

Joseph: Feast or Famine and Faith in God Almighty ... Genesis 43

We're back again this evening at the fascinating story of Joseph, and we're looking at chapter 43. Quite a chapter, isn't it - you read it through and you can't help but think: here's a big family in dire straits; a famished family, scraping the bottom of the barrel, trying to survive; a dysfunctional family in grave danger of being wiped out because of a global famine ... there ...

Sitting in the corner in his black Bedouin tent, there's a stubborn old man who feels that God has dealt him a bad hand, who reckons that God has given him a bunch of sour grapes - it has to be said that Jacob takes a fair bit of persuasion to do the right thing - and when he finally agrees, the motley crew of brothers head off to Egypt a second time - and, this time, Benjamin goes with them - when they get there, Simeon gets out of the prison where he's been held hostage for two years - they all have a big slap-up meal in the PMs home ... what lessons can we learn from it?

There's a glaring contrast between the first verse and the last sentence in the unfolding drama - we read: 'the famine was still severe in the land ... so they feasted and drank freely with Joseph.' Quite literally, they went from a bare table to a lavish spread, from nothing to a superabundance. It's a classic tale of, from poverty to plenty ...

Simply put, this narrative is all about the providence of a good and faithful God - we need to see God in the crucibles and the casseroles of life; it clearly shows us that the sovereign Lord

runs the entire show from beginning to end - there's nothing random or reckless about God's dealings in our lives; it's also a poignant reminder that come what may in your life and mine, that His mercy is more! The glorious truth that shines through every time is that God rules and overrules in all the circumstances of life.

So let's get into the heart of the story; we can write a caption over the first two verses:

Tough times (1-2)

The picture in this opening paragraph is bleak, to say the least. Times were hard. They had reached rock bottom - they were struggling to survive day after day - it was tough! They felt suffocated and were on the brink of catastrophe. The cupboards were bare, the shelves were almost empty - their meagre resources had plummeted to an all-time low ... the grain was gone - this was bad, really bad. It was, as the Bible says, 'a severe famine in the land' and around the world (41:57).

That's when Jacob said to the boys, 'Time to head back to Egypt and get more food!' Reality hit hard - and it hurt ... the pangs of hunger drove him to a point where he'd rather not be ...

You see, as we know from his past, Jacob excelled at scheming, at plotting, at manoeuvring - he was so twisted in his character that he could hide behind a corkscrew - but, here he is, and he's at the end of his tether ... God is bringing him to a point where he has to seek help from afar. He needs to eat humble pie and swallow his pride ...

hence the request: 'Go back and buy us a little more food.'

It's important to realise, before we move on, that even the patriarchs - and that's what Jacob was, along with Abraham and Isaac - these men were subject to the difficulties of life every bit as much as the non-believers in the God of Israel ... Jacob didn't have immunity from the ups and downs of life - you and I are not exempt from the trials and troubles of life - we don't get a free pass in life! The pagans have hard times, sure they do ... and we, as the people of God, have hard times.

Tough times, no doubts there - but there's also:

Tough talking (3-10)

See what happens here - Judah becomes the spokesman when he responds and tells his father what needs to be done! Benjamin has to go back with them to Egypt! That's what the PM of Egypt demanded - nothing less, it was non-negotiable.

Judah refers to Joseph here as 'the man' in verse 3 and again in verse 5 - we know his identity, but Judah didn't have a clue! You see, Joseph wanted to see his younger brother - they were blood brothers, they had the same mother in Rachel - the other guys came from other mothers ... so Benjamin was most special.

It's obvious from verses 4 and 5 that Judah is applying pressure to his father - he's twisting his arm behind his back in order for him to agree to send Benjamin along.

See Jacob's response in verse 6 - he knows he's backed into a corner and he doesn't appreciate being given an ultimatum! And, in verse 7, the

boys leave their father in no doubt that it's not their fault - 'the man' Joseph questioned them and they gave him a straight answer. The boys had no option but to spill the beans about their father and Benjamin ...

The tables turn in verses 8-10 when we see Judah upping the stakes - he lays it on the line when he tells his father that he will stand as a surety or a guarantor for Benjamin - if he doesn't bring Benjamin back to Canaan, then Judah says, the buck will stop with him ...

He leaves his old father in no doubt that it's gone from bad to worse and still some because he was so slow in making a decision - Jacob dithered and delayed ... the longer he waited, the problem was exacerbated. It's obvious, isn't it, that Jacob was a tough nut to crack - he played for time and their food supply dwindled and dwindled ... there's a lesson for us to learn here:

There are times in all our lives when we need to do something about something - but we tend to put off making a decision - we think the problem will just go away, we tend to blank it out ... and then we discover that it just goes from bad to worse to awful ... it gets bigger and bigger ... ah, procrastination is not an ally, it's not our best friend - it's a killer! Don't put off until tomorrow what we know should be done today!

Tough times, tough talking - and that leads us to:

Tough thinking (11-14)

I can tell you, folks ... Jacob is a pain, a real pain - see his attitude, and hear his answer, to Judah and the rest of the boys ... it smacks of bitterness

and it stinks with petulance. Says something like, 'OK, if that's what you want, you can do it - and be sure to take some of the finest products from Canaan with you to appease "the man" you're going to meet! And when you're at it, make sure you take extra shekels with you too.'

At last, he has faced up to reality ... that said, in his final sentence in verse 14 you can still hear something of his 'poor me' attitude ... he's feeling sorry for himself and he's engulfed with feelings of self-pity ... here is the groaning of a sad dad! In one sense, I feel sorry for Jacob - in his mind, he's already lost one son in Joseph, and he's not sure about Simeon, and he's heart scared that he might lose one more in Benjamin. And that's why he says what he does ...

His first sentence is a real desire for blessing to be upon them. He refers to 'God Almighty' and that should ring a bell ... that's El Shaddai. The same one who appeared to his grandfather Abram back in Genesis 17:1 when he promised to give him a seed ...

That is so significant because you see what he is about to do - Jacob is on the verge of sending all of his seed to Egypt - every single son - with the possibility that they might never return - so he's risking everything ... and if that happened, that's it - the covenant promise is extinct. He's too old to have any children - all of his eggs are in one basket, but it is God's basket ...

so he calls on the name of God, El Shaddai - the God who is all powerful, all-sufficient, the God who can do anything but fail, the God who is

enough, the God who is always on time ... ah, my friend, God can do whatever God wants to do - when all is said and done, he is El Shaddai!

Even when Jacob's faith is faltering, he recognises that the outcome is in God's hands. He knows that God can work in the heart of the PM, and he can bring it all to pass. When he has nothing to fall back on and no one else on whom he can rely, he knows that God is still there!

He's also a God who is all-loving for he is full of compassion, and loving kindness, and tender mercy! And, thirdly, he's a God who is all-present ... he's not just high and lifted up, he's near us in the midst of all life's storms ... he's in the heights of heaven but he's also with us when we're in the pit of adversity! That's what Jacob realised, and that's what you and I need to realise too.

Tough times, tough talking, tough thinking, and right here in this longer section, we have:

Tough questions (15-31)

We're told here that the brothers make a beeline down to Egypt, the regional superpower - it's a journey of about 250 miles, 3 weeks to get there - donkeys and camels - and all their baggage! An arduous journey. And a trek of great uncertainty because they had absolutely no idea what would happen when they got there!

When we read this part of the story we get an insight into the dynamics of the relationship between these brothers.

We have a number of windows opened into the heart of Joseph, we see his kindness, his bruised

memory, his love for his family, and his desire for true reconciliation based on repentance.

One look at the brothers - we see something of their fear, their guilty consciences, their suspicion at the kindness which 'the man' is showing them, their questions, but more than anything else, we see their new integrity and their humility before God.

These guys feared the worst, yet they received the best! A classic case of unexpected mercy. They thought they'd end up in a prison, but instead they're seated in a palace. They didn't deserve it, but that's what they got - a taste of the kindness and mercy of God.

And that's how we are meant to treat one another! No matter what anyone does to us, we are to turn the other cheek and return evil with good!

You can see Joseph's immediate reaction in verse 16 when he spotted Benjamin with them - imagine the excitement he must've felt, all the emotion with his heart beating faster ... that's when he told his steward - his chief of staff - to take them home to the palace and they would have a bite to eat at noon.

Remember ... Joseph hasn't seen Benjamin for 20+ years. That's one of those spine-tingling moments! There was nothing awkward about it.

You can read the dialogue that went on between the steward and the brothers from verses 17-25. I mean, these guys have no idea what's going on - as I said earlier, they think the writing is on the wall for them, they're apprehensive, they are

filled with terror and really uptight - their hearts are thumping ... they thought that Joseph would come down on them like a ton of bricks ...

but ... they hadn't bargained on God doing something extra special. As we all know, that's where God excels ... and that's the gist of verse 23, where we discover 4 truths about God:

One, the God of the Hebrews - Elohim - is the only true God for he is 'the God.' Two, the God of the Hebrews provides for his people for 'he has given you treasure.' Three, the God of the Hebrews works through secondary means such as other people and circumstances to do what he wants to do, for we read, 'I received your silver.' Four, the God of the Hebrews often works secretly, discretely, and mysteriously - we do not see his invisible hand at work, we only see the outcome of it.

When Joseph arrives on the scene again in verse 26, the brothers do what they need to do - they pass on the gifts and they pay homage to the PM; there was a polite conversation between them, peppered with questions about their father back in Canaan. That's the mark of a good man, a man with social graces - it is not to talk about himself, but to ask about them!

By the time we come to verse 29 Joseph has done a quick headcount and he sees 11 men standing before him ... out of the corner of his eye, he sees Benjamin - see how he's described - 'his brother' and 'his own mother's son.' In Joseph's heart, the blind Fanny Crosby penned how he felt: 'Chords that were broken vibrate once more.'

This is a tender moment - an intimate moment - when Joseph says to him: 'God, be gracious to you, my son.' This is the greatest thing you could wish for any person. He's the only one he singled out for a special blessing - and, amazingly, the other guys didn't bat an eyelid. They were ok with that. It's all a bit much for Joseph - he's on the verge of breaking down and weeping, such is his elation and joy at seeing Benjamin again ... Joseph leaves the room - he's lost it, his feelings get the better of him, he goes to his bedroom and weeps like a child ... an emotional meltdown, but these are tears of joy and pure delight ... he's a great leader and he's not afraid to shed tears ... real men cry ... that's something a few of us have done over the years - he washed his face, steeled himself, and then he emerged, and said, 'let's have lunch!'

And that leads us to our final point this evening:

Tough love (32-34)

There's almost a touch of humour with what happens next - a little comic relief - there's PM Joseph at a table eating on his own; there's the Egyptian entourage at a table - a kind of racial superiority; and then all the brothers are at another table - all 11 of them - you can visualise it, can't you? All of them at lunch, in the same place, but eating at 3 different tables!

See the astonishment on their faces ...! There they are - all 11 of them - and they're at the table seated in their birth order. How did that happen? How did the Prime Minister know where to seat them in such a fashion? So they sat with Number

One at the top - right down to Number Eleven at the bottom ... I mean, that's unbelievable! It's uncanny.

They must have wondered, how on earth did that happen? Was it pure coincidence? The scientist Henry Morris makes the point that there are over 39 million combinations in which eleven men can be seated - there's no doubt that this was done by someone who knew the family tree.

Look at verse 34 for we discover they ate the same as Joseph ate - they were served with food from the PMs table ... and see what happened to Benjamin - he had 5 times as much - talk about a cup overflowing, this is it. And there's not a sliver of jealousy from any of the brothers!

That's a reversal of fortunes which the brothers never saw coming - an unexpected mercy - they walked into an avalanche of grace ... it pays eloquent tribute to the sweet providence of a good God. From a famine to a feast because of a faithful God!

The lesson is: for you and me, when times are tough, and they often are - our God can be trusted! When we have tough questions that keep us awake at night, questions that demand an answer, our God can be trusted. He is faithful ... that's what Jacob and his sons discovered - so can you and I ... for them and for us, his ways are mysterious and his mercy is more.