

Shake-up for the make-up

Genesis 42:1-35

What kind of life experiences cause a step change in a person's character?

A lot of the things that really change the character of a person centre around moments of *crisis*. When people have near-death experiences, it can transform their perspective on things. When people are grieving the actual death of someone they loved, they change. When people share an experience of trauma, it can bind them together and change their relationships for life.

Even some positive big changes in life that can change character might be thought of as crisis moments - circumstances that suddenly force a response of change in how your day to day life works. Like marriage, having a child, being offered a great new job in a different place. All of these things, to different extents, can cause a noticeable change in a person's character.

Some of the other things that really change people happen in moments of *confrontation*. When families or friends finally discuss that unspoken thing that's been sitting between them for months, maybe years. When an individual is confronted with being found out for something they're guilty of that they thought would never be known and hoped would never be spoken about. When these things get aired, people get changed by them.

And both these things - a moment of crisis and a moment of confrontation - are happening to Joseph's brothers in Genesis 42:1-35. Where we left off in Joseph, we'd been following his story in Egypt for a few weeks. His brothers left the stage a while back, in chapter 37. Now, they're back on stage with Joseph - although they don't know it.

But they are not the same men that they were twenty years ago. Through crisis and through confrontation, these brothers of Joseph are becoming different people. The liars are becoming honest; the hard-hearted are becoming repentant; the self-serving are becoming self-sacrificing. How does this happen? What is God doing in their lives?

It's a moment of crisis for Joseph's brothers. At the end of chapter 41, we learned that all the countries surrounding Egypt were suffering the same seven year famine. Here in the opening verses of chapter 42, Jacob sends his sons off to Egypt to find food, because in the land where they lived, Canaan, the cupboards were bare too.

The lives of this family are hanging in the balance. This is the family that God promised to work through to bless the world - so the fate of the world hinges on their survival. It looks like they're going to die.

But in God's providence, He has arranged a whole series of events to see to it that one of this family is controlling the stockpiles of food for the nations - that not only God's chosen family, but all the nations, might 'live and not die' - a repeated theme in this chapter.

And chapter 42 is going to be a moment of confrontation for Joseph's brothers. They are going to be forced to face the reality of who they really were, what they'd really done. They are going to head into a place of fear and guilt when they face the facts about the brother they left for dead.

But in God's providence, He has arranged a whole series of events to see to it that Joseph, his brothers and their father will all be reunited, reconciled and made whole in their relationships. And what comes first in all of that is what we're going to look at today.

By this point in the story, those who have read the reports many times of who Jesus is and how He works will have seen a lot of parallels in Joseph's life. Joseph is one of a number of Old Testament shadows of the full colour real deal revelation of God that is to come in Jesus.

Let's look at the story so far since Genesis 37. Like Jesus, Joseph had some big claims to make about those around him bowing to him as King. Like Jesus, those he grew up with rejected Joseph and his big vision. Like Jesus, Joseph was sold by his family for silver. Like Jesus, Joseph was written off as dead and gone.

Like Jesus, Joseph was falsely accused by those enraged by his innocence, an innocence that showed up their guilt all the more. Like Jesus, Joseph stated out loud that 'I can only do this because God the Father does it through me.' Like Jesus, Joseph was exalted from the place of abandonment and death to reign at the right hand of the King. And like Jesus, Joseph went through all this to save God's family and bless the nations.

Now I say all this, partly by way of recapping the story, and partly so that we might set an expectation for our reading of Joseph's actions in this chapter and beyond. Joseph is not perfect. He's made mistakes, and he'll make one or two more before the end of his story.

He's possibly arrogant, definitely opportunistic like his father before him, could be accused of bleeding a starving people dry with his economic policies, and not always open to the wisdom of those who go before him. But he is a shadow of the true King that is to come in Galilee one day, and there are clues in his dealings with his brothers about God's dealings with us.

Like Jesus, it turns out here in Genesis 42:6 that the vision came true; Joseph really was bowed down to as the one in charge. So how will this 'king' treat those who are bowing down to him? What does that teach us about how Jesus the true King will treat us as we bow to Him?

Our narrator makes it clear in vv.7-8 that Joseph recognised his brothers, but they didn't recognise him. It's approaching twenty years since they last clapped eyes on each other - and the last thing Joseph saw was them counting the silver, dwindling from view as the slave traders they'd sold him to carted him away. They can't see who this clean-shaven, decorated Egyptian prime minister really is. But he'd know these ten greying heads anywhere.

What will Joseph's first move be? Will he say, 'Guys, it's me... Joseph! Your brother!' Maybe then he'll enjoy seeing them squirm before dishing out delicious payback from his position of power. Maybe he'll surprise them completely by saying, 'Do not be afraid... I *forgive* you. Let's let bygones be bygones and just start again.'

Well, we could skip the next three chapters if that's what Joseph had done. But he didn't. Not yet, anyway. Actually, that forgiveness was coming... but Joseph had something to put the brothers through first. A shake-up before the make-up.

Joseph puts them through the wringer here. He speaks to the brothers harshly; accuses them of being spies repeatedly (vv. 9, 12, 14 and 16); imprisons them all for three days; keeps one of them imprisoned in Egypt whilst the others return home; demands that they return with their younger brother; and frames them for a crime in putting their silver back in their bags.

Now I don't think that Joseph is just toying with them. He has a purpose in this shake-up before the make-up. And I'm suggesting today that God also works like this with you and me. So I'm going to ask you this:

What do you think is the purpose in Joseph's actions towards his brothers?

Joseph does what he does to confront his brothers with a reality check; a moment of truth. It leads to the first real acknowledgement that there is something in their past that needs to be confessed and dealt with, in vv. 21-23. And Joseph does some very deliberate things to stir that past up.

What he does parallels the things that they have done to him. Just as they treated him harshly, he speaks to them harshly. Just as they threw him in a cistern, he imprisons them all for three days. Just as they tortured Joseph psychologically by changing plans from killing him to leaving him for dead to selling him as a slave, Joseph changes plans by switching from keeping all of them but one to letting all of them go but one.

Just as Joseph's destiny was in their hands, now their destiny is in Joseph's hands. There's even a parallel with the silver. Every time these men come home to their dad, they seem to be down one brother and up some silver.

This moment of confrontation is bringing up the past for these brothers. We read about it in vv.21-23. It's a remarkable moment. Almost twenty years after the crime, they finally look themselves in the mirror, and say out loud what they did. They confess. Verbally. To one another. They get real and get honest.

They have no idea that Joseph can understand the confession they are making; that they have the same mother tongue. But Joseph does hear it. He hears and knows that these men realise their sin, and can say it out loud, and they are sorry for it. That moment matters. It's transformational for the brothers, and for the forgiveness that Joseph will later offer them.

If you understand forgiveness as something that God offers you in a 'just forget it and we'll never speak of it' sort of way, you're missing out on the healing that comes from this process of confession.

Joseph heard the brothers say, 'We really sinned. We were hard-hearted; we wouldn't listen to our brother's cries. And we're guilty of his blood.' And when Joseph finally did say, 'I forgive you,' the brothers will have realised that it came after he had heard them say out loud exactly what they were guilty of.

The shake-up really makes the make-up. God confronts you with your sin. He might stir it up for you in moments of crisis, moments of confrontation, or both. But He will do things in your life to shake you up, and the way to respond is to get real and get honest about what you need to confess out

loud - maybe to someone else, maybe to yourself for the first time, but definitely to Him.

When things are falling apart in our lives - the crisis moments - often our default is to think, 'is this me being punished for x, y or z?' That's how the brothers are thinking in vv.21-22 and in v.28.

And the short answer is no. The true and living God doesn't operate on karma. He says we're *all* sinners that can't come into His presence, except that He loves us bewilderingly so He gave His Son to die to completely deal with every sin. Trust in that, and your record before God is clean, and always will be. So 'Is God punishing me for my sin?' No. Because Jesus already took the punishment.

But it is a question that goes through our minds anyway, isn't it? And the *effect* of that is to expose to our consciousness something in our lives that *is* wrong, *needs* confessed, and *must* be turned from so we can move on. And I think God does shake us up in crisis circumstances to draw the 'hallelujah' from our lips; the 'save me, God, because I have sinned!'

Then there are the moments of confrontation. When you are brought face to face with the truth of who you are, what you're like, what you've done. It might be in an honest conversation that a friend has with you. It might be in a powerful word describing your behaviour that you'd never dreamed was really true of you. It might be in a sentence in a sermon or in Scripture that hits you in the gut because you *know*, 'that's me - God's talking to *me*, about *this*.'

God does these things that you might bend the knee, get real and say, 'God, I'm sorry, it's true. That's me. That's who I am. That's what I did. Wash me. Heal me. Change me. Make me new.'

Believe me, He's not doing it to get some sadistic pleasure out of seeing you squirm. He's doing it so you can be free. Free from the guilt that's sapping you like a parasite on your life that you're barely aware of but is causing you to limp along like a poor, frail, grey version of the vibrant, full colour you.

As well as exposing the sin until it's named out loud, Joseph has another purpose in his actions. He's testing the brothers. He sees that they seem very different now. They describe themselves in this chapter as 'honest men.'

And it's true, they report things honestly to this prime minister that they don't know is really their brother, and later on to their father Jacob about what

happened in Egypt (although they do leave a few bits out and soften the stuff about Simeon lingering in a prison cell that they all shared).

There appears to be a genuine change in these guys from twenty years ago when they were very, very far from being honest men. They were murderous, opportunistic, bitter, deceitful and crass back then. Their character *is* changing, in this moment of crisis and this moment of confrontation in their lives. But is it a real transformation? Will this change stick?

Joseph describes his actions to the brothers as a 'test.' He says it twice; in vv.15 and 16. The Hebrew word is 'bahan' - it describes a test like metal is tested for its value and quality. Are they going to repeat the sins of the past, or are they really people that are reforming in their character?

Will they abandon Simeon the way they abandoned Joseph? After all, Joseph's set the test up to enable them to - they've got all the provisions they came for, and their money back. To keep young Benjamin back home safe, and to look after their own interests, all they need to do is not come back.

Now that Joseph is thought dead, Benjamin is Jacob's favoured son (something that we see in v.4). Do the brothers treat Benjamin the same way they once treated Joseph? To know that for sure, Joseph needs to see Benjamin there with them. So he sets all this up to test the brothers.

Joseph is not God. Joseph doesn't know the answers until the results come in. God, however, knows without testing us whether we are genuinely changing through a forgiven relationship with Him. He doesn't need to test us to learn something about us that He doesn't already know.

But God tests us in moments of crisis and confrontation for evidence of change as a *gift to us*. So that we can see for ourselves the reality of change in our characters. And so that others can see it too, and look to the God who is transforming our lives to see if He might just transform theirs too.

How has God been shaking you up through moments of crisis or confrontation in your life recently? How are you reforming as a result of it?

'We're not saying you can change him, 'cos people don't really change... we're just saying that love's a force that's powerful and strange... people make bad choices when they're mad or scared or stressed... but throw a little love their way and you'll bring out their best.'

There endeth the lesson from Buldha the troll from Disney's Frozen, in the song 'Fixer-upper.' Happy boppy tune with a strong message about the transforming power of love. You can't really change people, but you can bring out the best of them by loving them well. Here's the thing - that stops short of the gospel; the good news about how *God* loves us.

Because the love of God towards us *can* and *does* actually change people. People *do* really change when they experience the shake up that God brings in their lives, and the make up with Him and with other people that follows. Have a look at Joseph's brothers, for example. Consider who they are becoming through this shake up experience compared to the men they were when they sold their brother off like an unwanted old toy.

Back in Genesis 37, they were cocky and self-assured. Now, in chapter 42, they seem pretty hapless, to be honest. They know they can't control everything; that their lives are in the hands of another. Back then, they struck fear into their brother's heart, amongst others around them. Now, they have a reverent fear of the one who holds their lives in his hands.

Back then, they were frighteningly deceitful - telling their dad with straight faces as he wept uncontrollably that 'a wild animal ate Joseph.' Now, they are becoming open and honest; heart-on-their-sleeves honest, telling this unknown prime minister their family history without him asking for it.

Back then, they would give up their brother for a few quid. Now, they would give up their own lives for their brother, as we're going to read in the passage next week. Back then, there was not a hint of the brothers giving a stuff about the hurt they caused to people around them (apart from Reuben, who did say at the time, 'let's not do this.')

Now they can say, even out loud to each other, 'What have we *done*? We are sinners and we deserve punishment.'

This is not just kindly love 'bringing out their best' - these are transformed men! And when you meet Christians, those who have confessed they are sinners in need of God's mercy and grace and who have found it in Jesus, you meet people who are not the same as they once were.

You'll see it as you look around this church; as you hear the stories of our lives we have to tell each other - but only in those who have been through the shake-up and make-up with God.

You'll see it in the Bible, as Jesus meets people and they are never the same again. Jesus meets a woman caught in adultery. In the public square, He allows her to get shaken up, inviting people to throw stones at her (if they have never sinned themselves) - before everyone drops their stones, walks away, and He assures the woman - 'you are forgiven. You are right with God - but go. Turn away from this. Go and live new.'

Jesus meets a rich young man who runs to him asking about how to live forever. Jesus shakes him up; 'Take all your stuff, sell the lot, and give the money to the poor.' The man walks away from the make up with God that would follow, because he *refuses* to change, *refuses* to confess that money is the biggest thing in his life and nothing could be allowed to replace it.

Jesus meets Peter. He calls him to follow, be part of the team, start the church that will change the world. And then He shakes Peter up. 'You're going to say three times you don't know me.' Peter gets totally shaken when the words come true. He never imagined that he could really be *like* that; he was sure when he told Jesus, '*that* won't happen.'

Peter sat broken, weeping, brought to the point of confession in a moment of crisis. Jesus died. Jesus rose. Jesus took a walk on the beach with his old friend. Jesus shook him up again. 'Peter, do you love me? But do you really? Truly, do you love me?'

And in the 'yes, Lord' and in the taking of the task Jesus gave Him in that moment, Peter was a new man. He said it loud and proud, 'yes, I know Jesus, He is King and He is God, and what's more than that, *you* need to know Him too if you're going to make up with God.' He said it in the streets, he said it under fire, he said it with his dying, unflinching breath as they killed him for it.

Jesus shakes people up. He'll shake you up if you listen up. He will not put a sticking plaster on the infected wound in your heart and soul; He will dig up everything that needs exposed, through crisis and through confrontation in your life; He will see to it that you are drawn down to your knees to say, 'Here's what I'm really like, God.' So that He can lift you up to live a new life. Life to the full. Now and forever.