

**Reading:** Genesis 44:1-16

**Subject:** The Benjamin Incident

In the film ‘Groundhog Day’ a reporter relives the same day over and over to learn from his mistakes, helps so many people in many ways and eventually, as a much better person, he wins the girl... We see something like this as the brothers are tested to see if they have changed for the better and will react differently than they did in a similar situation. The passage we read from Genesis 44 is quite a moving one and to help us look at it I have five headings:

### **1. Puzzling.**

We may be puzzled, mystified at Joseph's orders and actions in v1-2. Was he playing, toying with his brothers; wanting revenge on them? This idea of revenge cannot be included here in this passage as we have seen previously from previous chapters, Joseph had been deeply moved on seeing them, so much so he had to go and weep in another room. They had eaten dinner together and, we presume, they had hospitality overnight in Joseph's own home, for this is where Joseph gives the commands in the opening 2 verses.

Some have said that the events we read of are all part of Joseph's desire to be vindicated, to get rid of all his anger, to get even! But is that what is really going on here? It does seem a puzzling passage. It may surprise us to realise it is nothing of the sort. This episode shows this is one of the wisest, loving and kindest acts that Joseph could do for them! Joseph loved his brothers and had no desire for revenge or releasing his anger or bitterness. His love is not a weak, wishy-washy love, all soft and gushing – we have seen it produced an appearance

of severity to produce, work, bring forth evidence of a change. Joseph's brothers should have been his friends, yet moved by envy at the love and favour he received from his father, they became his enemies. Joseph still wished to have them for his friends, but could he be sure they had changed? Could they prove they were worthy of the love he had for them? So, we see:

## **2. Testing.**

Joseph's actions here are designed to test the depth and sincerity of their sorrow and repentance. He had heard and seen them repent, be sorry (42:21-22). Events had been used by God to produce an awareness of their sin against Joseph many years previously - they owned and confessed it - but was it real, was it genuine? Joseph needed to know. There are two kinds of repentance - one is being sorry because we have been caught - we have all been like that and have only a temporary sorrow. We may vow never to do it again, or if we do it again, vow not to get caught! The other repentance is a real and genuine sorrow for the word or the deed, it was wrong and we make up our minds never to do it again.

Joseph had seen the first - as they were sorry, although not caught, but it seemed as if this trouble had come on them because of what they did to their brother. Yet the question was - *If they were given the right circumstances would they try and do away with Benjamin, who was now dad's favourite, as they had done with Joseph?* If they showed no concern for Benjamin's affliction it would show they were still living under the selfish and evil attitude which prompted them to sell Joseph. If, on the other hand, they showed their desire to

rescue Benjamin, then it would show that their repentance was genuine and they were changed in their attitude to Jacob's favourite and love to Benjamin.

### 3. Loving.

The opportunity Joseph set before them was an act of kindness, a most loving and wise act. It gave them the chance to save face, gain his esteem, give evidence of repentance - not only to Joseph, but to themselves and Jacob (*who would, of necessity, have to find out that Joseph was alive!*) Both Joseph and his brothers were given the chance to see whether they had changed. Joseph heaped kindness on his brothers by loading them with as much grain as they could carry. This, no doubt, was a cause of gladness, along with his welcome the day before. Incredibly he also, in love, planned this trial for them.

God can deal with us in a like manner. He loads us with countless benefits, blessings and good things, but He doesn't want our true joy and comfort to be centred on these and He can try and test our faith in various ways; to wean us from dependence upon such blessings and gifts, to cause us to look to Him the Giver of all good things. He may allow such things **for us** so we know we have changed; we are truly different from what we were. He knows it - but often we do not! We may fear or feel we have not altered or changed over the years; that we have the same old hang-ups, but He encourages us it is not so.

Often as Christians we can have guilt feelings. We will acknowledge God has forgiven us, that all our sins have been

taken away and the Lord has accepted us. These are great truths, but we cannot fully accept our forgiveness, we still feel guilty, we still lack assurance, perhaps cannot forgive ourselves. We can read Scripture; listen to sermons and get some comfort from the truth, but it doesn't quite hit home and affect **our own** joy and comfort.

The kindest thing for us in that situation, with such a feeling of guilt over this or that which occurred in the past, is to discover we would not do the same again. Sometimes the Lord does it gently, but other times He can do it in ways that are totally unexpected, similar to the way Joseph does here and it is:

#### **4. Shocking.**

People feel bad not only because they cannot forgive themselves for what they have done, but also, feel that the same vulnerability is there. We have to accept God's forgiveness first and foremost, then to be able to forgive ourselves. We have to grasp that none of us are what we should be, or what we could be, but, if we are Christians, we are not what we were! There is a process of change going on in our lives and God shows this to us as He allows us to go through times of testing, opportunities to be tempted to do the same actions as we would have before. We are to strive, to be as He would have us be and show we have changed and are truly sorry for past sins.

This is what occurred here with the Benjamin incident. See the brothers' foolish words in v9. Imagine how they felt when the cup was found in Benjamin sack (v12). Would they now

say "*Sorry Benjamin. Dad will understand. It's your own fault.*" No, they did not! We read of their reactions in v13. They acted totally different to how they did some 22 years previously with Joseph. They do not repeat the same wrong and it shows there had been a change of heart and attitude.

I wonder how many people have wished for their lives over again so that they would avoid this mistake, wrong or hurt, even saying so. How many long to go back and right a wrong? Perhaps someone listening may feel like that; you feel guilty over the past; it distresses you and you want to change it. Sadly, it cannot be done. Here we are today and what is done is done. Nothing can change that. God has no intention of doing so, of undoing your past. Thankfully God can forgive our past, He can accept us despite our past, but He, or we, will not undo the past. The past cannot be re-lived. Yet when we truly repent, God works all things - including our past, its failures and sins - together for good. God is so good that He can kindly and gently give us a second chance by presenting an equivalent situation to allow us to discover we have changed and sometimes it occurs through events that are shocking in our estimation.

Very often we don't detect the second chances straightaway. They come at unexpected times, moments and ways - for the brothers it was by this cup in Benjamin's sack of grain and the crisis it brought along with it. Yet we see their reaction (v13) - show their sorrow, all load their donkeys and return back to the city to face the music together and stand by Benjamin.

## **5. Revealing.**

How Joseph must have rejoiced when he saw them all - just what he wanted, but he was going to test them further. The brothers are brought to Joseph's house. He had not left on his usual business for he had in mind one of the most important matters of his life - to know the true heart of his brothers. Yes, they had returned; was that enough? Would they indignantly defend themselves now the cup and the money were found among them? Would they abandon Benjamin? Would they take a self-righteous stand as they did previously when accused of being spies?

There are many things which will keep us from trusting in the Lord Jesus and being saved, but all these factors and reasons trace back to our imagined self-righteousness. The kindest thing that God ever does is to knock away our props of self-righteousness and bring us to true repentance before Him. True repentance involves a change of mind about ourselves; seeing and acknowledging that we are wrong before God; it is agreeing with God's verdict on us. True repentance is an essential ingredient to saving faith.

So, what are the hallmarks of true repentance? We can see some of such things from this passage. It involves treating the one we have sinned against the deepest respect (v14); it means admitting we have no bargaining power and we acknowledge our sin and wrong (v16a), also acknowledge our submission as the servant, slave of the one we have sinned against (v16b).

We need to see God has been wronged by our sin and it is not a small matter, but an infinite affront, a horrible and disgusting thing against the God of all Creation. We need to

see we have no right of claim to any of His kindness; that the fact of His keeping us alive is a miracle of His goodness. Some under God's hand have questioned why they were allowed to breathe and pollute the air He made and gave; some have felt that hell is but the best they deserve for they deserve much worse! Others have not been able to take in the wonder of the offer of the forgiveness of their sins through Jesus - saying it was for others and not themselves. We all need to see that our continued living is of God's goodness and our sin deserves His punishment in life and in the life to come. We have no bargaining power – being nice, respectable, kind, religious or learned people or even church goers and religious. We come to God with nothing to try to impress Him, knowing He clearly sees our guilt and sin.

Yet we come to Him acknowledging He has the right to our lives. We were made by God, for God. The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. He has the right to our lives by Creation, but He also has paid a great price for us - Redemption. To be a Christian means we are owned by God and acknowledge it - so He is not just a convenient Saviour, seen as an insurance against Hell and death; but He is to be the Lord of our life, every day of our lives. These brothers came to Joseph and owned all this. They saw their guilt and their useless position of bargaining; they came with reverence and fear before Joseph and owned that they were his slaves.

Do we have or have we had any sense of these things in our lives - an awe and fear of the holy God of all Creation; an awareness of our own unfit condition to face Him; an

awareness and need to surrender all our rebellion and self striving to Him and for Him to receive us? If so, take heart, take notice, it is His work in us that we are aware of; His drawing us to Himself. We're not to harden our hearts against Him as perhaps we have done before, but realise He would have us trust Him, receive Him as our Saviour.

Perhaps we say *"I cannot, I'm not good enough. I'm not nice enough. I don't know enough."* To that He would say *"Come anyway, I came to save such as you!"* As the verse of a hymn says: *"Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream; all the fitness He requireth, is to feel your need of Him: this He gives you; 'tis the Spirit's rising beam!"*

The Saviour Himself calls you to Himself, to come and He will receive you and be your Saviour, whoever you are and whatever you've done. You can do so now. Perhaps for some this will be a gradual process - like walking through the night and we don't know when, but it becomes day. We will not know when, but we be able to say that *"Yes, He is my Saviour!"* It is my prayer for us all, whether young and old, that we would come to know this Saviour as our own Saviour and have greater things than we could ever imagine.