

Resisting Reconciliation

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[0 : 0 0] Father, your word is a lamp for our feet and a light on our path. Please work in us tonight through your word and lead us to you. Amen. Well, do you ever feel like you make the same mistake over and over?

When I did this at school, that is make the same mistake a lot, a friend would say, Jeff, my dad says that only a donkey makes the same mistake twice. And so if Leon's dad is right, I'm thoroughly convinced that I am a donkey.

Lots of mistakes that I make repeatedly are pretty trivial. For example, hitting my head on a doorframe. But some mistakes, you might agree, that I used to make are a little bit more serious.

You might feel the same way. When I was growing up, I had a pretty tense relationship with one of my brothers. He would tease and I would lash out. Big brothers, right? We would fight and sometimes make up.

Seems pretty normal for siblings. But the frustrating thing is that this issue didn't go away when we grew up. Even in our late teens and early 20s, there's still lots of tension and fighting.

[1 : 1 6] One time that I remember quite well, we were both around 20. He'd been overseas for about a year. And we had an argument about something unimportant.

And I told him, I wish you never came home. It's a pretty low point in my life. Sometimes it can feel really frustrating when we make the same mistake as though we're caught in a loop.

At these times, as a Christian, I'm tempted to ask, where are you, God? What are you doing? And as I reflected on tonight's passage, Genesis 43 and 44, I wanted to ask this question.

What is happening? What are you doing, God? How can this be the right way? Well, as we look at it, what I hope we'll see is God working and bringing this sinful and dysfunctional family along a road to reconciliation and even to blessing.

The passage is really long. Helen didn't read it all. And so instead of reading big chunks, I'm mostly going to summarize and give references along the way. So make sure you've got your eyes in the Bible and your outline with you too.

[2 : 3 9] Verse 1 sets the scene with a reminder of what's happening in the story. The famine was still severe in the land. Food is scarce and Joseph is the only supermarket that's still in business.

The family's food has run out and Jacob wants to send the boys down the road for a little more. This probably means it's been quite a while since the end of chapter 42. Jacob seems to think that heading down to Egypt to get some more grain is a little bit like walking up the shop for a coffee.

But Judah and the brothers haven't forgotten what happened in Egypt. In verse 3, Judah gives his father an ultimatum. He says, Judah gives Jacob no option.

He says in verse 8 that if Ben doesn't come along, you and we and our children will all die. It seems like Jacob has no option.

And so he sends Ben along with them. And you know, I find this a little interesting. And while it would be foolish for Jacob to say no in this situation, let's just remember his attitude at the end of the previous passage.

[3 : 54] And Daniel really hopefully read it for us before. He said, This is all your fault. Everything is against me. Even in verse 6 in chapter 43, he said he blames his sons again.

Why did you tell him? Before he was utterly unwilling to help. But not now. He certainly hasn't backflipped in his attitude entirely.

He's still reluctant for Benjamin to go along. But now he's willing. And although this is only a small change, it's still a change. And for the good. In verse 14, he even prays for them.

It's clearly still the same Jacob. Still unkind. Still playing favourites. Still blaming. But there's an element of change.

A glimpse of how God is working in Jacob to bring about reconciliation and blessing. Well, these slight but noticeable changes continue as the brothers head down to Egypt with Jacob.

[4 : 58] Oh, sorry, with Benjamin in tow. In this next scene, the brothers meet the man from Egypt again. And while some things happen that are pretty odd, the whole experience is much more pleasant than last time.

As they begin their journey, I wonder what they would be thinking. What will happen this time? How will this man treat us? Will he release Simeon? Will he care at all that Ben is with us?

We don't have long to wait. They hurry down and they present themselves to Joseph. And with no word of greeting, the man says, come over to my place for lunch.

What? Can this be a good thing? Away from prying eyes? No accountability? What's he going to do to us? And you can imagine they'd feel this way after what happened last time, false accusations and imprisonment.

And so what they do in verse 18 is they try and explain their way out of it. They say all the things that happen. Oh, no, no, no, don't worry about it. When I read this, I imagine myself as a kid desperately trying to tell mom or a teacher all the details of the story so I don't get in trouble.

[6 : 11] Can you remember doing that? That's what they're doing. How would you be feeling if it was you? It might feel like nothing has changed. It might feel like that prayer dad left us with didn't get through.

But their concerns evaporate when Joseph's steward speaks to them. Take a look at verse 23. He says, it's all right. Don't be afraid.

Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks. For the second time in Egypt, the brothers have encountered someone speaking about their God.

The steward says, this is the work of your God. He gave you this treasure. Don't be afraid. What a fascinating comment. And even though the brothers don't really respond here, it begins to show us that God is the one working in this situation to bring about his promise fulfillment.

Then what happens? He released Simeon. He gave them water. He cared for their donkeys. And he brought them to Joseph's house. This really is a different experience than last time.

[7 : 26] After this, this is where we really begin to see change brought about by God. They enter the house and Joseph arrives home.

They present their gifts and fall down before him. At first, Joseph just begins with some small talk. How's your father? Is he still alive?

It's pretty odd. But they still reply. And then he turns to Benjamin. Now, as far as they know, Joseph is a total stranger.

Joseph says, is this your younger brother? And before they respond, Joseph continues as though he already knows. Isn't that strange?

But what's even more strange is what follows. Now, keep in mind, as we look at this, Joseph's memory of the issues in his family.

[8 : 25] His brothers, back in chapter 37, they didn't like him. They were jealous because he was the favorite. They were angry at him. That's why he's in Egypt.

When Joseph sees Benjamin, he blesses him. He says, God, be gracious to you. That's not the harsh language that we received when we were in Egypt last time.

And then, when he served them all dinner, he gives Benjamin five times as much as the rest of them. Like, it's great that we got a meal instead of prison.

But what's so special about Benjamin? It's like this guy is playing favorites just like our old man. Me and two of my siblings, there are three in total, four in total, three siblings.

Me and two of my siblings like to joke that the other is our parents' favorite. He's the smart one. Ultra godly.

[9 : 34] He lives the closest to them. And they don't ask for babysitting too much, but just enough. This is a big joke to me and my brother and sister.

But just imagine if my parents actually treated us differently because of this. Here the brothers get another dose of what they've copped their whole life.

And how do they respond? Did you see at the end of the chapter? Not negatively at all. In the past, chapter 37, they couldn't even speak a kind word to Joseph.

And now when Benjamin, the other favorite, is being treated as a favorite by this stranger, how do they respond? They eat and drink freely.

I think these are changed people. The tensions and dysfunctions in their relationship seem to have gone.

[10 : 36] God has been working in their lives. In the past, they would have seen this and said, typical. The favorite gets the best again.

But in this almost nothing response, we see in the most subtle way how God is working to change them and bring them toward reconciliation and the blessing he promised.

Well, chapter 43 ends on a bit of a high note, doesn't it? The brothers are happy. The brothers are happy. And although they still don't know who this man is, they eat and drink freely with him.

And there's no record of any upset or bitterness which has been characteristic of their relationship in the past. They leave Joseph at the start of 44 and the journey seems like a total success, doesn't it?

They're treated like guests. They get all the food they came for and more. Verse 1. They even get it for free. And they're returning back to their father with both Benjamin and Simeon.

[11 : 43] Hallelujah. But then everything takes a left turn, doesn't it? That's right. A left turn. Listen to what Joseph does in verse 44, chapter 44, verse 1.

Have a look. Now, Joseph gave these instructions to the steward of the house. Fill the men's sacks with as much food as they can carry and put each man's silver in the mouth of his sack.

And then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's sack along with the silver for his grain. And he did as Joseph said.

Okay. It doesn't sound too bad. Maybe he's giving Benjamin a gift. He did like him. Wouldn't be too surprising from what we've seen. But after this, Joseph instructs his steward to chase them down and accuse them of stealing this silver cup.

What? The brothers are totally shocked. Like, we are. They say there's no chance of that. In fact, they're so confident that none of them have done this wrong thing that they boldly say, if you can find it in any of our bags, you can enslave us all and kill the one who did it.

[13 : 02] Have you ever been super confident like that but wrong? I am very familiar. The steward agrees and he searches their sacks and he finds it in Benjamin's.

They tear their clothes and they go back to Joseph with their tails between their legs. Now, while this is clearly a strange move from Joseph, what I find really interesting among the brothers is that nothing negative is said about Benjamin.

As far as they know, he's the one who brought this trouble on them. In the past, their treatment of Joseph was downright evil, wasn't it?

But here, they don't even, they don't strike a deal to save themselves. They don't even point the finger with him. They don't do that. Something has changed in this family.

And so the brothers are brought to Joseph. They fall down before him and they offer themselves as Joseph's slaves. This trip has not gone like it should have.

[14 : 12] And in this moment of sadness and stress, Joseph makes them an offer. Despite what the brothers know or think, Joseph knows them, doesn't he?

He knows firsthand what his brothers are capable of. And so he makes them an offer. Verse 17, he says, Joseph's past experience would tell them that they would take this offer.

They don't like the sons of Rachel, do they? That is Joseph and Benjamin. Surely, surely they'll save themselves and get rid of this one who caused their problem.

He's a nuisance anyway. But no. In verse 18, chapter 44, Judah comes forward and he speaks with Joseph.

He retells all that has happened, including the emotional state of his family. He explains how his father's life is tied up with the life of his young brother.

[15 : 18] He mentions the death of the beloved son of his father, that is Joseph, and how the disappearance of this second son, him becoming slave, would just be too much.

Can you imagine how Joseph's feelings would be welling up as he hears this? And then something which would have been the biggest surprise for Joseph.

Judah offers himself in Benjamin's place. Have a look. Verse 33 of chapter 44. These are not the people they once were, are they?

They were totally evil, ready to kill Joseph because of jealousy, and still they sold him into slavery. And now years later, even though their father is still playing favorites, Judah is willing to sacrifice himself for Benjamin.

A significant change has taken place, hasn't it? I reckon if this was a movie, Benjamin would suffer, Jacob would die, and the brothers would be free, wouldn't they?

[16 : 45] But that's not how God works. All this time, God has been at work in these brothers bringing about real change. And it hasn't been sudden change, has it?

It wasn't overnight. It wasn't a week, a month, even a year. It's been like 15 years. But God has been working and bringing them along this road to reconciliation and his promised blessing.

So how do we think about this bizarre passage for ourselves? I think there are a few things that we should consider there on your outline.

Firstly, God is not doing nothing. One of the challenges of these chapters is that there's no ending. Did you notice that?

Yes, the conclusion is coming in the very next verse. But the story as it unfolds in these chapters leaves you on edge, doesn't it? Please don't take our brother. End credits.

[17 : 49] It would be like seeing half of the universe get killed and then the movie ends. How frustrating. But I wonder if there's actually something helpful in this leftover tension.

What could be helpful about this? In our Christian lives, while we know God is at work making us like Christ, often in the days and weeks, it feels like nothing has changed.

Church and Bible study are great. We hear the word. We're encouraged and spurred on. But then tomorrow comes and I'm the same old me still making the same old mistakes, especially when I'm away from accountability.

When we read this passage, while it seems as though there has been no change, after a closer look, we see that God is working.

He is bringing these seemingly unchanged people back together for an overdue reconciliation and promised blessing. And we'll see more of that next week.

[18 : 58] So what's the comfort in this? It may seem like God's doing nothing, but he's not. He's not doing nothing.

We watch this family over 15 years. 15 years ago.

15 years ago. I had a very tense relationship with my brother. In the weeks and months, it felt like it would never change.

And to be honest, at times, I didn't want it to. I realize now that over the years, as God was drawing me closer to himself, he enabled me to change my feelings about my brother.

This passage teaches the Christian to say, God is working. He is changing me. He is bringing me to his promised blessing.

[20 : 07] Toward Christ and heaven. The New Testament has a word for this. It's sanctification. It means God is making Christians a process.

It's a process like Christ. He's equipping. He's strengthening us by his spirit to live according to what he has made us by Christ's blood. So take comfort.

Take comfort in light of this. God is not doing nothing. He's actually doing a great deal. But he's working in his timing.

Secondly, we should consider how God works. The change that God brings about in this family is according to God's will, not theirs.

I wonder if there's a temptation to think, because of what we've seen in this passage, that God will definitely bring about a change to what I desperately want to change.

[21 : 08] I don't think this is about that. The story and passage is primarily about how God works for his purpose and glory, which will be for the good of those who love him.

But the change that God is bringing about in our lives may not necessarily be what I want right now.

Our human nature is sinful, isn't it? Our desires are often selfish. And so part of the way that God is changing and transforming us is having us learn to seek and desire what is in line with his will rather than ours.

And these lessons can be hard. So what should we do? We should seek Christ like change. God is working to bring about change, which is for our good.

So we should be actively seeking this. Paul's command to the Romans in chapter 12 is do not conform. Be transformed.

[22 : 18] Actively seek to become like Christ. Then we will know and live according to God's will. God who is working in us, changing even sinful people to be like Christ as he brings us to heaven.

How about I pray about this? Will you join me? Heavenly Father, thank you for this passage and for the chance to reflect on it.

Thanks that you're faithful to your promises and that you're bringing your children the blessing that you have promised us in Christ. Amen.