

Lecture #12

Isn't it ironic that we close out our year with a story of famine when we're entering a season of Christmas cookies, candy, good food and the inevitable weight gain that will usually make one of our New Year challenges the struggle to take off extra holiday pounds? To us famine is a word in the newspaper or the pictures of emaciated bodies and sad eyes without hope that come into our homes in the form of appeals for financial assistance.

The famine in today's lesson was deep in the Mediterranean lands and Canaan was among those hard hit. Word had spread, however, among the inhabitants of the land that there was food to be bought in Egypt and a caravan of purchasers began to form in preparation for the southward journey. Stop and think about it . . . all three patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac & Jacob), to whom Canaan was the land of promise, met with famine in the land. It kind of makes us think about America as the promised land of religious freedom, and yet we suffer today from a famine for hearing the true and abiding word of God in our country.

Throughout the lesson today we read the name of Jacob and Israel interchanged often; but don't be confused, remember they are one and the same man. When Jacob wrestled with God, his

name was changed to Israel and for some reason Moses as he wrote this portion of Genesis sometimes referred to him by the old name and sometimes by the new name. By either name, he is the father of the twelve sons including Joseph who was now in Egypt.

In Genesis 42 Jacob's sons seem reluctant to go to Egypt for famine relief. Was it that the very word "Egypt" could have pricked their souls?

Nevertheless, at Jacob's strong urging, ten of the sons moved to join the others in the trip to buy food. Benjamin, however, was kept safely at home. Evidently Jacob had learned nothing about the evils of open favoritism and had now put Benjamin on the pedestal once occupied by Joseph. Whether that fact had rankled the older brothers' hearts as much as it did before, we can only guess, but it would become the circumstance upon which Joseph's imminent testing of the ten would pivot. So off to Egypt they went.

We can suppose that certainly it was not necessary for Joseph to supervise all purchases of food, but he probably needed to be involved in decisions about how much food should be permitted to leave the country. In light of Joseph's old dream,

it's interesting to see his brothers prostrate themselves before him. . . the empty sheaves bowing down to the full one.

Joseph recognized his brothers, but they didn't recognize him. It had been some twenty years since they'd seen him. (Remember he's now between 37-40, clean-shaven, attired as an Egyptian and he spoke to them through an interpreter.) What feelings do you suppose stirred inside Joseph as he recognized his brothers? Being betrayed or misused by one as close as a brother can leave an emotional scar that only love and forgiveness can heal. Psalm 55:12-14 laments,

"For it is not an enemy who reproaches me, then I could bear it. Nor is it one who hates me, who has exalted himself against me, then I could hide myself from him. But it is you, my equal, my companion and my familiar friend. We who had sweet fellowship together walking in the house of God in the throng."

Could these men be trusted? Had they changed? Was his father alive? Where was Benjamin? Had they done away with him too? So Joseph spoke harshly to them -- not vindictively or spitefully, but in an effort to test and humble them and to see if some major spiritual changes had occurred in them over time.

Joseph decided to bait them with an accusation of being spies who had come to see the barren condition of the land. (Hummm

. . . hadn't they accused Joseph of being "Daddy's little spy" some twenty years ago?) Maybe a little poetic justice?

Shocked, they declared they weren't a reconnaissance force, but the sons of one man in Canaan on an errand to buy food. Their youngest brother was home with their father and the other brother was no longer living. They were very submissive and spoke to Joseph with all the respect imaginable, but denied that they were spies. The Jewish historian, Josephus, gives this account of how Reuben defended them to Joseph:

"Our father's name is Jacob, a Hebrew man, who had twelve of us for his sons by four wives; the twelve of us, while we were all alive, were a happy family (sure they were); but when one of our brothers, whose name was Joseph, died, our affairs changed for the worse; for our father could only make long lamentations for him and we were in affliction, both by the calamity of the death of our brother and the miserable state of our aged father. We are now, therefore, come to buy grain, having entrusted the care of our father, and the provision for our own families to Benjamin, our youngest brother; and if you send to our house, you will learn whether we are guilty of the least falsehoods in what we say." And thus did Reuben endeavor to persuade Joseph to have a better opinion of them.

In Genesis 42:15 Joseph replies, "This is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place

unless your youngest brother comes here.” Of course, the test wasn’t to see if they were spies, but whether they’d be willing to sacrifice Benjamin like they did Joseph for their own ends, or had they had a change of heart. One would be allowed to go back and get Benjamin. Then, to demonstrate that he meant business and perhaps to allow them time to decide who would go, he threw them in prison for three days.

On the third day, words of great encouragement fell upon their ears . . . the governor told them he feared God. Reviewing the story up to this point, we discover that the ten brothers never spoke the name of God. But the Lord was in Joseph’s thoughts constantly. “How can I sin against God?” he asked Potiphar’s wife (39:9). “Interpretation belongs to God” he told the baker and cupbearer (40:8). “God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace” he said in 41:6 and ended his interpretation by saying “the thing is established by God and God will shortly bring it to pass” (41:32). When naming his first son he testified, “God has made me forget (41:51). And his love for God now kept him from taking revenge on his brothers.

So Joseph decided to retain one hostage and let the others return with food for their families. But he warned them that, without the youngest brother, they would never see his face

again. And they knew he meant it! They became conscience stricken and reached the conclusion that they were suffering because of their crime against Joseph. Conscience pronounced them guilty and, as so often happens, affliction is the effectual means God uses to awaken our conscience.

To be right with God, we have to acknowledge our guilt and sin that cost the blood of Jesus and accept the full forgiveness that His blood purchased on the cross. We must open every closet and empty every drawer where we have hidden things contrary to His will. Having been justified by grace this spiritual housecleaning is accomplished by the Holy Spirit as he convicts us of sin. We confess all that was of the old Adam, and acknowledge freely that it was dealt with by the Savior. The old idea that God punishes all deviation in the believer is alien to the Word of God. Job's comforters thought his distress was because of sin, but the God's Word teaches the contrary. In the New Testament the blind man was not blind because of the sin of his parents or his own sins (John 9:3), but for the glory of God. Peter's denial of Christ was not punished, but covered and forgotten. This holds true for today's Christian who repents and confesses. So if you are suffering in some area today, don't fall into that trap of revisiting old, confessed sins and thinking, "God

must be paying me back for what I did." That's not true when sin is covered by the blood of Christ. Some sins carry long-lasting consequences, but the Lord Jesus dealt with all sin on the cross and we have full and complete forgiveness. Now the Holy Spirit moves our conscience forward to keep a clean house and live a life of holiness.

Well, little by little the whole truth was becoming known to Joseph. As the brothers squabbled in Hebrew which, of course, Joseph understood, he realized that Reuben had tried to save his life. So he took Simeon, the second eldest, as hostage while the rest returned for Benjamin. In binding Simeon before their eyes, again he reinforced the fact he meant business and dramatized the fact that Simeon would remain in prison until they returned. Dr. Donald Barnhouse offered the following as a possible reason why Simeon was chosen as hostage:

"Simeon was the ringleader in the murder of the Shechemites (34:25-30). Jacob, in his dying blessing, had nothing good to say about Simeon, but spoke of him as cruel, and his sword as a weapon of violence (49:5). It is more than likely that Simeon was a leader in the plot against Joseph. We can understand, therefore, why Joseph would place this particular brother in prison. He did not want his baleful influence to be exerted on the others on the way home. Also, it would take longer to move him to repentance, since he was harder of heart than the others."

Well, confrontation is like major surgery, isn't it? We try to avoid it at all costs. Now the sons had to face Jacob and tell the whole story to explain why Simeon wasn't with them. Also there was the fact that the money was still in the sacks. Jacob's reaction? . . . "Joseph is not, Simeon is not, and now you want to take Benjamin away; everything's against me." A real picture of a pillar of faith, right? Here's Jacob, almost 130 years old and he has a case of PMS. You know what that is, don't you? Poor-Me Syndrome! Jacob's response was obviously self-oriented and again put Benjamin's line from Rachel on a higher level than that of Leah. It must not have been easy for the brothers to be informed once more that they were secondary in their father's affections. In spite of that fact, Reuben extravagantly offered the sacrifice of two of his sons if he failed to bring Benjamin back safely. But Jacob brushed aside the offer and, for the present at least, was adamant about refusing to let Benjamin go. Again it's interesting to note that although Jacob had his heart set on elevating his descendants through Rachel, God chose to honor those coming through Leah instead. Judah was to be the line for David and eventually the Messiah. God's ways are very different from our own.

Have you ever had that “everything’s against me” feeling? Humanly it’s an easy thought to entertain. But in the reality of our Christianity, it’s almost an absurd thought if we really analyze it and truly believe God’s in control. How reluctant we are to allow the will of God to operate! We live in the here and now and need to admit we’re unable to judge from the viewpoint of eternity. What seems “against” us may really be God working it all out “for” us.

Surely Jacob was aware of the prophecy given Abraham in Genesis 15 that his descendants would be strangers in a country not their own for four hundred years before coming back to the land. But when life is in turmoil now, it’s pretty easy to lose sight of the future even if a happy ending is promised.

Common sense is a wonderful gift from God, providing it is not our final court of appeal. The sons of Jacob understood the tone of Joseph’s voice as he dealt with them, even though they didn’t recognize him. They knew it was no use to return to Egypt unless they fulfilled his demands and brought Benjamin.

So Judah took on the leadership and reminded his father of the absolute necessity of compliance or they would all die of starvation; in fact they had lingered too long already. In deciding to do things for God, there are two dangers: running ahead or

lagging behind. To press on in our own strength is certain to bring disaster. If we lag behind, we lose fellowship and blessings. Now was the time for Judah to stand strong in faith. He promised to personally be “surety” for Benjamin and to do all in his power to guarantee a safe return. In effect, he made himself responsible for Benjamin. Reuben’s voice cut no ice with Jacob since his sin of incest with Jacob’s concubine; Simeon was in prison in Egypt; and also remember he and Levi bore the chief blame for the massacre at Shechem; so Judah was next in line to assume the leadership role. Reference to Benjamin as a “lad or boy” doesn’t mean he’s still a child; it simply designates him as the youngest of the twelve. He was at least 21 or so at the time. Again, Josephus tells it this way:

“Now the misery growing ever worse, his sons begged him and he had no other course than to take in his present circumstances. And Judah, who was of a bold temper on other occasions, spoke his mind freely to him. ‘Do not be afraid for your son, or suspect the worst, for nothing could be done to your son but by the appointment of God, which must certainly come to pass whether he is at home or away. Do not condemn us to manifest destruction, or deprive us of plenty of food we might have from Pharaoh, just by your unreasonable fear about your son Benjamin. By hindering Benjamin’s journey, Simeon will perish.’ He exhorted him to trust God for him; and said he would either bring his son back to him safe, or together with him, lose his own life.”

Finally, Jacob bowed to the inevitable. But he took every step to guarantee the outcome. He sent fruit, spices, nuts and money. How the human soul desires independence! We always want to pay our way. Remember how Jacob tried to buy Esau's favor with sheep, camels and gifts? The idea of works added to grace to gain salvation is the same old "fruits and nuts" of Jacob. To yield to the grace of another is so foreign to the natural heart. So Jacob sent them off with presents and a prayer and resigned himself to God's will.

Joseph had learned discipline through his suffering in the school of hard knocks and although no longer in danger from his brothers, he couldn't reveal himself until he was satisfied they'd truly repented. From the time the famine began, the brothers were learning their own lessons about strict discipline. This story occupies far more space in the Bible than any other in Genesis. The memory of their old sins had to be recalled, their conscience awakened, obedience rendered, and humility instilled.

On seeing his brothers again, now with Benjamin along, Joseph gave orders that they were to eat in his own home at noon. Fearful at this unusual request, they no doubt must have thought it had something to do with the money mistakenly returned to them on the first visit. They tried to explain to

Joseph's steward, who not only reassured them, but brought Simeon out of his confinement to join them.

When time for the meal came, Joseph was so overcome at seeing Benjamin again; he left the room and wept. He ate alone (since the custom was that Egyptians and Hebrews didn't eat together) but he had the brothers seated according to age.

Henry Morris in his commentary on Genesis says there are "no less than 39 million, 917 thousand (39,917,000) different orders in which eleven individuals could have been seated." No wonder the brothers marveled at the seating arrangement! And then there was the preferential treatment given Benjamin – five times the portions given others! Would that stir jealousy? What a testimony to the brothers' change of heart when instead of jealousy, the Amplified Bible says in 43:34, "they drank freely and were merry with him."

Several commentators remarked that seating them according to birthright was a wonderful picture of what will be the Lord's dealings with the Jews at the end of the present age. No Jew in the world knows his tribe, but there are no "lost tribes." The Lord Jesus will sort out the tribes and we read in Revelation that 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes will be chosen for

testimony during the tribulation. They will probably be just as astonished as were Joseph's brothers.

Possibly Joseph entertained his brothers at dinner to be kind to them and just be with them. More likely, however, is that this act was a part of his greater strategy for bringing about their reformation. Unless they had access to his table, they could not be accused of taking his cup. Now Joseph was to engineer the supreme moment of testing of his brothers . . . the cup was put in Benjamin's sack. It would seem from the text that Joseph practiced divination. Divination is a pagan practice of foretelling the future or obtaining secret knowledge; it's demonic in nature. There is no reason to believe that Joseph actually used this silver cup for that purpose, but it would certainly make sense to the brothers as an explanation of how Joseph knew so much about them. Just as eating with Hebrews was an abomination to the Egyptians, taking possession of a divination cup would be an abomination to a Hebrew who believed in the one true God. Without reservation, every brother would vouch for the innocence of the others. They felt totally confident of the innocence of all when it came to the matter of stealing the divination cup. So much so they could pledge death or slavery for the guilty.

The test of loyalty and jealousy was upon them. If they were the same men as when they sold Joseph into slavery, they would disclaim responsibility, leave Benjamin to bear the blame of the theft and continue back to Canaan. But the Lord had been working in the hearts of these brothers. They stood by Benjamin and returned together to plead for their brother.

Joseph's test brought about one of the truly great speeches of history . . . great because of its sincerity of purpose, its emotional depth, its selfless concern, its revelation of the conversion of the speaker, and its substitutionary plea. Here is an eloquent expression of true love. Today, almost 4000 years later, we can hear the poignancy of Judah's voice in his account of Jacob's love for Joseph and Benjamin. Love so willing to take full responsibility for another before God melted the heart of Joseph. Such love moved Moses to ask God to blot his name out of the Book of Life (Exodus 32:32). Such love prompted Paul to wish himself accursed for his brethren if only they would be saved. Judah had been transformed by divine love.

One question remained, was this the plea of Judah only or did his brothers agree? They agreed . . . they were in this together; a spirit of community has arisen among them, a spirit of unity and solidarity.

Now was the time for the unveiling. Sending the servants away, he declares, "I am Joseph!" Vs. 3 says "his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified of his presence." That's probably putting it mildly. He drew them close, and several commentaries mention that he revealed his circumcision to them as proof. He comforted them with the assurance that this was all in God's plan and that "God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance." He told them to go home and get father and everyone and come to live in Goshen, near me. Can't you just see them all standing there with open mouths? But fear was cast out perfect love in Joseph's demonstration of forgiveness and the brothers relaxed and talked with him (vs. 15). There must have been so much to catch up on.

We'll go deeper into the issue of forgiveness in the next lesson, but I want to close with some thoughts about reestablishing relationships. And these apply to people in your life as well as a relationship with God. Maybe you're in need of lifting the veil that may be separating you from God. Maybe you're in need of a fresh relationship with Jesus.

There are three “C’s” to discuss:

Consideration – To reestablish any relationship there must be the desire to do so. For a Christian, our mark is to be how we love one another. Scripture says “as far as it up to you, be at peace with all men.” Is there someone toward whom you should be taking that first step? Maybe you’ve never come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. You are searching, you long to know God. The truth is that the Lord is waiting to reveal himself to you at this very moment, just as Joseph anxiously waited revealing himself to his family. Joseph looked for a proper response before giving away his identity, wanting to see new loyalty and changed attitudes. In offering His salvation, God doesn’t ask for either of these. All he desires is that you open your heart and in faith invite Christ to be your Savior. That’s it.

Second is confession. What caused the break in the relationship you’re thinking about? Don’t be afraid to admit guilt, say “I’m sorry.” Certainly the “clearing the air” will never begin if we don’t open up communications with one another. Maybe you’re out of fellowship with God. You haven’t spent much time with Him in quite awhile. Your priorities are fouled up. There’s sin in your life and you know it, yet you’re unwilling to deal with it. God may even seem as cold and distant to you as He did

before you received Christ as Savior. 1 John 1:9 says "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Unfortunately, there is no such guarantee on a human level; but, what really matters is that you have done what is right before God.

Third is commitment. Reconciliation may not happen on the first try. It may take commitment and perseverance in love to unlock forgiveness. But, we approach a new year . . . a fresh start . . . a clean slate, so to speak. Won't you try? And as for the Lord, will you give up whatever it is that keeps you from a close relationship to Him? Will you commit yourself to Him in worship and some form of service? Is there a spiritual famine in your life for the Word of God? Praise God you're here doing something about that! Are you trying to buy spiritual nourishment through the "fruits and nuts" idea of works added to grace for your salvation?

What a comfort it is to know that no matter how much you've neglected or mistreated Jesus in the past, He loves you and welcomes a repentant sinner with open arms.

In so many ways Joseph is symbolic of Jesus Christ. As long as Joseph's brothers maintained their own righteousness, Joseph appeared stern, cruel and unreasonable. But when they came in

deep humiliation and threw themselves on his mercy and grace, he showed himself as their loving brother with power to give them new freedom from want and a life abundant with him.