, we know that all is going to be forgiven. What they deserve is imprisonment and death for their crimes. But this prince has peace and mercy in store for them. But to receive it, they must return to *him*. They must come to *his* throne and fall on his mercy. The same is true spiritually speaking. God is ready to forgive. His desire is to shower sinners with love and mercy and grace and generosity, but we each must come to Him, confessing our guilt, and ask for the mercy that He is so ready to give.

Genesis 44:16-17 - ¹⁶**"What can we say to my lord?" Judah replied. "How can we plead? How can we justify ourselves? God has exposed your servants' iniquity. We are now my lord's slaves—both we and the one in whose possession the cup was found."** ¹⁷**Then Joseph**

⁷ Kenneth A. Mathews *Genesis 11:27-50:26*

⁸ John 13:35

⁹ Romans 14:19

¹⁰ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

¹¹ John Goldingay *Genesis*

said, "I swear that I will not do this. The man in whose possession the cup was found will be my slave. The rest of you can go in peace to your father."

Judah's words are so beautiful. He is a man who has had his heart changed by God. Though they weren't guilty of *this* theft, he knew they were guilty men. They had killed and stolen. They had lied. They had dishonored God. And Judah knows that they are facing a reckoning not just before Joseph, but before the Lord. How could they justify themselves? They couldn't. They were guilty many times over. As so, in this moment, Judah knows they can only appeal for *mercy*, not for justice.¹² In the Tamar incident, he learned the importance and power of confession. And this humility and honesty has helped the Lord transform him from a murderous, human-trafficking John, to being the spiritual leader of this family.

This opening statement from Judah must've been amazing to Joseph. You see, he was recreating this 10 brothers vs. 1 brother situation, but as R. Kent Hughes points out, the temptation was *much* greater this time around. 22 years earlier, the temptation was, "If we sell Joseph we can each get 2 pieces of silver." They were already rich men. Now the temptation is: Abandon your brother and you get to walk *free* instead of being enslaved. But then Judah says, "We're guilty and we're at your mercy." Joseph *knew* they weren't guilty of this cup crime. So this would've been a huge moment.

Genesis 44:18-23 - ¹⁸ But Judah approached him and said, "My lord, please let your servant speak personally to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, for you are like Pharaoh. ¹⁹ My lord asked his servants, 'Do you have a father or a brother?' ²⁰ and we answered my lord, 'We have an elderly father and a younger brother, the child of his old age. The boy's brother is dead. He is the only one of his mother's sons left, and his father loves him.' ²¹ Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him to me so that I can see him.' ²² But we said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father. If he were to leave, his father would die.' ²³ Then you said to your servants, 'If your younger brother does not come down with you, you will not see me again.'

Judah's speech is the longest in all Genesis.¹³ A lot of it is a re-hash for us, but there is a very interesting piece of information that we hadn't heard before. He reminds Joseph that they told him, "The boy (Benjamin) cannot leave or his father would die." And yet, Joseph proceeded with his demand that they bring Benjamin to Egypt. Did Joseph think they were lying or did he simply no longer care about the well-being of Jacob? It seems possible that, as Joseph hatches these plans, he's not actually considering what it might cost.¹⁴

Throughout the speech, Benjamin is silent while Judah advocates for him. Christ does the same for us. We have no plea before a holy God. We have no defense. All we can hope for is a Substitute, which is exactly what we get in Jesus - the Son of Judah, Who ever lives to make intercession for us. He is the One Who secures forgiveness for us. It's not our effort but His.

¹² Wenham

¹³ Faithlife Study Bible Notes

¹⁴ Waltke

Genesis 44:24-34 - ²⁴“This is what happened when we went back to your servant my father: We reported to him the words of my lord. ²⁵But our father said, ‘Go again, and buy us a little food.’ ²⁶We told him, ‘We cannot go down unless our younger brother goes with us. If our younger brother isn’t with us, we cannot see the man.’ ²⁷Your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons. ²⁸One is gone from me—I said he must have been torn to pieces—and I have never seen him again. ²⁹If you also take this one from me and anything happens to him, you will bring my gray hairs down to Sheol in sorrow.’ ³⁰“So if I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us—his life is wrapped up with the boy’s life—³¹ when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die. Then your servants will have brought the gray hairs of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow. ³²Your servant became accountable to my father for the boy, saying, ‘If I do not return him to you, I will always bear the guilt for sinning against you, my father.’ ³³Now please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave, in place of the boy. Let him go back with his brothers. ³⁴For how can I go back to my father without the boy? I could not bear to see the grief that would overwhelm my father.”

Judah’s pleas are all the more tender when we remember that *he* was the one who made the plan to sell him to the Ishmaelites. Now, Judah is fighting on behalf of the more-loved, favorite son.

He offers himself as the substitute. This is the first time in Scripture that someone has done such a thing.¹⁵ Even Abraham didn’t offer himself in place of his beloved son on Mount Moriah, but hoped that God would provide a substitute. Now Judah, who knows what it feels like to lose two sons, offers himself, even though it would mean he would lose his *other* sons who were back in Canaan. What a transformation of grace! This is what the Bible means when it says that, in Christ, we are *new* creations - the old has passed away.¹⁶ This is why our primary answer to problems is getting people converted. Laws don’t change people. Incentives don’t make the difference we want. But, if a person becomes *born again*? Anything is possible. Look at what faith did in Judah’s life. If we want societal change, the most important goal is for people to be made new in Christ.

Genesis 45:1-2 - **Joseph could no longer keep his composure in front of all his attendants, so he called out, “Send everyone away from me!” No one was with him when he revealed his identity to his brothers. ²But he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and also Pharaoh’s household heard it.**

Whatever Joseph’s thoughts or plans were, clearly he has become overwhelmed by all that he’s seen. These are not the same men he knew 22 years before. It’s time for the game to end and reconciliation to happen.

Genesis 45:3 - ³**Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But they could not answer him because they were terrified in his presence.**

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*

Suddenly this angry prince starts speaking to them in Hebrew. Suddenly, his face comes into focus. Suddenly he speaks the name that they hadn't used in years but thought of so often. Suddenly they "look on him they pierced." If they thought they were in trouble before, now they're *terrified*.

But in this moment of revelation, all their guilt is washed away by mercy and forgiveness. Joseph has no anger. He uses a tender term for father, sort of like *abba*.¹⁷ It's all about reconciliation and forgiveness now.

Genesis 45:4-8 - ⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please, come near me," and they came near. "I am Joseph, your brother," he said, "the one you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now don't be grieved or angry with yourselves for selling me here, because God sent me ahead of you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there will be five more years without plowing or harvesting. ⁷God sent me ahead of you to establish you as a remnant within the land and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. ⁸Therefore it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Joseph says, "Come near me," not so he can strike them or frighten them, but so they can embrace. As we approach the Lord and fall into His loving arms, He blots out our sins,¹⁸ because *He* paid their penalty.

Joseph is emphatic: It wasn't you, it was *God* Who did all this to me. Was that right? *Did* God do all these things? In the saga of providence it is true that God used Joseph as a sort of Ark to save His people from death. But should we then think that God *forced* the brothers to do what they did?

In the Book of Acts, Stephen comments on Joseph's life under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and he says that, "God was with Joseph and rescued him out of all his troubles." The Lord was working good out of the evil work of men because He needed to protect the chosen line which would deliver the Messiah.

This is not a story of God *making* men do evil, but a story proving that sin, hatred, and injustice cannot thwart God's grace or His plan.¹⁹ It is also a demonstration that, no matter what is happening in a family or a region or around the world, God preserves a remnant for His purposes. And His purpose is *always* great deliverance. Rescue for the guilty. Redemption for the undeserving. *A great deliverance*. When all the world is against them, God was for them. And though God is not the *cause* of your suffering or difficulty or opposition, He is able to work in and through it to accomplish a great deliverance in and through your life. But that work will mean that we have to be agents of grace rather than grievance, reconciliation rather than revenge,

¹⁷ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

¹⁸ Robert Candlish *Studies In Genesis*

¹⁹ Hughes

forgiveness rather than hostility. Joseph let go of any hard feelings he had toward his brothers and instead makes himself available to help and to save and to give to them all that he has.

Genesis 45:9-13 - ⁹“Return quickly to my father and say to him, ‘This is what your son Joseph says: “God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me without delay. ¹⁰You can settle in the land of Goshen and be near me—you, your children, and your grandchildren, your flocks, your herds, and all you have. ¹¹There I will sustain you, for there will be five more years of famine. Otherwise, you, your household, and everything you have will become destitute.” ’ ¹²Look! Your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin can see that I’m the one speaking to you. ¹³Tell my father about all my glory in Egypt and about all you have seen. And bring my father here quickly.”

The choice was very clear: Come and be saved or lose everything. There was no other option and no other hope. This is the forgiveness of God on display. Come and join His Kingdom, come and be fed, come and be enriched, come and be protected, or die. What a shocking heart-break that so many people choose famine over faith.

Joseph told them to hurry. There was no reason to wait and no time to lose. The same is true for the lost today. Hurry into His presence. Rush into His Kingdom. He has only the best in mind for you.

Genesis 45:14-15 - ¹⁴Then Joseph threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin wept on his shoulder. ¹⁵Joseph kissed each of his brothers as he wept, and afterward his brothers talked with him.

There was a total reconciliation between Joseph and *each* of his brothers - not just one or two. Joseph shows *real* affection, not simply a begrudging willingness to throw some grain their way. God is ready to embrace us with *this* kind of personal, affectionate forgiveness. But here is the deal:

Proverbs 28:13 - ¹³The one who conceals his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them will find mercy.

None of this “forgive yourself” nonsense. No, the way forward is to fall on God’s grace, which He is so ready to give in abundance to overflowing. But we must go to Him. We must bow before Him. We must confess our guilt and acknowledge that He alone can save. And then we can receive the richness of His provision.

As Christians, we’re then called to practice the kind of gracious forgiveness God shows us. We live in a land of hatred, hostility, grudges, and retaliation. That isn’t the way forward. Not in our families, not in our churches, not in our politics, not in our society. *Grace* is the way forward. Be a servant full of faith and forgiveness from the heart, knowing the Lord is on your side and His rescue plan continues even now.