

# The Unexpected Feast

## Genesis 42:36-43:34

‘God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.’

That’s the well known Serenity Prayer. It’s also known as the Alcoholic’s Prayer, because it’s associated with the life-restoring Alcoholic’s Anonymous programme. And as we look at Genesis 43 today, we start by looking at three men wrestling with the need to pray like this - Reuben, Judah and Jacob.

In 42:36-38, Reuben, the oldest brother, has a little exchange with his dad. Reuben sees the need for someone to step up and change the predicament they are in. The family is running low on food. Simeon is still stuck in prison in Egypt. Nothing can change unless they bring the youngest brother, Benjamin, back to the mysterious Egyptian Prime Minister. But dad Jacob will not be parted from his youngest, now most favoured boy.

So... now what? Reuben tries to step up to change things, and there’s a certain courage in it. ‘I’ll take care of the boy and be personally responsible for him. You can kill my sons if I don’t bring your son back.’ There’s a big, brash effort here to try to win Jacob over so that things can change... but it doesn’t work.

Near the beginning of this series on the Joseph story, we talked about Reuben and Judah as the two brothers whose different characters were on show. We saw that Reuben was basically well intentioned but never quite effective in influencing things. Whereas Judah was always influential in the story, whether for good or for ill. Earlier in the story, it was for ill; but as the story goes on, Judah grows - both in screen time, and in character.

Here in chapters 42 and 43, we see that playing out some more. Reuben can’t persuade his father to change his mind about letting Benjamin go with the brothers back to Egypt. But Judah can, and Judah does.

Judah’s approach in vv.3-10 is a little different to Reuben’s - he’s firmer with Jacob: ‘If Benjamin goes, we go; if he stays, we stay... There’s not a choice here, dad, if we all stay, we all die, including Benjamin. Crack on, because we could have been there and back twice by now.’

Judah also calls Benjamin ‘the boy’ in v.8 - more literally, ‘the lad.’ It’s the only time in the Old Testament that brother refers to brother in this way.

Benjamin's no kid, he's probably in his twenties or early thirties by now. But Judah is telling his dad here that he *gets* it. He gets just *how* precious Benjamin is to Jacob, and assures him: 'you can trust me with him, dad. I've got this.'

Maybe the firm approach wouldn't have occurred to Reuben. Maybe he just wouldn't have worn it well. The bottom line is, Judah could speak to the person in authority in this way and make things happen, and Reuben couldn't. They were just different people.

Maybe Reuben's grand gesturing didn't inspire as much trust as Judah's 'I get what's precious to you' speech. Whatever the reasons, Jacob consented to let Benjamin go after Judah spoke. Judah got things changed, because he could. There's little lessons here to learn from Reuben and from Judah.

There are contexts in which we need to learn to do what Reuben had to do here. Where we need to *step back*. Reuben's part in the story is basically done now. He recedes, Judah rises. It's his turn.

Just as in our Streams service we saw that the time came for Moses to recede, and Joshua to step up. Just as David would not be the one to build a temple for God, but his son Solomon. Just as in the New Testament Paul planted churches but Apollos was the one to water them.

There's no lifetime guarantee on your God-given position of responsibility or influence. This isn't about when you get tired or fed up of serving or leading; but about the point at which you recognise that something has changed. You're no longer the one who is able to change things, and you pray for the wisdom to know the if and when of that, and the serenity to accept it.

And there are contexts in which we need to learn to do what Judah had to do here. Where we need to *step up*. Judah knew he had the influence to change his father's mind. To move the hand of authority. He still deferred *to* that authority - he didn't just take the brothers and go - but he stepped up with the courage to change the things that *he* could change.

And it did take courage. It was a big responsibility to assure Jacob that 'the lad' was safe in his care. He counted the cost when he told Jacob in v.9 that 'you can hold me personally responsible for him.' This could mean his imprisonment, or his death. It would probably mean pouring out energy in advocating for the protection and welfare of 'the lad.' It would certainly mean a constant, unending watchfulness, with all that that responsibility costs.

If you discover your ability to change the situation around you, pray for the courage to get on with that as you count the cost of stepping up. Our life groups have got back to looking at the 'frontlines' of life that each of us is uniquely placed in.

And as God's people in those homes, workplaces, school, college - what do you know *you* are able to change? Can you model godly character in a way that sticks out as different, and might cause some awkwardness? Can you mould the culture of your workplace to become a little different, a little more wholesome and more like God's Kingdom?

Can you be a mouthpiece for truth and justice, advocating for someone else that is struggling or not being treated well? Can you move the hand of authority to make good things happen that need to happen because of the kind of influence you know you have? If you *know* deep down that there is something that needs to change that *you* can change, then pray for the courage to change it. You're there for a reason.

*Is there a context in which God is calling you to step back?*

*Is there a context in which God is calling you to step up?*

There are contexts where we need to learn to do what Jacob had to do here. Where we need to *let go*. In vv.11-14, where Jacob finally agrees to let go the precious person he's been clinging to, there are things he can influence, and things he can't. So he does all the things he can - gives instructions, supplies provisions. And then he does something that nobody else has thought of. In v.14, he *prays for God's mercy and leaves it in his hands*.

What a wise way to approach every challenge, every opportunity, every decision in life. 'Right, here's the things I can do... made the first move in the broken relationship... written the job application... revised as well as I know how... sought advice on how to help my child with this... done what's within my competence, time and energy at work...'

And then, accepting that actually that is all you *can* do, saying as Jacob does in v.14, 'And may God Almighty (that's *El-Shaddai* in Hebrew, the name describing the God who blesses, promises, draws near, gets involved with us) - may this God of ours have mercy on our situation.'

And concluding, as Jacob does, that the answer is in His hands and up to Him. 'As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved.' You see, *serenity* is really

found in this kind of God-trust - doing all that you can about a situation, commending it to God's mercy and putting it in His hands, considering the worst outcome, and then accepting that whether it comes or the best comes or something in between comes, that's up to God.

*Is there a context in which God is calling you to let go?*

Let me just lead us through a prayer off the back of that:

Father, for my part, here's what I've done about it...

Father, here's what I realise I still need to do about it...

Father, I recognise that beyond that, it's not in my hands. So Almighty God, have mercy on us as I put it in your hands now...

Father, as far as I can see, the worst outcome would be this...

Father, I tell you now that if that's how it is to be, so be it. I trust you...

So, the journey is finally settled on by v.14. In vv.15-22, we read about the brothers setting off, arriving in Egypt, and then finding once again that a curveball comes their way that they had never expected. They are brought to Joseph's house for a meal. And how do they react? They're frightened.

Their minds go all over the place. They read all sorts of things into what is going on. 'It's because of the money in our sacks... this is bad... we're being brought to his house to be captured and made into slaves!' It's not rational stuff, this. If Joseph wanted them enslaved, he could just have had them arrested anywhere. He needn't have bothered laying on the charade of a fancy dinner before unfolding some dastardly plan like a James Bond villain.

But they imagine happening to them what they did to Joseph years ago. Funny how carrying guilt warps what you think about. The commentator W.L. Humphreys commented on this passage, 'For the guilty, even hospitality can seem ominous.' When you're carrying guilt around, you can't look at kindness without suspicion.

You can't look at the grace of God freely offered to you without thinking, 'Where's the catch? When's it going to twist and I get clobbered for what I've done?' But here's the thing - both in the way God meets us with kindness and grace, and in the way Joseph treats his brothers in this passage which is a shadow of that for us to learn from, the hospitality and welcome is astonishing.

As we look through vv.23-34, firstly the brothers are given *relief*. 'It's all right' the attendant tells the brothers in v.23. 'Don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver.' In a moment, the brothers fears that this appointment at the house was to punish and bind them disappears.

The irony is that the very thing that the brothers thought was a punishment from God - the placing of the silver in their sacks - turned out to be described as God's *gift* to them! Back in 42:28, when they discovered the silver in one of their sacks, they thought God was punishing them for their crimes. Here in 43:18, they think that this silver is a means God is using to punish them. But now in v.23, they come to realise that it's a genuine gift.

There are things in your life that you may fear are God's punishment. But remember, as we said last week, God doesn't punish you who trust Him. Jesus took all the punishment due to you on the cross. So many of the things we fear as God's wrath are actually His gift to us, although we can't see it until it's unveiled as such.

This is pretty much a summary of the whole Joseph story. The circumstances that people go through that look and feel like God's displeasure or absence are actually turned over and unveiled as God's purposeful, transformative gift to us, to bring about His saving purposes amongst us and those around us.

The *relief* that the brothers feel when they realise that they are not going to be punished is just the first of *many* blessings. Next comes the *reunion* with Simeon, also in v.23. The family that was split apart is brought back together, almost completely. Eleven brothers have no idea that the twelfth one is right there with them. And dad is yet to be with them. But the reunion of people - that is starting to come together in this cascade of blessing.

Then there's *refreshment* in v.24. These tired, dusty travellers are provided for in simple, physical ways. Water to get their feet washed. Fodder for their donkeys. Little things that feel like the best thing in the world, like when you gulp back just a mouthful of water after a bit of hard graft. All of this is provided for the brothers for their welfare.

And that's the next thing: as Joseph himself meets the brothers in vv.26-28, he *enquires about their welfare*. 'How are you? How's your dad (really, of course, he's asking how *his own* dad is doing...)' This is yet another surprise for the brothers, because it's not how they expected to be treated.

Last time Joseph engaged with them in chapter 42, he was firm, harsh, confrontational. He was purposefully shaking them up, bringing them to a point of humility, confession and change. Now, as the brothers come before him, it's hospitality, friendship and peace that Joseph holds out.

The Hebrew word in v.27 that's translated as 'he asked them how they were' is *shalom*. Those of you in Life Groups will have come across that word, *shalom*, in the Fruitfulness on the Frontline course. It means peace - not just in a 'peace and quiet' sort of way, or in a 'let's not be enemies' kind of way - but wholeness and welfare in its broadest sense.

Joseph's interested in the whole welfare of his brothers. God's interested in the whole welfare of you and me, and this church, and this community, this city, this nation, this world. It includes forgiveness, the relief of guilt (the word *shalom* is used back in v.23 as well, where the attendant says, 'It's all right... Do not be afraid...'; the Hebrew is 'have *shalom*'). And it includes refreshment. And reunion. God wants us to know that our *shalom* is the reason for all that He's doing in and around and through you.

Finally, and most astonishingly, in vv.32-34, the brothers are blessed with a *feast*. Put yourselves in the brothers' shoes. They must be thinking, 'Why is this man laying on a feast for us?' They think the man doesn't know them, and that his first impression of them, he didn't like.

Even if the brothers realised that this was Joseph (and the smart ones might start to wonder, since this host of the feast knew how to arrange them at the table in age order), the same question would emerge: 'Why is he laying on a feast for us?' This man whom we betrayed, left for dead, wrote off as no longer part of our lives - he's putting on a spread at his expense for *us*?

It's lavish love, pure and simple. This, again, is how God treats us. Jesus used stories about a feast set for those that God adopts into His family. He talked about life in eternity like there would be wine flowing and tables bursting with food, all laid on by God. He made it sound like the life to come is the party that's going to make everything before it look lame.

There are so many parallels between this story and the parable of the lost son that Jesus tells to describe God's welcome to us. The brothers, like the son, get shaken up by their life experience to the point of realising they are sinners and they need to change path. Joseph, 'sees the brothers coming' and orders a feast for them in v.16, just as the father in Jesus' story does for his son.

The brothers, like the son, arrive expecting to have to grovel. Instead they are met with an incredible, inexplicable, 'I'm-just-so-pleased-you're-back-with-me' feast. This is how God feels about you coming home to Him.

*Why does God welcome you to a feast with Him?*

Do you just taken it for granted that He does, before moaning about the things God *doesn't* do for you? Are you parked in the sulky, entitled, self-focused malaise that sums up our millennial generation, but has actually always been at heart the human problem of sin?

God doesn't have to welcome you. But He wants to, because He wants you! Do you think God doesn't know who you are? Do you think His first impression of you means He doesn't want you near Him? Do you think that Jesus, whom we as humans betrayed, left for dead, and wrote off as no longer part of our lives, wants you to stay away? No. He *loves* you, and there is a feast that He's got ready with a place name written for you, once you've been through the shake up that leads to the make up with Him.

We've been looking at this passage from the brothers' perspective this morning. Let's finish with a little look through Joseph's eyes. In the last chapter, Joseph set about a plan to bring change, healing and reconciliation, all in good time. And now his emotions flow as he sees it working.

As he sees his brothers returning in v.16, he is inspired to celebrate with a feast. Joseph is joyful and ready to bless. Then, in vv.29-30, he is moved to tears by the reunion he has with his full brother, Benjamin, the other son of Joseph's mother. It is a deeply moving thing for Joseph to be together again with him. Joseph is emotional and ready to cry.

But Joseph is also composed, and ready to see his plan through. He doesn't give away his identity or his tears - not yet. There's a little bit more testing to be done of these brothers. They've passed the test we talked about last week about Simeon - they didn't leave him for dead as they once left Joseph for dead. But what about Benjamin, the one who is clearly favoured now that Joseph is apparently gone? Will they treat him like they did Joseph?

In v.34, Benjamin gets five times the portion of the others. He's being deliberately favoured, and the brothers are having their faces rubbed in it. Joseph's setting everything up to see if the brothers have really been changed by confessing their sin and changing direction in life.

We're going to skip on to chapter 45 next week, so I'll just tell you what happens in chapter 44. Joseph frames Benjamin for stealing a silver cup, demands that Benjamin remain as a slave, and sets the other brothers free. He gives them every opportunity to walk away and leave the brother they might have been jealous of for dead, as once they would have done.

But this time, it goes down differently. Judah steps up once again. He fulfills his vow to keep the lad safe. He pleads and pleads with Joseph for his father's sake. And he offers his life in place of Benjamin's; he'll stay as the slave, so that Benjamin may go free.

The brothers really are transformed people now. By the end of chapter 44, Joseph will know it, and they will know it, and the big reveal and reunion that this whole story has been heading towards can happen. But where we are in chapter 43, Joseph hasn't got there yet. He stays composed, he sees the plan through, for the fullest *shalom* possible for all concerned.

And all of this reminds us this about our God. He's not unemotional. He's overjoyed to see you turning around from having your back to Him, heading His way after the shake up that brought you to your knees. He's moved to tears to have you back in His presence.

But He is completely composed to see through the plan that He is outworking in your life to do everything needful to bring about the greatest *shalom* for you at the end of the story; however confusing and painful it seems right now.

Just remember, at the end of the story, there's a reunion. At the end of the story, there's a feast. God will bring you home to it, if you'll trust Him to do it His way.