

“TESTED AGAIN”

This is the middle chapter in the unit that runs from chapter 43 to chapter 45, covering the brothers’ second visit to Egypt. These three chapters stand as the climax of the Joseph story, culminating in the reconciliation that is brought about between Joseph and his brothers, which we will see in the next chapter. But before that reconciliation can take place, Joseph had to test his brothers one more time. We have seen him doing this ever since they first appeared in Egypt, and now he puts them to one final test to see if their repentance really is genuine. And as we study this chapter, we will see two aspects of what it means to have a repentant heart. First, it shows us that those who are truly repentant respond to their trials by acknowledging their sin. And second, it shows us that those who are truly repentant begin to put other people before themselves.

In the previous chapter, Joseph set a feast before his brothers and tested them by giving extra portions of food to Benjamin. They passed that test. They did not get jealous of Benjamin but made merry with him instead. But now, as Joseph prepares to send them on their way back home, they are about to be put to a much more severe test. The brothers must have been feeling a great deal of relief as they packed up and began to head home. Things had gone far better than they could have hoped. They had been treated like honored guests by Joseph. They had their grain. They were bringing Simeon and Benjamin back home with them. Everything had worked out. But little did they know that this was only the calm before the storm.

Joseph directed his steward to place the money back in his brothers' bags and to place his own silver cup in the bag of Benjamin. We may be inclined to think that it was wrong for Joseph to do this. We might think that it was cruel of him to manipulate the situation in this way. However, we need to realize that we can have the same kind of thoughts about the way the Lord exercises his sovereign control over our lives. We are sometimes tempted to think that God is toying with us because we cannot see what the Lord is doing, just as the brothers could not see what Joseph was doing. But we need to remember that what was true for them is also true for us. In the end, it was all for their good.

As I said, Joseph put on this ruse in order to test his brothers. He had to see if they had truly changed. On their previous visit he had overheard them expressing their sorrow over what they had done to him, but he had to know if their repentance was genuine. And in order to find out, Joseph created a scenario that provided his brothers with an opportunity to commit the same sin all over again. Two decades earlier they had sold their father's favorite son into slavery, giving no thought to the suffering that their actions would bring upon Joseph and their father. Now Joseph wanted to see how his brothers would respond when they were given the opportunity to give Benjamin up as a slave in order to save their own necks.

Joseph's reason for placing the money back in his brothers' sacks was, in the words of commentator Meredith Kline, "probably to enflame the brothers' smouldering sense that God was mysteriously dealing with them for their great sin, summoning them to repentance." [*Eerdmans Bible Commentary*, 110] Ever since their first visit to Egypt the

brothers have had a sense that God's hand was behind the things that were taking place, and Joseph wanted to make sure that that sense remained hot within them.

When the steward caught up with the brothers and made the accusation, they were, as we would expect, utterly surprised. They did not hesitate to put down their bags and let the steward search through them for Joseph's silver cup. By the way, Joseph's mention of his using this cup in order to practice divination, which was an attempt to see into the future, does not necessarily mean that he actually did so. If he did, it would stand in sharp contrast to his statement to Pharaoh back in chapter 40 that only God could reveal the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams. So it seems best to see this mention of divination as part of the ruse. It made the cup that much more precious, and it made the crime of stealing it that much more serious.

When the cup was discovered, the brothers tore their clothes and returned to the city. Both of these actions carry immense significance. You may recall that when the brothers told their father about what happened to Joseph it was only Jacob who tore his clothes. The brothers did not tear their clothes. But here they all do it as an outward sign of their despair. Twenty years earlier they did not care about their father's favorite son. But now they do.

This is further demonstrated by the fact that the brothers all returned back to the city. They probably would not have had to do so. As the steward had told them, "he who is found with it shall be my servant, and the rest of you shall be innocent." The brothers probably could have gotten rid of Benjamin then and there. They were being given the

chance to get rid of their father's favorite, and to do so to their own advantage. They would be saving their own skins. But they did not take the opportunity to do so. They all went back. This shows us that the brothers have in fact changed. True repentance has taken place. They are not going to commit the same sin again.

Nevertheless, the test is not over yet. When they arrive back in the city, they have to face Joseph himself. And notice who it is that serves as the spokesperson for the brothers. It is Judah. We have been noting how important a character Judah is in the Joseph story, and it is in this chapter that we see this most clearly. Remember, it was Judah who had come up with the idea of selling Joseph in order to turn a profit. And do you remember what Judah did right after that? He left the covenant circle to live among the Canaanites. He intermarried with the Canaanites. He raised boys who were so wicked that two of them were put to death directly by the Lord. He failed to fulfill his obligations to his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar. And then he had intercourse with her when she disguised herself as a prostitute. But in spite of all of this, the Lord was gracious to Judah. God humbled Judah through his scandalous dealings with Tamar. We were given a glimpse of Judah's new character in chapter 43, where he took it upon himself to be the pledge of Benjamin's safety to his father. And here in this chapter we see Judah making good on that promise. He takes responsibility for Benjamin. He is the spokesman, even though Reuben, Simeon and Levi were older. Reuben had disgraced his father by sleeping with one of his concubines, while Simeon and Levi had slaughtered the

Shechemites. Judah was no better, but the Lord worked a profound repentance within him, as his speech to Joseph demonstrates.

Now before we look at that speech, consider what Judah said when Joseph initially confronted them for stealing the cup. What would you have said if you were in Judah's shoes? What would you have said if you were accused of doing something that you had not done? Our first impulse in a situation like that would be to deny it, to plead our innocence, to try with all of our might to convince our accuser that he had made a terrible mistake. I can easily see myself responding that way in such a situation. But that is not what Judah did. What did he say? He said, "God has found out the guilt of your servants." Now why do you think he would say that? Obviously, he was not talking about the silver cup, even though that is how the Egyptians would have understood him. He was talking about the guilt that they bore for what they had done to Joseph those many years before. The Lord had been working on the consciences of these men ever since they first came to Egypt. And as a result they became convinced that the terrible situation that they were in came about as a result of God's judgment for their past crime. During both of their trips to Egypt they interpreted every setback as divine punishment for what they had done to Joseph. They realized that there was nothing that they could do to escape God's justice. He found them out. That is why they admitted their guilt.

The brothers did not know it at the time, but their admission of guilt paved the way for a beautiful reconciliation. They had to be brought to a low point. They had to see the evil of their sin and God's wrath against it before they could receive the grace that the

Lord was about to pour out upon them. This is an important spiritual principle. We need to experience the bitterness of our sin and guilt before we can appreciate the greatness of God's grace. The Puritan Thomas Watson put it this way: "Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet." [cited in Harvey, *When Sinners Say 'I Do'*] The Lord orchestrated things so that Joseph's brothers came to taste the bitterness of their sin, and that is what prepared them to receive the grace he was about to extend to them.

There is something else here that I want to point out. The brothers were not guilty of the offense with which they were being charged. They were innocent, at least in this matter. But they did not say so. Instead, they said that the Lord had discovered their guilt. There is a very important lesson for us in this. There are times when you and I are faced with trials and difficulties that we have not brought upon ourselves, at least as far as we are able to tell. There are times when we feel as though we have not done anything to deserve what we are going through. Now, how does this passage speak to us when we are in those kinds of situations? It shows us that we need to realize that we are never truly innocent. Every trial that we face in this life should humble us. It should remind us of our sin. We would not have to experience such trials were it not for our sin. But because we remain sinners, even after our conversion, the Lord continues to discipline us and sanctify us through our trials.

As we turn now to briefly look at Judah's speech to Joseph in verses 18-34, I want to call your attention to just two things, both of which demonstrate how Judah was intent on putting others before himself. First of all, look at how he speaks of his father. He

mentions his father fourteen times in this speech. He no longer resents Jacob's favoritism. He accepts it, and he even uses it as the basis for his plea. He quotes his father as saying that his wife had only bore him two sons, as if his other sons did not count because they were not Rachel's children. Judah admits that Jacob's life is bound up with the life of Benjamin. He tells Joseph that if Benjamin does not return, then Jacob will go down to the grave in sorrow.

The reason why this stands out so much is because it is Judah who is saying it. Neither he, nor the brothers for whom he is speaking, cared one bit about their father when they conspired to make him think that Joseph had been eaten by a wild animal. Nor did Judah care about his daughter-in-law's situation when his two wicked sons died and left her childless. But now Judah does care. Why? Because he has seen his sin. He has been humbled. And he sees that he can no longer live only for himself.

The second thing that I want to point out in Judah's speech is what he says at the very end of it. After making his case for why it is so important that Benjamin be allowed to return home, he pleads with Joseph to take him as a servant in Benjamin's place. Judah's concern for his father causes him to sacrifice himself for Benjamin's sake. He puts his father, and Benjamin, before his own interests. He cannot bear to think of the evil that would befall his father if Benjamin does not return. So he offers himself in Benjamin's place.

Does this remind you of anyone else? It is a foreshadowing of what was done by Judah's greatest descendent, the Lord Jesus Christ, when he offered himself up on the

cross for our sake. Judah is a type of Christ here. He is a changed man. His life has taken on a Christlike form. That is what happens when the Lord works repentance in a person's heart. Repentant people are humbled under their trials. They see everything that happens to them through the lenses of their own sin and God's great mercy. And as they reflect upon the fact that God does not treat them as their sins deserve, they stop thinking only about themselves and begin caring about other people. Judah demonstrated his repentance with self-sacrificing love. He provides an example for each one of us to follow. Look for ways in which you can lay your life down for the benefit of those around you. For, as the apostle John says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." [1 Jn. 3:16]