

Tears of Reconciliation

Gen 44:1-45:15

This week we come to the final chapter in the long process of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. We have discovered that reconciliation is often a lengthy and complex process. This is especially true when one party has suffered betrayal or abuse. It's not simply a matter of forgive and forget. There must be a significant transformation of heart and character. Before Joseph is willing to let his guard down, he sets up three tests to determine whether his once hateful brothers can be trusted. The **first** test concerned their honesty and greed (42:11,18-38). Would they sacrifice money for the sake of a brother? The **second** test was designed to test their ability to accept the inequalities of love. Would they eat freely in the atmosphere of favoritism? The brothers passed both tests with flying colors. The **third** and final test is designed to see whether they will exhibit a sacrificial love that will place their father's interests above their own and count their brother's life as more important than their own. In the end, "The brothers collectively exhibit the virtues of reconciliation and become the kingdom of God, a family fit to rule the world."¹

I. Joseph Tests his Brothers' Integrity (44:1-13)

A. The test is set with Joseph's cup (44:1-2)

1 Then he commanded the steward of his house, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack, 2 and put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph told him. (44:1-2 ESV)

The morning after the feast with his brothers, Joseph sets up the third and final test of his brothers' integrity. This time not only is the money returned in their sacks for the grain, but Joseph's silver cup is placed in the sack of the youngest. The brothers probably drank wine from this cup the night before, but later we learn it had special powers of interpreting dreams (or so Joseph claimed as a way of indicting them).

B. The steward's instructions (44:3-5)

3 As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. 4 They had gone only a short distance from the city. Now Joseph said to his steward, "Up, follow after the men, and when you overtake

them, say to them, ‘Why have you repaid evil for good? 5 Is it not from this that my lord drinks, and by this that he practices divination? You have done evil in doing this.’” (44:3-5)

At dawn Joseph’s brothers leave for home well fed and reassured until they are paid a surprise visit by his chief steward, who overtakes them and then accuses them of a crime they have no knowledge of. In the midst of their consternation he further specifies the goblet, as if they know what he is talking about. Feeling confused and betrayed, they protest their innocence.

C. The brothers’ rash vow of innocence (44:6-9)

6 When he overtook them, he spoke to them these words. 7 They said to him, “Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing! 8 Behold, the money that we found in the mouths of our sacks we brought back to you from the land of Canaan. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord’s house? 9 Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die, and we also will be my lord’s servants.” (44:6-9)

The brothers, confident of their innocence, take upon themselves a rash vow of the death penalty for the guilty party and servitude for the remainder. The vow is a painful reminder of their father’s words when Laban accused him of stealing his household idol (31:32). Little did Jacob know Rachel was hiding the idol her saddlebag. With the memory of her premature death still fresh (35:19), we wonder if Rachel’s son will suffer a similar fate.

D. The brothers return to Joseph’s house (44:10-13)

10 He said, “Let it be as you say: he who is found with it shall be my servant, and the rest of you shall be innocent.” 11 Then each man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. 12 And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. 13 Then they tore their clothes, and every man loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city. (44:10-13)

Joseph’s steward accepts their proposal but lightens the penalty from capital punishment to enslavement for the guilty and freedom for the rest. He does this in

keeping with Joseph's design to recreate the exact stage of their guilty past when the youngest was sold into slavery and the rest went free. Confident of their innocence, they immediately dismount, drop their sacks to the ground and open them for inspection. The tension mounts as the royal inspector searches each one from the oldest to the youngest and the brothers grow increasingly impatient and angry. Finally, as he tears through the Benjamin's sack, he discovers the silver chalice, and they are shattered.

The weight of evidence appears so strong, Benjamin offers no protest or explanation of his innocence. Aghast, the brothers assume the worst. But instead of denial or blame, there is corporate solidarity, as each man tears his clothing in a unified gasp of grief for his brother. Twenty-two years before, only Jacob tore his clothes in grief (37:34). The brothers and their heavy laden donkeys make the forced march back to Egypt in oppressive silence.

II. Judah Proves his Integrity (44:14-34)

A. Judah's plea and Joseph's verdict (44:14-17)

14 When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell before him to the ground. 15 Joseph said to them, "What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?" 16 And Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found." 17 But he said, "Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant. But as for you, go up in peace to your father." (44:14-17)

Judah takes the lead role among his brothers to face the music before a wronged sovereign. When they enter Joseph's house the brothers humbly bow to the ground before the one who holds their life in his hands. Joseph's accusation backs them against the wall as guilty thieves who wished to "steal his dreams." For that offense Judah offers no excuse but gives glory to God and owns up to their corporate guilt. **God uses a wrongful accusation for a crime they did not commit to extract a confession for an unrevealed crime they did commit.** For Judah there is no explanation available except

the hand of God orchestrating events and pursuing them relentlessly for their criminal past. Judah gives voice to twenty-two years of unresolved guilt, “God has found out the iniquity of your servants.” The brothers resist no more and willingly subject themselves to the Egyptian viceroy.

But Joseph responds with equitable justice and refuses to hold all of them culpable, only the one in whose possession the cup was found. **This will now become the ultimate test. How will the brothers respond when the life of the youngest is in jeopardy and the rest are free to walk away?** Will they turn a blind eye once again and refuse to help a brother? Or will Judah take the lead again and “wrestle” with the monarch like he did his father? Challenging a parent is risky, but to challenge a monarch can cost you your life.

How will Judah respond? What can he possibly say to change the verdict handed down from a “sovereign”? What follows is one of the most passionate speeches in the Bible (in Genesis it is the longest). Leupold called it “one of the manliest, most straightforward speeches ever delivered by any man. For depth of feeling and sincerity of purpose it stands unexcelled.”² Years ago, I was studying this text with a friend who was an attorney. He pointed out how difficult it is to reverse a judge’s ruling in an ordinary court of law, even more so when the evidence of guilt appears irrefutable, but that Judah conformed to the best examples taught in Law School of how to present an effective case of appeals before a judge.

The **first thing** Judah does is to step forward and initiate his argument with Joseph. This takes courage, but he does so humbly to honor his judge. Once he gets a hearing, Judah makes his argument in three parts. **First**, to gain credibility, he accurately reviews the facts of the case (vv. 18-26). **Second**, he shares the terrible consequences Benjamin’s enslavement will have upon their father. If Judah is not able to bring Benjamin safely home, it will kill their father (vv. 27-31). **Finally**, he concludes with a daring solution and offers himself “*in place of the lad*” (vv. 32-34).

C. Judah’s masterful appeal (44:18-34)

18 Then Judah went up to him and said, “Oh, my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord’s ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself. 19 My lord asked his servants, saying, ‘Have you a father, or a brother?’ 20 And we said to my lord, ‘We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of

his old age. His brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.' 21 Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.' 22 We said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.' 23 Then you said to your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.'

24 "When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. 25 And when our father said, 'Go again, buy us a *little* food,' 26 we said, 'We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down. For we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' 27 Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. 28 One left me, and I said, "Surely he has been torn to pieces," and I have never seen him since. 29 If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol.'

30 "Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, 31 as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. 32 For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.' 33 Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. 34 For how can I go back to my father? For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father." (44:18-34)

Judah's presentation is a masterpiece of legal argumentation. My friend, the **attorney**, summed it up as "passionate, humble, honoring, confident, credible, sincere, reasonable, self-sacrificing and *directing*" (suggesting a reasonable solution to break the impasse).

There are **three things** in Judah's speech that amaze me. First, it is saturated with **the language of prayer**, as Judah speaks to Joseph in language one uses with God (his approach in v. 18 and the often repeated terms, "*lord*" and "*servant*"). Perhaps this illustrates Judah's faith, pleading to the God who stands behind the king. Thus, we might think of it as Judah's impassioned plea to the God of his father for mercy.

Second, in reviewing the facts with Joseph, he shows that he is a son whose interests are now governed more by his father's concerns than his own ("***father***" frames the speech and is used fourteen times). In fact, he has such empathy for his father, he allows himself to be described as a "*non-son*." This demonstrates that Judah is no longer controlled by jealousy, but rather he allows his passions to be shaped by his father's heart, as narrow as those affections may be. Remarkably, Judah has come to terms with a love that "is unpredictable, arbitrary, at times perhaps seemingly unjust."³ Judah sets a very high calling for children, to be able to get beyond the love denied them in early years, and not only to forgive, but to love their parents unconditionally. And now he asks this monarch to be governed by these same feelings and to have empathy for a father's heart.

And **third**, since his father's soul "*is bound up in the lad's life*"⁴ (1 Sam 18:1), then Judah will do everything in his power to care for the boy, even at the expense of his own life. He is prepared to accept the worst, but he cannot bear the thought of the worst happening to the ones he loves so much. If we ask where this newfound empathy came from, we are reminded that Judah intimately knows what it is like for a father to lose two sons (38:7, 10). Grief has softened Judah's cold heart and made him a very compassionate man. And now Judah demonstrates the highest human love possible. He offers his life in exchange for his brother (the first instance in the Bible). As Jesus would later remark, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends"(John 15:13).

Sternberg summarizes the impact Judah's speech had on Joseph. "That the sons of the hated wife should have come to terms with the father's attachment to Rachel and her children is enough to promise an end to hostilities and a fresh start. That the second of these children should enjoy his brothers' affection is amazing. But that Judah should adduce the father's favoritism as the ground for self-sacrifice is such an irresistible proof of filial devotion that it breaks down Joseph's last defenses."⁵

And so for a third time Joseph weeps, this time in front of his brothers.

III. Joseph Reveals Himself to his Brothers (45:1-5)

A. Joseph reveals his person (45:1-4)

45:1 Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. (45:1-2)

Judah's speech brings Joseph's emotions to a head where he can no longer control himself. Now that his brothers have passed the final test and demonstrated their love for their brother, Joseph reveals himself. But this is going to be a private moment for just the family, and he orders everyone else out of the room so he can shed all the symbols of his success that have kept his brothers out of reach. Once everyone is out of the room he sobs uncontrollably in the presence of his brothers. His tears give free expression to twenty-two years of sorrow mixed with what is now a renewed joy. His uncontrolled sobs were so loud that "all"⁶ the Egyptians heard and the news spread quickly to Pharaoh's house.

3 And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. 4 So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. (45:3-4)

For the first time in decades Joseph is free to be himself, and he removes the Egyptian mask with "a two word (in Hebrew) bombshell tossed at his brothers."⁷ "I am Joseph." Judah's speech has reawakened his own identity.

Then he immediately wants to know about his father, "Is **my father** still alive?" The brothers are so "dismayed" they cannot speak. As Waltke suggests, "The family is close to true intimacy, but as long as they live in fear of the one they wronged and until they allow themselves to be embraced by forgiveness, they do not talk intimately to one another."⁸ So Joseph tries to bridge the enormous distance that guilt, time and space have created between brothers. He gives up the "control" of his brothers for intimacy, an intimacy he has longed for.

Joseph invites his brothers to “come closer” since distance is preventing him from being able to speak as intimately as he wants. As they come closer he reintroduces himself to them. “I am Joseph” is surely a heart-stopper for the brothers.”⁹ As if their memories needed a little help, he reminds them of the events that took place at their last meeting. But instead of leaving them in silence and tormented by shame, he redirects their eyes to the grace and sovereignty of God that overruled their sinful choices for good.

What follows is the theological heart of the Joseph story. It is such profound truth that the narrator places it on a silver platter as the best gift he can give to us, and thus one that is not to be missed.

B. Joseph reveals his theology (45:5-8)

5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (45:5-8)

Joseph assures his brothers that he has no plans to harm them. Over time he has been able to step back from his personal pain and witness the hand of God working in much larger dimensions than he had ever imagined. Three times he affirms, “*God sent*” him to Egypt for life, knowing the famine was about to occur. Though they intended to harm him, God used their actions for good to preserve a *remnant* (denotes descendants who survive a great catastrophe, who become the bearers of a future hope) of them on the earth. And in the process of being “sent” to Egypt God has made Joseph a chief advisor, “like a father,” to Pharaoh. This is all good news about God, who not only forgives the wrongs we do but, by his sovereign grace, is able to transform our sin into “good” purposes for life, not only in the present, but also for a future hope.

As Waltke writes, “This truth enables him to reinterpret his narrative. From a worm’s-eye view, his narrative reads like a nightmare, a cacophony of outrageous excesses unjustly inflicted upon him. A rational conclusion that it is all absurd from this

perspective could have made him an existentialist, a cynic, or a nihilist. But he chooses the heavenly perspective that God is working through him to bring about what is good (Rom 8:28 [NIV note]; cf. Prov 16:1-4; 19:21; 20:24; 27:1). This enables him to forgive and encourage his brothers to do the same.”¹⁰

C. Invitation to survival and intimacy (45:9-11)

9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry. 10 You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. 11 There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.’ (45:9-11)

Then Joseph urges his brothers to make haste and return to Canaan and tell their father the news of what God has done for Joseph. Then they are to bring their families back to Egypt where Joseph will give them prime land to settle in and provide for all their family needs during the remaining famine years.

D. A credible testimony for the father (45:12-13)

12 And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. 13 You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” (45:12-13)

Joseph drives his final point home by speaking in their own language, no longer through an interpreter. “Joseph’s words are so incredible that Jacob will need a credible witness. Benjamin is the only brother whose character is beyond reproach and whose testimony is completely credible.”¹¹ For a fourth time, Joseph’s tears cannot be restrained, unleashing more emotion.

E. A river of tears in consummate joy (45:14-15)

14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him. (45:14-15)

The scene closes with tears of reconciliation and an embrace that breaks the walls that had separated them for years. These demonstrative acts of deep emotion are finally

sufficient evidence to free Joseph's brothers from fear and unlock their voices so they can speak again. The final note that intimacy has been achieved is the ability to talk freely with the one they wronged. Jealousy and resentment are gone and miraculously replaced by easy and free speech that inquires, shares, encourages and builds up. But, as Waltke further suggests, "the narrator, however, blanks the conversation as inconsequential to the reconciliation. Intimacy is visceral, not cerebral."¹²

In conclusion, let us reconsider the character traits that God formed in these brothers that made reconciliation possible and give glory to a God who reshapes our personal history, causing us to relive our painful past with a renewed and right spirit. In so doing, he faithfully conforms us to the image of his Son.

IV. Character Transformation that Fosters Reconciliation¹³

A. Character traits that God shaped in Judah

1. Being loyal to family member even when they look guilty
2. Allowing personal loss (the death of his two sons) to enlarge one's heart with compassion for others, rather than becoming resentful towards God
3. Giving glory to God by owning up to sin and God's right to punish it
4. Adopting the concerns of a parent, even when they previously brought you pain
5. Having faith that God is in control and doing bigger things in the midst of painful circumstances, like a famine or a pandemic.
6. Accepting that love can be irrational, unequal and at times, unjust
7. Being willing to sacrifice your life for the life of another

On a broader level, Judah models the role of being an advocate to those in authority for those who have no voice, as Jesus does in the gospels. With this character Judah becomes the leader of this family, and it will be his descendants that God will choose to become the line of kings in Israel (Gen 49:10). The heart of a king is one who not only serves the flock, but also is willing to die for the flock.

B. Character traits that God shaped in Joseph

1. Humility from years of suffering injustice and betrayal
2. Patience from years of waiting on God to fulfill his promises his way
3. Giving up power and control for the sake of intimacy
4. Embracing feelings of compassion and tenderness, sensitivity and forgiveness
5. Reaching out to bridge the distance guilt has created in others

6. Being faithful to provide for parents and family when you have been more fortunate financially
7. Being willing to express deepest emotions of love with the family that wronged you

As Waltke states, “A dysfunctional family that allows these virtues to embrace it will become a light to the world.”¹⁴

Benediction

May our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus,
make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all,
and may he establish your hearts unblameable in holiness
before our God and Father,
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Amen.

¹ Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 559.

² H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis: Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), 585.

³ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 175.

⁴ “his life is bound up in the lad’s life” – this is the same expression used to describe Jonathan’s love for David in 1 Sam 18:1. In that story Jonathan also pledged his life for the sake of his brother (1 Sam 20:13-16) and indeed gave it (1 Sam 31:2; 2 Sam 1:26).

⁵ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 308.

⁶ “all” – The LXX (Greek translation of the OT) adds “all”.

⁷ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 1, The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 176.

⁸ Waltke, *Genesis*, 563.

⁹ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 1*, 177.

¹⁰ Waltke, *Genesis*, 565.

¹¹ Waltke, *Genesis*, 564.

¹² Waltke, *Genesis*, 564.

¹³ I am indebted to Waltke for these insights. Waltke, *Genesis*, 565-66.

¹⁴ Waltke, *Genesis*, 566.