

OVERCOMING BITTERNESS GEN. 42-45

In Joseph's story, it's certainly hard to visualize him as a victim at this point isn't it? He was now the second most powerful man on earth, and he had absolute control over the destinies of millions of people. Much had happened since Joseph rose to power (Gen. 41). The 7 years of plenty predicted by Pharaoh's dreams had come and gone-and Joseph's plan had worked to perfection. The grain was stored, and now, in the midst of the 7 years of famine, the world was coming to Pharaoh's (and to Joseph's) doorstep for food.

In Genesis 42, Joseph's brothers came seeking food, and he provided it for them. In the course of that meeting, he questioned them and discovered that their father and younger brother were still alive. Joseph then began to set the wheels in motion for a reunion. He sensed that his brothers had changed-but for the sake of Benjamin, he had to make sure. In the ensuing events, he forced them to return with Benjamin. Then he prepared for the final test.

At the banquet referred to in chapter 43, he gave Benjamin five times more than the other brothers, and they didn't resent the kind of favoritism that they had despised so viciously in Joseph. Then he seemed to put Benjamin in harm's way to test them again. Would they protect Benjamin, or abandon him as they had abandoned Joseph 20 years earlier?

Only God can look at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). So Joseph put in motion the test that would expose them and reveal how genuine their apparent change really was.

A PLAN FOR THE TEST (44: 1-13)

After the feast Joseph commanded his butler to do several things: Fill their sacks with food, return their money, and put his silver cup in Benjamin's bag.

Why? The only way Joseph could test their character was to "return to the scene of the crime." They had to be put in the position of choosing between rescuing Benjamin at great personal risk, or abandoning him to slavery for personal gain.

As soon as the brothers departed for Canaan, Joseph sent his servants to catch them and accuse them of the theft of the cup. The brothers reacted with shock and confusion. They claimed honesty based on the return of money they had found in their bags on the first trip for food. And they backed up their claims of honesty with a bold offer: "Kill the guilty one, and enslave the rest!" The extreme nature of their offer was intended to prove their innocence and sincerity. They would certainly not make such an offer if even one of them was guilty.

The steward's reply in verse 10 raised the stakes-and the pressure: "Only the guilty will be enslaved." Imagine the mounting tension as one by one the sacks were examined, and one by one found to contain only grain. The steward moved from elder to younger, and the stress of the moment reached its peak as they finally arrived at Benjamin's donkey. Imagine the shock and pain as the cup was found in his sack. How could it be? They were so certain of their innocence. How would they respond?

"Then they tore their clothes" (v.13). They had reaped what they had sown, and in this dramatic gesture of mourning they displayed the depth of their grief and despair. They responded to Benjamin's distress the same way Jacob had responded years before when shown the bloody coat of colors that had belonged to Joseph. Now the big question had to be answered. The agreement was that only the guilty would be enslaved and the rest could go home. The easy thing to do would be to leave Benjamin and go home. But they didn't. Envy and resentment no longer governed their thoughts and deeds. They returned with Benjamin, determined that whatever was to be faced they would face together.

The evidence was there. They were truly changed men.

A PLAN FOR MERCY (44:14-34)

Notice the difference in their attitudes from years before: "They fell before (Joseph) on the ground" (v.14), fulfilling the promise of Joseph's first set of dreams. • "How shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants" (v. 16). There were no excuses or rationalizations. There was no attempt to cover up. They admitted, through Judah, their guilt and submitted to slavery as a group. It was "we," not "he." Joseph tested them further with an offer of release, and they passed with flying colors.

Let (me) remain instead of the lad (vv.33- 34). What a turnabout. The same Judah who had led in the plan to sell Joseph offered to be Benjamin's substitute as a slave in Egypt. Why? Out of concern for their father . He openly acknowledged that the young man was now Jacob's favorite. But instead of resenting this favorite-son status, he longed to preserve it by giving himself. Jesus said, "By their fruits you will know them" (Mt. 7:20), and the change in Judah was real. We have been examining God's work in the life of Joseph, but God had also been working in Judah and his brothers.

A PASSIONATE REUNION (45:1-15)

For Joseph, the years of pain dissolved in a moment of joy, and he wept uncontrollably in the presence of his brothers. They were tears of joy because his brothers had truly changed, and tears of love because at last they were as brothers should be. The room was electric as Joseph finally said the words that he had longed to say since he first saw them coming for food: "I am Joseph" (v.3). But they were terrified. The dream had come true. Joseph had the power of life and death over them. What would he do? Notice his tenderness toward them: • "He wept aloud" (v.2), openly expressing his emotion. Please come near to me" (v.4). They had been apart far too long. • "Do not . . . be grieved or angry with yourselves" (v.5). This was a time for joy. God sent me" (vv.5,7—8).

They were to trust that God was in control. "Go ... and bring my father" (w.9, 13). It was time to share the joy. Forgiveness resolved the issue of guilt. Merrill Unger wrote, "Joseph displayed his deep faith in the omnipotence of God-overriding Satan, demonic powers, and wicked men to work out His sovereign will and unbeatable plan.

Faith lifted the whole sordid crime out of the pit of misery and self ... recrimination and placed it on the mountain peak of divine sovereignty where God's forgiving grace not

only heals but wipes away the past and the pain" (Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament, Moody Press, 1981, p.94).

Joseph had overcome all these things particularly the potential bitterness that would have seemed so normal. He exemplified grace, giving full forgiveness and no revenge. He exemplified love, discarding the wrongs of the past for the compassion of the present. He exemplified faith, trusting that God would preserve him from the bitterness that leads to self-destruction. It is full love that was not born out of ease or comfort or convenience, but out of suffering and hardship. That is the only way to overcome bitterness. When we trust God and rest in Him, we can love others. Why? Because we believe in a God who is big enough to work in all things for our good.

THE TRUST THAT OVERCOMES

In Genesis 50:20, we read Joseph's final words to his brothers. They are a capsule of his life's view: "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive." This amazing perspective reflected a life that had embraced the living God and trusted Him completely. As you face the pains and heartaches and mistreatment of life, it is only by complete confidence in the goodness and plan of God that you can overcome. The things that could destroy you can become building blocks on the journey of faith as you look for the hand of God in all the circumstances of life. "This is the victory that has overcome the world-our faith" (1 Jn. 5:4).

If you have never confessed your sin and trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, life can be a jumbled ball of confusion. But the One who died for your sins and gave Himself for your failures can bring rightness with God, forgiveness of sin, and a new sense of wholeness and purpose into your weary soul. Christ came into the world because of His love for you, and that love can bring an end to the emptiness or bitterness or sinfulness that wracks your life. Accept by faith the gift of eternal life and personal forgiveness He offers, for the only way to really overcome forever is to accept the victory of Calvary that He accomplished for you. "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). Now that is real victory-and real overcoming.

AMEN