

A Family Is Reconciled

By Brad Allison on 4/3/2005

Scripture Reference *Genesis 44*

There was a serious, unresolved issue in the life of Jacob's family. Some 22 years prior to this, Joseph's brothers had cruelly sold him into slavery. They had initially envisioned a worse fate for him—dying of dehydration in the bottom of a dry cistern—and only changed their minds when Judah thought of a way they could accomplish two desirable goals at the same time. They could get rid of their little brother and also make some money by selling him into slavery. The last time they had heard Joseph's voice was as he begged them to release him from the pit. All he heard in return was silence as they ignored his pleas. This group of ten older brothers had all the power then, and Joseph had none. Now, everything is reversed. Joseph has ascended to the highest office in the most powerful country of the region. Only Pharaoh is above Joseph. Furthermore, this country which he now leads has grain when the rest of the world has none. Just as Joseph had once begged them for his life, they now come and seek life-giving grain from him. What would he do with his power? Would he seek his revenge, or would he pursue reconciliation? By God's grace, he pursued reconciliation, which happens by the end of the story.

This passage forms a wonderful study on the topic of reconciliation. It shows us that reconciliation is possible in a world full of sinful people. There are many who don't believe in reconciliation. Listen to the following sad tale in a letter written to Ann Landers.

Ten years ago I left my wife and four teenagers to marry my secretary with whom I'd been having an affair. I felt I couldn't live without her. When my wife found out about us she went to pieces. We were divorced. My wife went to work, and did a good job educating the boys. I gave her the house and part of my retirement fund. I am fairly happy in my second marriage, but I'm beginning to see things in a different light. It hit me when I was a guest at our eldest son's wedding. That's all I was—a guest. I am no longer considered part of the family. My first wife knew everyone present, and they showered her with affection. She remarried, and her husband has been taken inside the circle that was once ours. They gave the rehearsal dinner, and sat next to my sons and their sweethearts. I was proud to have a young pretty wife at my side. But it didn't make up for the pain when I realized that my children no longer love me. They treated me with courtesy, but there was no affection or real caring. I miss my sons, especially around holiday time. I am going to try to build some bridges, but the prospects don't look very promising after being out of their lives for 10 years. It is going to be difficult re-entering now that they have a step-dad they like. I'm writing in the hope that others will consider the ramifications before they jump. Just sign me "Second Thoughts in P.A."

Dear Second Thoughts: I could use the rest of this column to reflect on "sowing and reaping," but it would serve no useful purpose. I'm sure you also know that a father can't disappear for 10 years and expect his sons to welcome him back with open arms. Sorry, Mister, your wife has earned their respect and devotion, and what's left over is going to the man who is now making their mother happy.

So is that it? Once you've messed up, just write off the relationships and don't ever expect any reconciliation. The Bible says that reconciliation is possible, and we have a case study of it right before us this morning. It may be helpful before going any further for you to think about any need for reconciliation that may exist in your life right now. Perhaps it's a longstanding need in a relationship with a parent. Perhaps it's a fight you had just this morning with your spouse or with a child. Maybe it's a business relationship or a problem with someone else in the church. I want us to look at reconciliation by looking at the two parties that always exist where reconciliation is needed: a victim and a victimizer. Many times, both parties are both victim and victimizer. But in this story, Joseph is the victim and Judah and his brothers the victimizers. Let's look at what each must do in order for there to be

reconciliation.

I. The Victimizer (Judah)

Judah and his brothers are the victimizers in this situation, but Judah becomes their spokesman. There are at least two things that happen in their lives, both of which are brought to the surface through this trap Joseph lays for them. The trap was to frame Benjamin for the crime of stealing Joseph's special cup, and then see how the brothers would respond. Joseph skillfully arranges for a situation that is exactly the same as when he was sold into slavery. When Rachel's favored son (Benjamin in this case rather than Joseph) becomes a bother to them, will they abandon him for their own good, or will they remain loyal to him? This test is like Solomon's test of the two women claiming the same baby. Solomon's order that the baby be divided and both women given half was a move like Joseph's, one that revealed the true character of those involved. Two results are revealed from this test, and these two things are needed from the guilty party in order for there to be real reconciliation. First, Judah acknowledges guilt, and then he gives himself to serve instead of use others.

The brothers confess their guilt twice in this story. The first time was when they first appeared before Joseph and he accused them of being spies and required that one of them stay behind until Benjamin could be brought back and their story verified. They said, "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us" (42:21). And then we see it for a second time in this chapter, when Judah confesses, "God has found out the guilt of your servants" (44:16). He can't mean the theft of the cup, because he knew they weren't guilty of that. He meant that their earlier treatment of Joseph was now being exposed and dealt with by God.

Let me now make two important points about this confession of guilt by the victimizer. First, this is required for reconciliation but not for forgiveness. In other words, if there is in your life some relationship in need of reconciliation, you cannot have such reconciliation without the victimizer coming clean and confessing guilt. But if you are the victim of their sin, you can forgive that person even without their confession. Indeed, God calls you to do so.

The second point I want to make about this confession of guilt is that one of the chief obstacles to it is our tendency to see ourselves always as the victim, and never as the victimizer. In most of our relationships, we are the victim in some ways and the victimizer in other ways. We need God's help to see our sin and confess it. In that relationship I asked you to think about earlier, the one where a need for reconciliation exists, you have to ask yourself the question, "Is there any extent to which I am the victimizer in this relationship?"

Illustration: Someone in the small group that meets at our house reminded me recently of a story I told several years ago. A woman was waiting for her flight in an airport, and was eating out of a bag of cookies she had brought along. The cookies were sitting in the chair next to her, with a man sitting in the next seat over. To the amazement of this woman, this man who was a complete stranger reached into the bag of cookies without asking her, and took one for himself. She glared at him and reached in to get another, after which he did the same. They went through the entire bag of cookies like that until there was only one left. He looked over at her and said with a smile on his face, "Why don't you take the last one?" That's all it took. She angrily left her seat and went to find another. A few minutes later, her flight was called, and she boarded her plane. As she reached into her carry on bag to get a book to read during the flight, to her utter horror she found an unopened bag of cookies. The entire time when she thought she was being victimized by this man who

was eating her cookies, she was actually doing that to him. Would you consider the possibility that there might be some guilt in need of confession in your life? Ask God to show it to you, and then be open to seeing it.

The second thing I notice about the victimizer, Judah, is that God has changed him from one who uses others to one who has learned to serve others. This is the same Judah who had been the ringleader in selling Joseph into slavery. It was the Judah who was disloyal to his family and left them in order to take up with the Canaanites, the Judah who was a fornicator and an abysmal failure as a father. Where Judah went, trouble followed. But God has worked in his life in some remarkable ways. Though Jacob was still up to his old tricks of showing favoritism among his children, notice how Judah speaks of it. “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” (v. 20). Judah is able, out of concern for his father, to accept the painful fact of Jacob’s favoritism toward Benjamin. But then the most significant evidence of the change that has taken place in Judah lies in verse 33. It’s actually the first occurrence of a human substitution in the Bible. When Joseph was insisting that Benjamin should become Joseph’s slave for his crime of stealing the cup, Judah says, “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.” Judah had changed.

Let me make one more point before moving off the victimizer. Note that this reconciliation took 22 years to take place. It had been that long since Joseph had been sold into slavery as a 17 year old young man. Patience is often needed.

II. The Victim (Joseph)

There are also requirements upon the victim in order for reconciliation to take place. I notice two of them here. The first is that the victim must come to the place of interpreting his suffering through the sovereignty of God. All victims need to know what to do with their pain. Notice what Joseph does. I notice first that he doesn’t minimize their sin against him. When he identifies himself to his brothers in chapter 45, he says, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt” (45:4). The path to reconciliation doesn’t require the victim to deny that real harm was done. But I notice also that Joseph kept his eye on God’s role in these events. He trusted in the providence of God, God’s control of all things. Verse 5 is a beautiful statement of this. “And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.” Those two words, “You sold me... God sent me,” describe the same event. That is a classic understanding of this theme that lies at the center of Joseph’s story—the providence of God. To see both human failure and God’s perfect will is the key for any victim to come to peace with those who have sinned against him.

Illustration: I just finished reading a book called *The Heavenly Man*, about a house church pastor in China who was persecuted severely by the government because of his Christian witness. He was imprisoned three times for a total of seven years, during which time he was tortured repeatedly. At one point, his legs below the knee were clubbed so severely that the bones in both legs were completely shattered. Other prisoners had to carry him everywhere he went, including the bathroom. He had to sleep with his legs propped against the wall, because the only way he could sleep with the pain was to make his legs numb by elevating them in that fashion. But here’s what he said about his sufferings: “God is my witness that through all the tortures and beatings I’ve received I have never hated my persecutors. Never. I saw them as God’s instruments of blessing and his chosen vessels to purify me and make me more like Jesus” (p. 311).

As victims are enabled to see their sufferings in the light of God's will and his control over their lives, they are enabled to do the next thing, to seek restoration of the relationship instead of holding onto power. I've already pointed out how Joseph had power over his brothers. They knew it too. It says in 45:3 that his brothers were "dismayed" at the revelation that this powerful man was their brother, Joseph, the same one they had treated so poorly. This word is used elsewhere in the Bible of the paralyzing terror soldiers feel during battle. Joseph could have used his power to retaliate, but instead gives it up in order to seek reconciliation. It is sometimes the victim that keeps a relationship from being reconciled, because the victim wants to hold onto power. What power does a victim have? Sometimes it is simply the power of holding onto a grudge. It is the way the victim "pays back" the victimizer.

CONCLUSION:

There is one more thing we need to see here. Have you ever noticed how in situations where reconciliation is needed, both the victimizer and the victim have a guilt problem. In the case of the victimizer, the problem is that there is no guilt when there should be guilt. In the case of the victim, the problem is the presence of false guilt. The one who has been abused often blames herself. The answer to both is the same: true guilt. It's easy to see how the answer to no guilt is true guilt, but it is also the case that the answer to false guilt is true guilt. The victim needs to ask God for a true sense of sin. But the reason both the victim and the victimizer are often kept from true guilt is that we are kept from seeing the love of God through Jesus. Guilt is too much to bear until we see Jesus.

Notice two ways we see the love of God through Jesus. Judah's concern for Benjamin was directly tied to the effect Benjamin's absence would have on Jacob, his father. Do you see that this is a statement about our heavenly Father? The parable of the prodigal son teaches us that the Father grieves for his lost son and wants him back. Have you ever understood that the Father aches for you, longing for your return? And then notice also how Judah's offer to be a substitute describes Jesus. He is the ultimate substitute, paying the price our sins deserve, in order that we might go free. Judah wasn't taken up on his offer. He never had to become a slave in Benjamin's place. But Jesus was taken up on his offer. He became sin, was forsaken by the Father, and died the death we should have died. So, you see, both the victim and the victimizer can be honest about their true guilt, because there is an answer for such guilt. It lies through seeing and receiving the love of God through Jesus.