

OVERCOMING BITTERNESS

Genesis 42-50

Introduction:

One Sunday morning at a small southern church the new pastor called on one of his older deacons to lead in the opening prayer. The deacon stood up, bowed his head and said, "Lord, I hate buttermilk."

The pastor opened one eye and wondered where this was going. The deacon continued, "Lord, I hate lard." Now the pastor was totally perplexed. The deacon continued, "Lord, I ain't too crazy about plain flour. But after you mix 'em all together and bake 'em in a hot oven, I just love biscuits."

"Lord, help us to realize when life gets hard, when things come up that we don't like, whenever we don't understand what You are doing, that we need to wait and see what You are making. After you get through mixing and baking, it'll probably be something even better than biscuits. Amen." Romans 8:28

The Old Testament character, Joseph, was a man who could certainly relate to concept contained in that prayer. He faced a series of discouragements, and events which tested his character, yet he overcame each one and passed each test that came his way.

He overcame the treachery of his brothers who, out of hatred and spite, sold him to become a slave in Egypt. He overcame temptation, when his master's wife propositioned him, offering him momentary sexual gratification. He overcame disappointment when he was left, abandoned in prison, forgotten by the man who promised to help him. He overcame the dangers of success when Pharaoh, in response to Joseph's ability to interpret his dreams, promoted him to make him governor over the whole land of Egypt.

All of the negative events in Joseph's life, individually, seem difficult to understand for a man who was determined to live for God. Yet when God was finished mixing and baking, it is clear to see that He was working out a plan to accomplish something wonderful and special in the life of Joseph.

This morning, we look at one more test that Joseph faced. Theodore Epp calls this the test of the inner man. Joseph is faced with an opportunity for revenge and must overcome the rise of bitterness in his life.

How do you respond when you are wronged? The human tendency is to hold onto the anger that comes so naturally—to allow anger to become hatred and hatred to turn to bitterness. When someone hurts you, whether as simple as spreading a rumor, or as serious as murdering a family member, how do we keep from becoming bitter? Joseph gives us a wonderful example of overcoming bitterness in chapters 42-50 of the book of Genesis.

(Much of what you hear today is taken directly from the booklet, "Joseph: Overcoming Life's Challenges" from Radio Bible Class.)

At this point in Joseph's story, things had changed significantly for him. He was now the second most powerful man on earth, and he had absolute control over the destinies of millions of people—including the brothers who had sold him into slavery so many years earlier.

A great deal has happened since Joseph rose to power—7 years of plenty have come and gone. Joseph's plan worked out—grain has been stored up in abundance. They are now into the 7 years of famine and the whole world is coming to Joseph's door to buy corn and grain for food. Along with everyone else, Joseph's brothers from Canaan come down to Egypt seeking food and he provided it for them.

The Test

When Joseph's brothers came to Egypt for food, they had to come before Joseph. They did not recognize him, but he knew them immediately. 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 seemed to sense a change in his brothers, but for the sake of Benjamin, he had to make sure.

We are not going to take time to go through all that occurred, but suffice it to say that in the events that followed, 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 there is no evidence that they resented the kind of favoritism that they had despised so viciously in Joseph. Then he put Benjamin in harm's way as a test for them. 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.

Chapter 44:1-13 – After the feast was over, Joseph commanded his steward to do several things: Fill their sacks with food, return their money, and put his silver cup in Benjamin's bag. Why would he do this? The only way Joseph could test their character was to put them 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 tension mounting as one by one the sacks were examined, and one by one found to contain only grain. The steward moved from the oldest to the youngest, 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 question was, what would they do? The agreement was that only the guilty one 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. They returned with Benjamin, determined that whatever was to

be faced they would face together. The evidence was there. They were truly changed men.

The Plea

Chapter 44:14-34 – What a dramatic change in these men from their attitude 20 years earlier.

- "They fell before (Joseph) to the ground" (v.14), fulfilling the promise of Joseph's first set of dreams.
- Read 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 another offer of release (v. 17), and they passed with flying colors.
- "Let (me) remain instead of the lad" (vv. 33-34). What a turnaround. This is the same Judah who had led in the plan to sell Joseph back in Canaan. Here he is offering to be Benjamin's substitute as a slave in Egypt. Why? Out of concern for their father (vv. 19-32). He openly acknowledged that Benjamin was now Jacob's favorite. But instead of resenting this favorite-son status, he wanted to preserve it by giving himself.

God was working not only in Joseph's life but in the lives of Joseph's brothers as well. They had changed.

The Reunion

In chapter 45 we have the most amazing reunion described. Joseph could not contain his tears as he revealed himself to his brothers. One can only imagine the flood of emotions that must have gone through the hearts and minds of his brothers in those moments:

- relief that Joseph was still alive
- wonder that the dreams he had told them had come true
- fear because he now held the power of life and death over them

Yet, he reassured them that he was not out to destroy them. He saw the hand of God in all that had happened – *go through 45:4-15 briefly.*

Many years later, after their father had died, Joseph again dispelled their fears – see *Gen. 50:15-20*.

Conclusion

So now we come back to the question we asked early in this message: How do we respond when we are wronged? How do we overcome bitterness when faced with hatred and treachery? A few things:

1. Forgiveness – easy to say, difficult to do. To forgive requires grace. It was grace that allowed Jesus, when He was wrongly accused and hung on a cross, to be able to look at his assailants and say, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” It is only by grace that we can forgive those who have wronged us and hurt us deeply.
2. Recognize God’s sovereignty – remember the old deacon’s prayer. In the midst of our hurt, we usually cannot see what God is doing or what the end will be. Joseph had no way of knowing the end result of his brothers’ betrayal. Yet later on, he could look back and see God’s hand at work. He could say that it was really God who had brought him to Egypt. We need to wait on God to see what He is doing in and through our lives.

Bill Crowder tells this story:

I was deeply moved when I read about Mr. and Mrs. Robert Bristol of Dearborn, Michigan. They traveled on their vacation to San Diego for the purpose of sharing Christ with a man in prison. The thing that made it so amazing was that this criminal was in jail for raping and murdering their precious daughter. That is a spirit of mercy born out of grace. 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.