

God and Men

Genesis 43:1-34

Something fascinating is going on here. In this simple and familiar story which is usually included in the first group of Bible stories we teach our youngest children, something fascinating is happening. Something that plumbs the depths of our theological understanding of God and his sovereignty. We see human beings here, living and acting very humanly. We see the personality of different men, and the dynamics of their relationships within a rather large family. And we could easily study the psychology of each person. Actually, we will. We will be touching on that psychology--the study of what is actually going on in their minds and hearts.

But there is something far deeper than the psychology of man here. There is God, God at work. God at work fulfilling his purposes. God sovereignly at work in the lives of his people to bring about precisely what he has foreordained will come to pass. And so played out before us in these verses is the interconnection between the psychology of man and the sovereignty of God. How God acts within the particular personalities of specific men, to bring about his purpose. And that is what is so fascinating here in our text.

Let's start with Jacob. Israel. Let me review ever so briefly. Jacob was sold as a slave by his brothers. He was sold to Potiphar in Egypt, elevated to the highest position of chief steward in Potiphar's house, only to be falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and imprisoned. For 13 years. Then he was brought before Pharaoh to interpret a dream, and elevated to the highest position of chief steward in Pharaoh's house and therefore in all of Egypt. He supervised the storing up of grain in Egypt during seven years of prophesied prosperity, then he was

the overseer for the distribution of that grain during the succeeding seven years of drought. People came from all over the world to buy grain from Egypt, including Joseph's brothers. But Joseph wouldn't sell them grain until they returned with their youngest brother Benjamin, and their father Jacob refused. For another two years.

Gen. 42:38 "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is left alone. If any calamity should befall him along the way in which you go, then you would bring down my gray hair with sorrow to the grave."

But then they run out of food again, and still refusing to send Benjamin, Jacob asks his sons to return.

v.1-2

He refuses to do that which he knows he must do. There is, in Jacob, great hesitancy to do what is necessary. That is his very human side, and his hesitancy is very easy to understand. He was afraid.

42:4 "But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "Lest some calamity befall him."

But now in chapter 43,

I. GOD OVERCOMES JACOB'S HUMAN HESITANCY.

God is sovereign to govern all his creatures and all their actions, but he does so in the context of their own humanity and human psychology. God doesn't transform Jacob's mind into a computer chip, programmed to act exactly as it is wired. There is nothing here similar to what we call artificial intelligence today. Instead, by his own sovereign influence, he changes Jacob. He transforms Jacob. And that transformation can properly be described as God overcoming Jacob's natural tendency--his hesitancy to do what he had to do.

As I just read, Jacob's hesitancy was based on fear. Fear of harm coming to Benjamin. But it really is a self-centered fear. Jacob is governed not so much by an altruistic motive to protect Benjamin, but rather by a self-absorbed desire to protect himself from further grief. Notice how he focuses on himself.

v.6

For Jacob, EVERYTHING focuses on himself. "Why did you bring this trouble on ME?" But actually, the trouble is upon Benjamin, for Benjamin is the one who would be in danger, not Jacob. That's the psychological observation obvious in this whole thing. Jacob is fearful of his own grief, not primarily of Benjamin's safety.

Obviously those two things are related, but it is a good example of a tendency that is very much a part of our self-absorbed society today. For many people, everything has reference to them. We have become almost incapable of loving others, because we are being taught that our love for others is based upon love for ourselves. We must love ourselves first, we're told. And the result of that is that even loving others is defined selfishly, for our own selfish advancement. Jesus says something quite different.

John 15:12 "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Lay down your life for someone else. That's love. Take up your cross. Bear the burdens of one another. That's love. As Paul explains it,

Phil.2:3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."

That's love, with no fear. I believe that fear is the direct consequence of self-absorption, of being self-centered and self-focused. And fear causes us to hesitate to act, to hesitate to that which is good and necessary. Jacob is a perfect example.

A. Hesitancy to act is often caused by self-centered fear.

But God overcomes Jacob's human hesitancy. But, how? For lack of better words, he doesn't give Jacob any other choice! It became very obvious that either Benjamin would return to Egypt with his brothers, or the whole family would starve to death.

Sometimes, in his infinite love and perfect sovereignty, God puts us in positions like that. Sometimes he simply forces us to do what he wants us to do because he doesn't give us any other choice. And you can respond to that in one of two ways--either with a fatalistic bitterness, or with a deep and submissive faith. Jacob responds with faith. Specifically, faith in God's goodness. Though he was compelled, in a sense, against his will, though he realized that he was trapped in a corner and couldn't get out, though he realized that there was absolutely nothing he could do about the situation, still, in faith, Jacob focuses his eyes upon the goodness of God.

His example is a good one for us, that,

B. Hesitancy is often conquered by the faith of trusting in God's goodness.

Let me put that another way, when you confront your own fear, a fear that keeps you from doing something that you know you ought to do, something good, then first of all identify how much your fear really is self-centered. That is, how much you are counting the cost to yourself. Then deny yourself. And fix your eyes upon the knowledge of God's goodness. Trust him to be good, and do whatever it is that causes your fear. Regardless of

the consequences.

That's how you overcome fear. Look more closely at Jacob.
v.11-13

Jacob's motives are a little difficult to interpret, and we are not always told explicitly what they are. But let me attempt to evaluate Jacob's motives here. Verses 11-13 seem to be open to the idea that he is being fatalistic, even manipulative. "Well, I have no choice, so just go and take Benjamin with you but take some gifts along to try make that MAN happy."

In those verses, there is no reference to God nor to his goodness. But there is in the next verse.
v.14

There's his faith. He blesses them with his request for God's mercy to be upon them. And he uses the name, God Almighty, El Shaddai, that great name by which God revealed himself to Abraham in establishing the covenant in the first place. Jacob is remembering that, and remembering the great covenant promise, "I will be with you and will bless you." And with that faith, I take Jacob's final words to be a trusting submission to the sovereign will of God Almighty. "If I am bereaved, I am bereaved!"

Now, if we didn't have the first half of verse 14, I would probably interpret those words differently, with fatalistic hopelessness. "What will be, will be." But given Jacob's understanding of God Almighty, I believe that they are more accurately words of godly submission. As one commentator puts it, "extreme as the utterance is, being coupled with faith, it means: if it so please God, so let it be."

And so, what God had determined would happen, happened.

But only after God overcomes Jacob's human hesitancy.

v.15

Something else happened in Jacob's change of mind, though, and that is the influence of Judah. God uses Judah's leadership to bring about his own will, too. Again, the fascinating interconnection between the sovereignty of God and the psychology of man. In this case,

II. GOD EQUIPS JUDAH FOR FAITHFUL LEADERSHIP.

Judah assumes the role of leader for himself. He becomes the spokesmen.

v.3-5

Remember, Reuben had tried previously at the end of chapter 42, but his counsel was rejected, his preeminence from being the firstborn had been forfeited by his act of incest. Simeon was incarcerated. Levi had displayed cruel bloodthirstiness in dealing with the Shechemites in chapter 34. But even Judah was tainted by terrible sin, the incest recorded in chapter 38, impregnating his own daughter-in-law Tamar. So what equips him for leadership now? Nothing less than the grace of God.

Judah is thrust into a leadership roll, urging his father to send Benjamin back with them as they return to Egypt, and he succeeds. He is able to answer his father's concerns, and compels Jacob to see the necessity of sending Benjamin. These verses give a good indication of why Judah is successful as a leader, and how God has equipped him. The first aspect of his leadership is shown in,

v.7

Jacob had challenged his sons with that probing question of verse 6, "Why did you tell the man you had another brother?"

That's a legitimate question, for surely they weren't obligated to tell the man their whole life story. But they were required to answer his questions, and to tell the truth. So they said to Jacob, "He asked us, and we simply answered him."

Gen. 43:7 "The man asked us pointedly about ourselves and our family, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' And we told him according to these words. Could we possibly have known that he would say, 'Bring your brother down'?"

"We simply answered his questions." The explanation given to Jacob was that when they were asked a question, they answered it honestly. That's leadership.

A. A faithful leader is known for the truth of his word.

If you can't believe what a man says, then he is unfit to be a leader. Judah says, "We simply answered his questions." A faithful leader is known for the truth of his word, and God has equipped Judah to be such a leader. "We simply answered his questions."

Judah does something else. He accepts responsibility.

B. A faithful leader is known for taking responsibility.

v.8-10

There is such practical wisdom in that. In verse 8, Judah finally gets the point across to his father, "if we don't go back, we will all die." And there is a gentle and respectful rebuke to his father, in the words of urgency found in,

v.10

We discover in chapter 45:6 that two years have passed. Two years they have delayed. The food supply which they got in

Egypt the first time is depleted. They face death by starvation if nothing is done. But Judah doesn't use that argument to twist the arm of his father. Instead, he accepts his own personal responsibility.

v.9

There is every indication that those are sober, sincere words. Judah is not being flippant. He is not being manipulative or superficial. He is legitimately assuming responsibility before his father for the safety and well-being of Benjamin. And if anything happens, he will accept the consequences. That's leadership.

"The buck stops here." As President Harry Truman would say. No one else to blame. No excuses. Simply responsibility. "I'll take care of it." "I'll accept the consequences." Jacob trusted his son. And agreed.

Let me make this a personal application., that you and I should be known for these things as well—the truth of your word and your willingness of accept and fulfill responsibility. That should be the reputation you seek, that whatever you say, people will believe. Along with trustworthiness. When someone asks you to do something, they can have the confidence that you will do it. When you agree to do something, it gets done? A faithful leader, and in a broad sense, a mature Christian, will be known for taking responsibility. Anything less is an offense against God!

Again, the interplay between God's sovereignty and the actions of men. God uses Judah in causing Jacob to allow Benjamin to go down to Egypt. And God uses Judah by equipping him for faithful leadership.

Finally, let's look again at Joseph, again emphasizing the

interconnection between God's sovereign will and Joseph's own actions. It is obvious throughout these chapters that God is ultimately in control, for we see that,

III. GOD PLACES JOSEPH IN A POSITION OF HONOR TO FULFILL HIS OWN PURPOSE.

I don't think I need to emphasize this much more, that God put Joseph in Pharaoh's house. God put Joseph in this position of honor so that God could fulfill his own purpose, which would ultimately be to deliver Israel out of Egypt. Therefore, obviously, Israel had to go down to Egypt. The whole family, which would become a whole nation.

Genesis chapters 37-50 are not simply the story of the life of Joseph. Rather, the theme of those chapters is that God is accomplishing his purpose. So with that, how does the sovereign God of the nations work within the personal psychology of Joseph? Well, we learn a lot about Joseph in this chapter, a lot of his character. We see what God is doing in the life of Joseph in order to bring about his own sovereign purpose. First, we see that,

A. Joseph demonstrates genuine graciousness.

Graciousness is one of my favorite words, because it summarizes much of what it means to be godly. Literally, the word means to show grace to others, which is one of God's most prominent attributes. According to the dictionary, graciousness means a person characterized by kindness and warm courtesy, tact and propriety, one with a merciful or compassionate nature. And note that those are all matters of the heart, not merely external actions.

And we see all of that in Joseph. Notice how kindly he responded to his brothers when they returned, having proven

their own truthfulness about Benjamin.

v.16-17

Such graciousness must have been confusing to Joseph's brothers, for they had been treated with such suspicion previously, having been accused of being spies. They were understandably afraid.

v.18

And they were very defensive, wishing to acquit themselves before Joseph's steward,

v.19-22

And then, to their absolute amazement and complete astonishment, they heard this,

v.23

"Peace be with you." Graciousness means granting peace, putting someone at peace in your presence. It means that you quiet their fears. And through his steward, Joseph did that. He forgave their debt, attributing the payment to God himself, called "the God of your father."

Then Simeon was restored to them. No hesitation. No theatrics. No suspense. Just graciousness. The brothers are all cared for with such gentle love, all their needs and comforts are attended to, along with their animals.

v.24-25

Joseph himself personally continues that graciousness, in,

v.32

Now, they were all eating separately, as required by Egyptian custom and religious conviction. Egyptians would not eat with

Hebrews, for such would be a great offense to the Egyptians. Joseph, with an Egyptian name and family, was counted among the Egyptians. So he observed that custom.

But his graciousness shone forth, even in seating the brothers in the same room with him. And in serving them such a hearty meal.

But his graciousness is most fully revealed in the continuation of his testing intended to bring them to repentance. He doesn't deal harshly with them, as he seeks to bring them to confess their sins. He deals gently and kindly, albeit very firmly.

First, to further astonish them with his knowledge of their family, he seats them in order of age, a fact he would not have known as the servant of Pharaoh. One commentator calculates that this arrangement was but one of nearly 40 million possibilities in which 11 individuals could be seated!

v.33

Such penetrating exposure will often bring a man to repentance, and I immediately think of Jesus and the woman at the well, who was brought to repentance after being exposed by Jesus. He knew everything about her, and that is a terrifying, humbling experience. It must seem to Joseph's brothers that he knew everything about them.

Then, he tests their tendency to be jealous, the very sin that caused them to sell him into slavery in the first place. Joseph gave extra portions to Benjamin.

v.34

There was no evidence of resentment toward Benjamin whatsoever, and in God's purpose, the brothers are almost ready

to be confronted by Joseph's true identity and their own sin.

But for now, let me reemphasize how God is using Joseph's graciousness to bring all of this about. And with all of that, we can see all the more clearly that,

B. Joseph demonstrates loving compassion.

Now we really get a glimpse into Joseph's heart. Now we can really see and evaluate his actions psychologically. The one word which best describes his heart is compassion. Or tenderhearted love. Translated in verse 30 simply as yearned. It could be translated, "deeply moved." Literally, the Hebrew is, "his compassion grew warm."

Let me read the whole description,
v.26-27

There is so much in that question, so much loving interest in the well being of his father. Joseph must have been thrilled by their answer.

v.28

Then his attention shifts to Benjamin.
v.29-31

He was so deeply moved by the presence of all his brothers, especially his younger brother Benjamin, his only full brother born to his mother Rachel, that he lost his composure. His compassion was so great that he had to go into a private room to weep, then wash his face before he could serve dinner.

Joseph was a compassionate man, a man moved in his soul with the joy of being reunited with his family. That compassion drowned out any bitterness or vindictiveness that might have

tempted him. That compassion was no doubt fueled by the realization that God had placed him in that position of honor to fulfill his own purpose. The man God used was characterized by graciousness and compassion.

I lament that those qualities are not practiced today, particularly among men in our culture. There are, in fact, very few gentlemen any more, men truly characterized by the demonstration of gentleness, and graciousness. Manliness is too often measured by strength, or power, or success, or material wealth. We value a man who is a warrior or a fighter. One who exercises authority even harshly. We make heroes out of professional athletes who are the exact opposite of graciousness and compassion. We make heroes out of public figures, entertainers, actors, or politicians who are the exact opposite of those things. That is a sad commentary on our values.

A real man, a godly man, will be gracious and he will be compassionate. And God will use such men to accomplish his purpose just as he did Joseph.