



# TEARS OF RECONCILIATION

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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40th Message

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Christmas is the time of year when our deepest yearnings for family come to the surface. But this festive and holy period can also be quite emotional. Like no other time, this season heightens relational pain within families. What good is it singing carols that celebrate peace on earth if we are estranged from our own family? The stories that move us most at this time of year are those about "coming home." What if I were to say that in some way, God was shaping your life for just such a story, and that you would play a significant role in it? The fact is, I believe he is (2 Cor 5:18-19).

No one felt this longing for family more deeply than Joseph, the patriarch of Israel. Today we come to the final chapter in the long process of reconciliation between him and his brothers. Joseph now sets up the third and final test for them. 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 plumb their ability to accept the inequalities of love. Would they eat freely in an atmosphere of favoritism? (43:34) 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 this, one of the most powerful displays of human emotion in the Bible, we have an icon of God's heart searching for his lost children.

## I. Joseph Tests the Integrity of His Brothers (44:1-13)

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

**Then he commanded his house steward, saying, "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. Put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph had told him (44:1-2, NASB).**

Joseph sets up this third test of his brothers' integrity on the morning after the feast they had shared together. This time their money is returned in their sacks, and Joseph's silver cup is placed in the sack of the youngest. The brothers probably drank wine from this very cup during their feast. But later we learn that it had special powers of interpreting dreams (or so Joseph claimed, as a way of indicting the brothers).

### B. The brothers are overtaken with accusation (44:3-6)

**As soon as it was light, the men were sent away, they with their donkeys. They had just gone out of the city, and were not far off, when Joseph said to his house steward, "Up, follow the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid evil for good? Is not this the one from which my lord drinks, and which he indeed uses for divination? You have done wrong in doing this.'" So he overtook them and spoke these words to them. (44:3-6)**

At dawn, Joseph's brothers leave for home, well fed and re-

assured. But then they get a surprise visit by Joseph's chief steward, who accuses them of a crime about which they have no knowledge. In the midst of their consternation, the man makes specific reference to the cup—as if they know what he is talking about. But they do not. Feeling confused and betrayed, they protest their innocence.

### C. The brothers' rash vow of innocence (44:7-9)

**They said to him, "Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing. Behold, the money which we found in the mouth of our sacks we have brought back to you from the land of Canaan. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord's house? With whomever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord's slaves." (44:7-9)**

So confident are they of their innocence, they take upon themselves a rash vow of the death penalty for the guilty party and servitude for the remainder. Their vow is an echo of their father's words, when Laban accused Jacob of stealing his household idol (31:32). When Jacob made that vow he was unaware that Rachel had stolen the idol—and now the sons follow suit. With the memory or her premature death still fresh (35:19), one wonders if Rachel's son will suffer the same fate.

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

**So he said, "Now let it also be according to your words; he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and the rest of you shall be innocent." Then they hurried, each man lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. He searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest, and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. Then they tore their clothes, and when each man loaded his donkey, they returned to the city. (44:10-13)**

Joseph's servant 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. So confident are they of their innocence, they immediately dismount and lower their sacks to the ground for inspection. As the royal inspector searches each one, from the oldest to the youngest, they become more confident. However, as he tears through Benjamin's sack and discovers the silver chalice, they are shattered. No matter how hard they try they cannot rid themselves of their silver in Egypt. It keeps sticking to them.

It's intriguing that the weight of evidence appears so strong, Benjamin does not protest his innocence. In the oppressive silence, each brother assumes the worst. But now, instead of denial or blame, they exhibit brotherly solidarity, as each man tears his clothes, in a unified grasp of grief for his brother. Twenty-two years earlier, Jacob was the only one who tore his clothes in grief (37:34). No words are recorded as the brothers and their heavy-laden donkeys make the forced

march back to Egypt. Only dreadful silence fills the air.

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

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

**When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there, and they fell to the ground before him. Joseph said to them, "What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that such a man as I can indeed practice divination?" So Judah said, "What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; behold, we are my lord's slaves, both we and the one in whose possession the cup has been found." But he said, "Far be it from me to do this. The man in whose possession the cup has been found, he shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father." (44:14-17)**

Bravely, Judah leads his brothers back to Egypt to face the wrath of a wronged sovereign. Entering Joseph's house, all of them bow once again in humility—another sign of Joseph's fulfilled dream—before the one who holds their life in his hands. Joseph's accusation backs them against the wall: they are guilty thieves who wished to "steal his dreams." For that offense, Judah offers no excuse. He gives glory to God and owns up to their "corporate" guilt. God uses a wrongful accusation for a crime that they did not commit to extract a confession for an unrevealed crime they did commit! For Judah, there is no explanation other than the hand of God orchestrating events and pursuing them relentlessly for their criminal past. So he gives voice to twenty-two years of unresolved guilt, saying, "God has found out the iniquity of your servants." The brothers no longer resist, but willingly place themselves in subjection to the Egyptian viceroy.

Joseph, responding with equitable justice, does not hold all of them culpable, only the one in whose possession the cup was found. The ultimate test is now set. How will the brothers respond when the life of the youngest is in jeopardy and the rest are free to return home? Will they once again refuse to help a brother? Or will Judah take the lead again and "wrestle" with the monarch, like he did with his father? Challenging a parent is risky, but challenging a monarch can be fatal.

How will Judah respond? What can he possibly say to change the verdict handed down from the sovereign? Even in an ordinary court of law it is extremely difficult to reverse a judge's ruling. It is even more so when evidence of guilt appears irrefutable. What follows now is one of the most passionate speeches in the Bible—and the longest in Genesis. Wenham says, "No more moving example of true contrition and repentance is to be found in Scripture, unless it be the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15)."<sup>1</sup>

A friend who is an attorney probed this text with me in a men's study.<sup>2</sup> His observations proved very helpful in grasping Judah's skill and wisdom in presenting his case to Joseph. My friend remarked on how difficult it is for an attorney to get a judge to reverse a ruling. He said that Judah's brief conformed to the very best examples taught in law school of how to present an appeal before a judge.

Judah takes the initiative and courageously comes forward to state his argument with Joseph. But he does so humbly, showing honor to the viceroy. Having gained a hearing, he makes his argument, in three parts. First, he reviews the facts of the case (vv. 18-26). Reciting each fact accurately, he gains credibility. Then he describes the terrible consequences that the enslavement of Benjamin will have on their father (vv. 27-31). It will kill him if Judah doesn't bring Benjamin home safe-

ly. Then he concludes with a daring solution, offering himself "in place of the lad" (vv. 32-34). Judah's presentation is a masterpiece of legal argumentation. My attorney friend summed it up as "passionate, humble, honoring, confident, credible, sincere, reasonable, self-sacrificing, and directing" (suggesting a reasonable solution to break the impasse).

### C. Judah's appeal (44:18-34)

Then Judah approached him, and said, "Oh my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are equal to Pharaoh. My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?' We said to my lord, 'We have an old father and a little child of his old age. Now his brother is dead, so he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.' Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me that I may set my eyes on him.' But we said to my lord, 'The lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.' You said to your servants, however, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.' Thus it came about when we went up to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. Our father said, 'Go back, buy us a little food.' But we said, 'We cannot go down. If our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down; for we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' Your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons; and the one went out from me, and I said, "Surely he is torn in pieces," and I have not seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.' Now, therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad's life, when he sees that the lad is not with us, he will die. Thus your servants will bring the gray hair of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow. For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever.' Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me—for fear that I see the evil that would overtake my father?" (44:18-34)

Three things in Judah's speech are absolutely amazing. First, it is saturated with the language of prayer. Judah speaks to Joseph in the kind of language one uses when communicating with God. Notice his approach, in verse 18, and the repeated terms, "lord," and "servant." Perhaps this illustrates Judah's faith, pleading to the God who stands behind the king. We might think of this speech as Judah's impassioned plea for mercy to the God of his father.

Second, in reviewing the facts with Joseph, Judah shows that he is a son whose interests are now governed more by his father's concerns than his own (the word "father," used fourteen times, frames the speech). In fact, he has such empathy for his father that he allows himself to be described as a "non-son." No longer controlled by jealousy, Judah allows his passions to be shaped by his father's heart, as narrow as those affections may be. He has come to terms with a love that "is unpredictable, arbitrary, at times perhaps seemingly unjust."<sup>3</sup> Judah sets a very high calling for children to go beyond the love denied them in their early years, and not only to forgive, but to love their parents unconditionally. 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" (1 Sam 18:1),<sup>4</sup> Judah will do everything in his power to care for the boy, even at the cost 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. Where has this new-found empathy come from? Judah knows what it is like for a father to lose two sons (38:7, 10). Grief has softened his cold heart, making him a compassionate man. Now he demonstrates the highest human love possible, offering his own life in exchange for his brother's (the first such 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 of Judah's speech on Joseph: "To Joseph, of course, the speech again reveals even more than the speaker intended: the official version of his own death ('torn to pieces'), the reason for the delay in the brothers' return, the pain his testing as well as his fate must have given...That the sons of the hated wife should have come to terms with the father's attachment to Rachel ('my wife') 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."<sup>5</sup> For the third time now Joseph weeps, on this occasion in front of his brothers.

### III. Joseph Reveals Himself To His Brothers (45:1-15)

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

**Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me." So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it. Then 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. (45:1-3)**

Judah's speech brings Joseph's emotions to a head. He can no longer control himself. Now that his brothers have passed the final test, having demonstrated their familial love for their brother, Joseph reveals himself. But this will be a private moment, reserved for the family. He orders everyone else out of the room so that he can shed all the symbols of his success that have kept his brothers out of reach. Then he weeps. His tears give free expression of twenty-two years of sorrow mixed with what is now a renewed joy. His uncontrolled sobs were so loud that "all" (the LXX adds "all") the Egyptians heard, and the news spread quickly to Pharaoh's house. For the first time in decades, Joseph is free to be himself. He takes off his Egyptian mask with "a two-word (in Hebrew) bombshell tossed at his brothers":<sup>6</sup> "I am Joseph." Judah's speech has reawakened Joseph's own identity.

He immediately wants to know about his father: "Is my father still alive?" he asks. The brothers are so "dismayed" (a word used to depict a feeling of panic or terror when one is confronted by an unexpected threat) they cannot speak. 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."<sup>7</sup> So Joseph tries to bridge the enormous distance that guilt, time and space have created between brothers. He gives up "control" of his brothers for intimacy—an intimacy he has longed for.

**Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to**

**me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." (45:4)**

Joseph invites his brothers to "come closer." Distance is preventing him from being able to speak as intimately as he wants. As they come closer, he reintroduces himself to them. In case their memories need a little help, he reminds them of the events of their last meeting. But instead of leaving them in silence, 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. So profound is this that the narrator places it on a silver platter. It is the best gift he can give to us, and thus, one that we should not miss.

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

**"Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (45:5-8)**

Joseph immediately 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 that "God sent" him to Egypt for life, knowing the famine was about to occur. So although they intended to harm him, God used their actions for good to preserve a *remnant* (survivors who are then the object of a future hope) of them on the earth. And in the process of being "sent" to Egypt, God has made him a chief advisor ("like a father") to Pharaoh. This is all good news about God. He not only forgives the things we do, but in his sovereign grace transforms our sin into "good" purposes for life, not just in the present, but for a future hope.

Waltke comments:

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.<sup>8</sup>

This theology that upholds the sovereignty of God and human responsibility becomes the bedrock of all Scripture. Addressing the Jews, who were responsible for delivering Jesus over to Roman crucifixion, Peter speaks this same truth: "This *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised *Him* up again" (Acts 2:23-24a). Peter therefore invited the Jews to repent and receive the gift of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Joseph urges his brothers to return to Canaan and tell their father the news of what God had done for him. Then they are to bring their families back to Egypt, where Joseph will give them prime land to settle, and care for them during the remaining famine years (45:9-13). Finally, he weeps for the fourth time.

### C. Tears of restoration (45:14-15)

**Then he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers and wept on them, and afterward 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 finally are sufficient evidence to free Joseph's brothers from fear and unlock their voices so that they can speak again. The final proof that intimacy has been achieved is their ability to talk freely with the one they had so wronged. Jealousy and resentment are gone, miraculously replaced by the free and easy speech that enquires, 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."<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, let us reconsider the character traits which God formed in these brothers that made reconciliation possible; and give glory to a God who can re-shape 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.<sup>10</sup>

## IV. The Anatomy of Reconciliation

### A. Character traits that God shaped in Judah

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

Possessing this kind of character, Judah becomes the leader of this family. God will choose his descendents to become the line of kings in Israel (Gen 49:10). The heart of a king not only serves the flock, but is also willing to die for them.

### B. Character traits that God shaped in Joseph

1. Humility from years of suffering injustice.
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 that guilt had created between him and his brothers.
6. Being faithful to provide for parents and family when he has been more fortunate financially.

7. Being willing to express deepest emotions of love with the family that had wronged him.

Waltke states, "A dysfunctional family that allows these virtues to embrace it will become a light to the world."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps it is this final quality of tearfully embracing his brothers that is most powerful in the process of reconciliation.

**Then he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers and wept on them. (Gen 45:14-15a)**

The rabbi Chafetz Chaim was one of the greatest leaders of Jewry at the turn of the twentieth century. As he pondered this text he saw Joseph's actions as a type of the Messiah to come: "When Joseph said 'I am Joseph,' God's master plan became clear to the brothers. They had no more questions. Everything that had happened for the last twenty-two years fell into perspective. So, too, it will be in the time to come when God will reveal Himself and announce, 'I am Hashem [the Lord].' The veil will be lifted from our eyes and we will comprehend everything that transpired throughout history."<sup>12</sup>

Of that day, Zechariah wrote, "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn" (Zech 12:10).<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps this is the Christmas gift you can give that you never thought about. Is someone from your physical or spiritually family desperately waiting for the gift of forgiveness from you? If that is so, will you orchestrate an embrace of tears?

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1. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 431.
2. Special thanks to my friend Jerry Nastari for his astute comments on the legal force and power of Judah's speech.
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. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 266
7. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 563.
8. Waltke, *Genesis*, 565.
9. Waltke, *Genesis*, 564.
10. I am indebted to Bruce Waltke for many of these insights. Waltke, *Genesis*, 565-66.
11. Waltke, *Genesis*, 566.
12. Nosson Scherman, ed., *The Chumash: Stone Edition* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1993), 1298.
13. See David Brainerd's wonderful description of the "pouring out" of the Spirit upon the Indians he had preached the gospel to on August 8, 1745. It is moving fulfillment of what Zechariah wrote. Walter Searle, *David Brainerd's Personal Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 74-76.