

35. Fear removing God's grace

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Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it.

A crucial point of the Christian faith is our understanding that people are saved by grace alone. There's nothing we have to do or we can do to earn it.

However, there's one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be ours only if we'll reach out and take it.

So if we choose to receive God's grace, it can remove our fear from our hearts.

In this chapter Joseph's story shows him to be even more than a man of integrity and forgiveness – he is a model of God's grace. A type and shadow of Jesus, Joseph personifies the spirit of Christ. He responds to mistreatment with blessing, and he gathers those who have long been alienated into a family.

A. DELAY AND DENIAL

Genesis 43:1-2 Now the famine was severe in the land. 2 And it came to pass, when they had eaten up the grain which they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, "Go back, buy us a little food."

Perhaps Jacob originally thought they had enough to tide them over until the famine is over, so that they would never need to go back with Benjamin. But the famine continued and they ran out of food.

Necessity drove Jacob to do something he would normally never do. We might imagine Jacob prayed so hard for the famine to break, and asked God to send relief. We also might imagine Jacob became angry and bitter against God for not answering those prayers. But God knew what He was doing and had something so much better for Jacob than he could ever imagine.

Jacob cared about Benjamin so much that he was willing to let Simeon spend his life in a foreign country prison. When you have a partiality toward your children, you are asking for troubles. Actually a lot of them.

B. BLAME AND DECEIT

Genesis 43:3 But Judah spoke to him, saying, "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' " 4 "If you send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. 5 But if you will not send him, we will not go down; for the man said to us, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' " 6 And Israel said, "Why did you deal so wrongfully with me as to tell the man whether you had still another brother?" 7 But they said, "The man asked us pointedly about ourselves and our family, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' And we told him according to these words. Could we possibly have known that he would say, 'Bring your brother down?'" 8 Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. 9 I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. 10 For if we had not lingered, surely by now we would have returned this second time."

Instead of dealing with the real issues, Jacob passes blames to his sons for all his troubles. He also clearly suggests, true to his character, that it would have been better if they had deceived the Egyptian official.

This time Judah comes forward as a surety for Benjamin. This is the first good thing we see Judah doing. Previously, he was the one who had proposed the sale of Joseph to slavery. He was the one who wronged his daughter-in-law Tamar and had sex with her, because he thought she was a prostitute.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a better Surety today, and He came from the tribe of Judah. The Lord Jesus took that place and became our Shepherd. We were not able to meet His standard, nor to come up to His level. But the Lord Jesus stepped in and became our Surety and gave His life for us.

C. TOLERANCE AND UNCERTAINTY

Genesis 43:11-14 And their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: Take some of the best fruits of the land in your vessels and carry down a present for the man--a little balm and a little honey, spices and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds. 12 Take double money in your hand, and take back in your hand the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks; perhaps it was an oversight. 13 Take your brother also, and arise, go back to the man. 14 And may God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may release your other brother and Benjamin. If I am bereaved, I am bereaved!"

Grim-faced Jacob agrees to let Benjamin go but not without gifts and money to appease the Egyptian official. This same ploy had worked for Jacob once before when he took presents to his brother Esau, whom he had cheated. It's the best plan Jacob can think of to help ensure Benjamin's safety. Up till now, there are no vertical plans of hoping and trusting in the Lord, only a feeble hope in the horizontal men's planning.

They took double money with them to Egypt to buy grain and the Egyptian leader's favor.

D. HOUNDED BY FEAR

Genesis 43:15-18 So the men took that present and Benjamin, and they took double money in their hand, and arose and went down to Egypt; and they stood before Joseph. 16 When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Take these men to my home, and slaughter an animal and make ready; for these men will dine with me at noon." 17 Then the man did as Joseph ordered, and the man brought the men into Joseph's house. 18 Now the men were afraid because they were brought into Joseph's house; and they said, "It is because of the money, which was returned in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may make a case against us and fall upon us, to take us as slaves with our donkeys."

Remember, Joseph's fearful brothers, haven't had the advantage of reading the Book of Genesis like us. Every step of their trip back to Egypt has been anxious one. Each of the Joseph's brothers carried back to Egypt an awakened conscience. But every step, from God's perspective, has been preparing them to reach out and take the grace Joseph has to offer.

These men are really panicky now. They can't imagine him inviting them to his home for any good purpose. He had dealt with them so harshly before, and now he

is inviting them to lunch! Perhaps they figured that the kindness from the Egyptian leader was just the prelude to an execution.

Under ordinary circumstances having a lunch with the Prime Minister would be something to brag about. Wouldn't you brag if the President of the United States had invited you to the White House for dinner? You would think it was a wonderful privilege. Not these guys for now.

E. UNEASY EXPLANATION AND CALMING RESPONSE

Genesis 43:19-23 When they drew near to the steward of Joseph's house, they talked with him at the door of the house, 20 and said, "O sir, we indeed came down the first time to buy food; 21 but it happened, when we came to the encampment, that we opened our sacks, and there, each man's money was in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight; so we have brought it back in our hand. 22 And we have brought down other money in our hands to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks." 23 But he said, "Peace be with you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money." Then he brought Simeon out to them.

As Shakespeare once wrote, "Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind." So when Joseph's steward escorts the brothers to the prime minister's home instead of to the public grain mart, the brothers immediately become suspicious.

Hounded by fear, Joseph's brothers immediately seek someone out to plead their innocence. They fear the worst, looking at the situation from a totally horizontal perspective just like their father. Ironically, it's the Egyptian steward who speaks of their God and makes them aware of His provision.

To calm the brothers, the steward not only offers encouragement, but he communicates it in Hebrew, their own language. He says, "Shalom to you", "Chill out", and, "Elohim," *Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure.*" It's the first time anyone has suggested seeing the money they found in their sacks from a vertical perspective.

F. GRATEFUL BROTHERS AND JOSEPH

Genesis 43:24-29 So the man brought the men into Joseph's house and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their donkeys feed. 25 Then they made the present ready for Joseph's coming at noon, for they heard that they would eat bread there. 26 And when Joseph came home, they brought him the present which was in their hand into the house, and bowed down before him to the earth. 27 Then he asked them about their well-being, and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" 28 And they answered, "Your servant our father is in good health; he is still alive." And they bowed their heads down and prostrated themselves. 29 Then he lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your younger brother of whom you spoke to me?" And he said, "God be gracious to you, my son."

Can you imagine how bewildered the brothers must feel? They come fearing the worst and, so far, have been given only the best. Still, they cannot imagine the prime minister being gracious to them, so they prepare their gifts in the hope that it might appease his anger.

The brothers received the blessings of love and kindness from Joseph without knowing who he was. In the same way, God showers love and blessing upon man even when man doesn't know whom the blessing comes from.

G. LONG WAITED EMOTION

Genesis 43:30-32 Now his heart yearned for his brother; so Joseph made haste and sought somewhere to weep. And he went into his chamber and wept there. 31 Then he washed his face and came out; and he restrained himself, and said, "Serve the bread." 32 So they set him a place by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; because the Egyptians could not eat food with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.

In v30 of KJV, it says, "His bowels did yearn upon his brother" – that is, he was deeply moved, and his heart went out to him, not that Joseph was having a bowl movement.

Joseph did not eat with his brothers because at the time, Egypt was one of the most racist societies on earth. They believed that Egyptians came from the gods, and all other peoples came from lesser origins. There was absolutely no social mixing with foreigners in the Egypt of Joseph's day.

The Egyptians would not even eat with Joseph, much less these strangers from Canaan. Even with all his status and power, Joseph could still not eat with "real" Egyptians.

Here is the wisdom of God. God will bring the entire family of Jacob into Egypt, where they will be isolated from the surrounding people for some 400 years. In that time, they will multiply greatly, increasing to the millions. If God had allowed them to remain in Canaan, they would have simply blended into the corrupt and godless peoples of Canaan. The rape of Dinah and its aftermath and the sin of Judah's sons and Judah with Tamar revealed this danger.

God not only had to take the family of Israel out of the corrupt environment of Canaan, but He had to put them among a racist people who would not intermarry or even mingle with them. God simply sent Joseph on ahead to make the arrangements.

H. SURPRISE, SURPRISE!

Genesis 43:33-34 And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth; and the men looked in astonishment at one another. 34 Then he took servings to them from before him, but Benjamin's serving was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him.

After they were assigned to seats at their table, eleven brothers noted a remarkable thing. They had been seated in order of age, from the eldest through the youngest. If this were a mere coincidences it was indeed marvelous. One can easily show that there are no less than 39,917,000 different orders in which eleven individuals could have been seated. Evidently, this man knew a great deal more about their family than they had realized or else he had some kind of supernatural power. They had no answer, and could only wonder about it.

Joseph bestows an even greater honor by giving Benjamin five times as much as the rest. Apparently, none of the brothers resent Joseph's attention to Benjamin, they all relax and enjoy the meal together like one big happy family – almost.

What a picture of God's grace we have in these scenes from Joseph's life! We so often come fearing the worst from God, and then He gives us gifts. We desperately plead our case, and He speaks kindly to us – in our own language. We try to fend off His anger with our works, and He welcomes us to His table, feeding us with the finest of wheat, the Bread of Life.

It is amazing that the One who was rejected would work so hard to get us reunited with Him. But that's His nature.

Isaiah 30:18 Therefore the Lord will wait, that He may be gracious to you; And therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; Blessed are all those who wait for Him.

I. APPLICATIONS

1) We need to force ourselves to keep a vertical focus onto our God instead of the things around us horizontally.

The tendency to view life horizontally is not going to lie down and surrender just because we want it to. It has to be fought aggressively time and again with a vertical perspective in God. How? One way is to get into the habit of asking yourself the question, "What is God trying to say to me in this situation?"

2) We need to remember that our God responds with His grace, peace and love while we don't deserve them.

Are you keeping your distance from God? Fearing that you'll get what you deserve? Let's learn from Joseph, who embodied God's grace to his brothers. Like God, Joseph was patient, giving his brothers time and opportunities to have their consciences activated. He didn't retaliate with punishment. He responded with peace and generosity. Let's linger over this truth. And let it lead us to the generous God of all grace.