

Sermon: Genesis 42-45

I don't know if you've been watching the TV Series "Death in Paradise" over the last couple of months. Me and Phil have really been enjoying it. The final episode of the series was on TV a couple of weeks ago, and during that episode one of the characters says, "No-one can escape their past, can they?" then they stare into middle-distance, and there's a pause and some dramatic music.

But that idea, that no-one can escape their past, is a common one, isn't it: How many films have you seen where one of the main characters has some hidden secret, and during the course of the film they somehow deal with it and find redemption? It's almost become a cliché!

I wonder if you identify with that feeling tonight. Maybe some sin in your past which you still feel trapped by. Maybe some mistake that you've made. Maybe an event that happened which you had no control over. Maybe you feel like your life is spiralling out of control. Our past affects all of us.

Well, I hope that the story of Joseph and his brothers will speak to us tonight and let us know that our past does not control us.

It's a fairly long passage – four chapters – so instead of having a reading to start with I'm going to try and tell the story as we go along. One of the challenges when preaching on the story of Joseph is not breaking into songs from Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat"! So I'll try not to do that tonight, that wouldn't be good for any of us.

So, as we come into chapter 42 of Genesis, as predicted at the end of last week's passage, a famine has come over the land and Jacob and his sons are starting to feel hungry. So Jacob says, "[I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die.](#)" (v2)

So, ten of Joseph's brothers go down to Egypt – but Benjamin stays behind, because Jacob is worried that something might happen to him. Even though this is about 20 years after Joseph was sold to the Egyptians, Jacob is still mourning the loss of Joseph.

And when they reach Egypt, the brothers come face to face with Joseph, and Joseph recognises them. He "[pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them](#)" (v7) – he accuses them of being spies and throws them in jail for three days! Now at this point I wonder whether Joseph is actually doing to his brothers what they originally did to him, but as we'll see later in the story there's more going on.

And Joseph tells his brothers he will keep one of them in prison for security, and then they must come back with the other brother so that they may verify their words. But look down at v18 – Joseph says, "[Do this and you will live, for I fear God](#)". He's not being unreasonably harsh; he's seen here to be sympathetic and fair. See again in v24 – he begins to weep! But then he puts Simeon in prison and sends the others back to Canaan.

So, at the end of chapter 42 we see Joseph's brothers returning to Jacob, and in a scene which is almost a replay of the one where they had to tell Jacob that Joseph was dead, they have to tell Jacob

that Simeon is missing. Jacob says “You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!” (v36)

Now, I know we’ve skipped fairly quickly through the story so far, but let’s just stop for a moment to take stock. At this point in the story, all of the main characters are trapped by their past sin: Jacob is trapped because of his grief over Joseph. He cannot bear to let Benjamin go. The brothers are trapped because they can’t tell their father about their sin: if they could tell him they could maybe reassure him. And Joseph is trapped because he doesn’t know whether he can trust his brothers: he doesn’t know whether they still hate him, or whether their hearts have changed.

I wonder if you can identify with any of those characters? Is there something from your past which has you trapped in its power? Something which someone did to you, or some sin which you’ve committed against someone else? Keep that in mind as we continue this story.

So this is the situation we’re in at the start of Chapter 43. But the family in Canaan are beginning to run out of food again, so eventually Jacob says to his sons, “Go back and buy us a little more food” (v2). He reluctantly agrees to let them take Benjamin with him, but only after Judah says “I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him” (v9). Now that’s interesting: if you flip back just a few chapters to Genesis 37:26, you’ll see that *Judah* was the one who initially proposed selling Joseph. It’s a definite change of heart, isn’t it?

So Joseph’s brothers – all eleven of them this time – arrive in Egypt, and Joseph sees them and tells his servant to bring them to his house for a meal. In the meantime, Joseph’s brothers are worried about the silver which they found in their sacks on the way back home the previous time. So they speak to Joseph’s steward and ask him about it. But the steward says to them: “Don’t be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver.” (v23) Here, even an Egyptian – someone who wasn’t part of the covenant God gave to Abraham – is portrayed as having more of a clue of what is going on than they do!

So, the brothers are reassured, and they eat with Joseph – but still they don’t recognise him. Then, as we come to the beginning of chapter 44, the brothers head off home with their grain. And once again Joseph orders that their silver be given back – but he also orders that his silver cup be placed into Benjamin’s sack, and then once they’ve gone he orders his steward to chase after them and accuse them of stealing.

Now at this point, you might be thinking: “Why on earth does Joseph do this? Is he being capricious and unfair? Is he doing this for the sake of getting his own back on his brothers?” I don’t think that’s the case at all.

Look down at 44:10. Joseph’s steward says to the brothers, “Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame.” What Joseph is doing here is giving the brothers an opportunity to do pretty much *exactly what they’d done to Joseph* all those years ago. If they hated Benjamin, as they hated Joseph, they could just let him be taken into slavery. But if they’d changed, they wouldn’t let him be taken away like that.

And they had changed: look down at verse 16. Judah – notice, Judah again – says, “What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants’ guilt. We are now my lord’s slaves – we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup.” But in the next verse

Joseph says: “Far be it from me to do such a thing! Only the man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace.”

Joseph is piling on the pressure for them to leave Benjamin and walk away. It would be easy for the brothers to leave at this point, rather than defy someone powerful in the land of Egypt. But they don't. Instead, Judah makes one of the longest speeches recorded in Genesis. It culminates with him saying, in v33, “please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers.” This is a 100% change of heart, isn't it? Instead of taking the opportunity Joseph gave them to leave Benjamin and get away, Judah takes a massive risk and asks to stay as a slave in Benjamin's place. If ever Joseph needed any evidence that his brothers had changed, this was it.

Well, let's see what happens next as we have chapter 45 read to us.

Reading: Chapter 45

It's really important here to think about what's going on. Joseph's brothers had been weighed down with the guilt of what they'd done to Joseph for years. But, in reconciling with Joseph, they were released from that burden – they were set free from their sin.

Now there are a couple of important things to remember here. Firstly, if you're in a situation tonight where you are burdened by the guilt of something you've done in the past, we need to remember that it is reconciliation with God that sets us free, through Jesus Christ's death on the cross for us.

The apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ”. If we have been reconciled to God, then we are free from the power of guilt. It doesn't need to hold any power over our lives any more. Like Joseph's brothers, we are prisoners who have been set free.

Of course, as well as being reconciled with God, we should also be reconciled with each other. Paul says in Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” But, ultimately, if we believe in Christ, if we have accepted His forgiveness, there is no condemnation for us. We are reconciled with Him.

Secondly, look at what Joseph says in 45:5: “Now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you ... God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

We've seen this all the way through this story, haven't we – how God's hand was guiding even when things didn't look like they were going well. But look at those words: “It was not you who sent me here, but God.” These characters who had previously been trapped, suddenly realise that God had been working all along. They realise that the very thing which has trapped them is the very thing which God has used to bring them life.

So if you're sitting there, thinking about something in your past which has trapped you, take heart. If you've made a big mistake in the past, or if something bad has happened, don't think that puts you out of God's control. God doesn't promise, as he did in this story, to use the very thing which has

gone wrong to save us in the end! – but he does promise, in Romans 8:28, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Over the past couple of weeks I’ve been reading through Jim Packer’s book “Knowing God”. It’s a classic Christian book, I’m nearly finished and I can thoroughly recommend it! In one chapter he talks about God’s love, and one thing he said really struck me:

“... so far as [the Christian] is concerned, God is love to him – holy, omnipotent love – at every moment and in every event of every day’s life. Even when he cannot see the why and the wherefore of God’s dealings, he knows that there is love in and behind them, and so he can rejoice always, even when, humanly speaking, things are going wrong. He knows that the true story of life, when known, will prove to be, as the hymn says, ‘mercy from first to last’ – and he is content.”

Now I think for many of us this won’t be any easy thing to accept or to believe. But we must trust that in God, when we can see the whole picture, the story of our lives will read: “mercy from first to last”.

So if there’s something in your past which you feel you need to rectify, then I would encourage you to make steps towards that tonight. But, remember that these things are not outside of God’s control, we cannot surprise God! – and we can trust in him to give us the strength to do what needs to be done.

So tonight we need to ask ourselves two questions: are we reconciled with God? Are we free from the guilt of sin which we’ve committed?

And if we are living with the consequences of our past, do we trust God to use it and help us move forward?

What I’d like us to do now is just spend a few moments thinking about our lives, our pasts, and how God has worked in them. Why don’t we take a minute just to reflect on Joseph’s words in 45:5-7 and how that applies to our own situations.