

LESSONS IN BROTHERLY LOVE

by Steve Zeisler

Later this year my high school class will celebrate its twentieth reunion. As I thought about that last week I was struck by the fact that Joseph, the man whose life we are presently looking at in this series of messages, was in almost exactly the same place in life as I find myself now. Joseph left home at 17. So did I. I left home to attend college, but Joseph entered the school of hard knocks, having been sold into slavery in Egypt. About the time when teenagers make a break from their families and strike out to gain their freedom, Joseph found himself more restricted than ever, serving as a slave in the household of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard. After serving 13 years in that role, however, Joseph was elevated, almost overnight, to the second highest political appointment in the civilized world. He became the right-hand man of Pharaoh, appointed to manage the economy of Egypt during a seven-year cycle of abundance which would precede a seven-year period of famine.

So Joseph has been away from home for just over 20 years--13 years as a slave and seven years-plus as the head man of the economy of Egypt. And, as we will discover in our text this morning, after 20 years had gone by, Joseph finally met with his family again. It was a 20-year reunion that none of them, not even in their wildest dreams, could have anticipated. Reunions are a time for examination and reflection, a time when people take stock of themselves and others. They are a time for people to evaluate what has become of themselves and their school friends, to see what values are important to them and what motivated them to pursue their interests. That kind of examination is certainly at the forefront of Joseph's 20-year reunion with his family.

This is a time in our history as a nation when we seem to be focused on failed leadership. The Congress is examining the Executive branch of government, while would-be Presidents are coming under the microscope of the media. Spiritual leaders are not immune to the malaise of failure either. We are daily served up an account of some religious leader's failings. This questioning of our leaders is turning up some hard answers, but these answers remind Christians of the great biblical doctrine that God is in the business of making failed people into new creations. Those who come to genuine repentance discover that God can make them into what they thought was impossible for them. Failure is not always inevitable; those who have lived selfish, rebellious lives can be changed.

Christians should proclaim this great doctrine at a time when people all around us are seeking answers to the questions being raised today. The wisdom of the world says that our future is determined by our genes, in concert with our environment and other things, and that we cannot change it. But Christians can refute that error by showing that God is the great invader who enters into people's lives and makes them new again. What a wonderful truth we have to share in these needy times!

Scripture also speaks, however, of a fake repentance, an imitation religion which claims renewal but lacks evidence of renewal. We need to be wary of religion that changes only surface things and makes no permanent change in the heart.

In our study on the life of Joseph this morning we have a platform for examining the biblical doctrine that ordinary men and women can be changed, that we are not doomed to live in the old ways forever. The lives of Joseph's brothers, Ruben and Judah, give us proof of that. And secondly, we will see how important it is that renewal must begin in the heart; it is not a surface thing. We will begin our examination with the 20-year reunion of Joseph's family in Egypt. The famine which Joseph had foretold was coming was now ravaging the land. But the Egyptians, thanks to Joseph, were prepared. Genesis 41:57:

And the people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine

was severe in all the earth. Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, "Why are you staring at one another?"

What a great line that is! The very mention of Egypt strikes fear into the hearts of Joseph's brothers. It brings back memories of their wickedness and moral failure.

And [Jacob] said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die." Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt. But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "I am afraid that harm may befall him."

Jacob apparently knew that he would be putting the son of Rachel in danger if he allowed him to accompany his brothers on this mission. Years earlier he had sent his favorite son Joseph to his brothers while they were tending the family flocks, and he had reportedly been killed by a wild animal. Since then Jacob had been loath to entrust his youngest son to the care of his brothers.

So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also. Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly. And he said to them, "Where have you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." But Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him. And Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them, and said to them, "You are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land." Then they said to him, "No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies."

To Joseph's utter amazement, some 20 years after his graduation to the school of hard knocks, who should appear before him but his own brothers, the very ones who had sold him down the river. What a way to begin a 20-year reunion! Joseph had become a changed man during that time. The years spent in slavery and in prison in Egypt had tempered the arrogance and vanity which had been typical of him as an adolescent. He had become a humble man, even though by now he occupied the second highest position in the land. How he must have wondered about these brothers who were now prostrate before him. God had been active in his life, of that there was no doubt. Had his brothers likewise been changed? Or were they still the tough bandits who struck fear into the hearts of all who crossed their path? Perhaps these are some of the questions that came to Joseph's mind at this reunion.

Then he remembered that as a young man he had dreamed that he and his brothers were binding sheaves in a field, and his sheaf rose up and stood erect, while their sheaves gathered around and bowed down to his. How they had hated him for this dream, and how they had hated his tone of voice as he related the dream to them. Joseph knew that one day that dream would be realized, but how could he have imagined that it would be realized in this way?

When he first had the dream Joseph was the smug, vain, favorite son of Jacob. Dressed in his varicolored tunic, he watched his older brothers squirm as he told them about the dream. But when the dream was finally realized, Joseph was not wearing his robe of many colors. It had long since been dyed red by the blood of an animal and produced before his father as proof that he had been killed by a wild animal. On the day when he met with his brothers after all those years, Joseph was wearing the robes of a high Egyptian official. When the dream was realized, he was not even speaking in his own language, but was conversing through an interpreter in the tongue of the Egyptians. When the dream was realized, Joseph's brothers were not honoring him as they bowed before him, but paying homage to Pharaoh, whom he represented.

What had God been doing in their lives? he must have wondered. Had they changed too, as he had? They claimed they were honest, but were they? Joseph here makes a tactical maneuver, and accuses his brothers of spying on Egypt. No, they protest, they are ten honest men, the sons of one father, come to buy food to feed themselves. They are telling the truth, of course. But Joseph remembers his earlier dealings with them; their heartlessness in abandoning him in a pit while they debated how they would kill him. He is determined to discover the truth--why they had come to Egypt, and what they were up to. He must have wondered why Benjamin was not with them. Was it still dangerous for a son of Rachel to travel with his older brothers? Had nothing changed during those 20 years?

Joseph determined to find out. He put the ten brothers in prison for three days. That would strike fear into them and help loosen their tongues. We pick up the story again in verse 18.

Now Joseph said to them on the third day, "Do this and live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die." And they did so. Then they said to one another, "Truly, we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us." And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood." They did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them. And he turned away from them and wept. But when he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. Then Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain and to restore every man's money in his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. And thus it was done for them. So they loaded their donkeys with their grain, and departed from there. And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money; and behold, it was in the mouth of his sack. Then he said to his brothers, "My money has been returned, and behold, it is even in my sack." And their hearts sank, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?"

Joseph has no interest in taking revenge on his brothers for their past misdeeds. He longs, in fact, for evidence of change in their lives. Repentance and restoration, not revenge, were what he sought. As he overhears their recriminations about their treatment of him, he realizes that some of them, at least, are sorry for what they did to him. This brings a gush of tears to his eyes.

At this point it seems there is no need for further examination of the brothers' reason for coming to Egypt. Joseph has overheard their conversation. We could well ask, therefore, why not skip ahead to chapter 45 and read about their joyful reunion, when Joseph at last reveals his true identity to his brothers? Why does Joseph insist on a further examination of their motives? There is a very good reason for it, as we will see. Repentance is more than mere words. If life-giving renewal and restoration do not follow, then there was no true repentance to begin with. That is why Joseph determines to test his brothers: to see if they had indeed truly repented for their past actions.

Joseph begins by telling them that he fears the God of Abraham. That should have tipped them off that something more significant than they imagined was going on. Then he expresses an interest in their youngest brother who had remained at home. That probably made them wonder afresh why the sons of Rachel were so talked about. Joseph then orders that the money which they had paid for the grain be put in their sacks, thereby placing them in a quandary when they discover that later. Simeon, the most hardened of the brothers, was then bound and separated from his brothers. He would be kept behind.

Joseph had posed a moral quandary for his brothers. Twenty years earlier they had abandoned one of their own; now they had an opportunity to abandon yet another one of their brothers, one who was probably the least popular among them. They could return to Canaan laden with the grain they had set out to buy, together with the money they had set aside to buy it, minus the cruel Simeon whom they probably were glad to be rid of. It would be easy to convince Jacob that Simeon had come to some grave end. If the brothers had indeed

changed during the intervening years, here was their opportunity to prove that their repentance went beyond words. Joseph needed to know that they had been renewed too. How would they respond when they opened their grain sacks and found their money inside? What story would they tell their father this time? That is what Joseph intended to discover when he posed this dilemma for his brothers. Had they truly repented and were they changed men?

That is the critical question facing the church today. Do our actions match our words? One area I am certain I have grown in as a pastor is my ability to not believe everything people tell me. When I first entered the ministry I believed just about everything I heard. When people said to me, "I've quit drinking," or, "I will never beat my wife again," or, "I've really changed," I believed them. But I have learned through the years to wait and see have they indeed changed; to see if they are truly expressing the desires of their hearts when they say they want to change. I have seen too many families suffer misery because of sinful behavior, and listened to their tearful promises that things would change in the future, only to see the cycle repeated again and again. Joseph likewise remained to be convinced of his brothers' true repentance. That is why he acted as he did toward them. Time would tell the tale.

Secondly, we should recognize from this account that people will frequently say they are sorry for what they have done, but only when they are faced with the consequences of their sin. The consequences, not the sin, causes the tears to flow. Joseph's brothers were facing, they believed, a tough Egyptian taskmaster who didn't believe their story. To convince them of his seriousness he threw them in prison for three days--a softening process--and then demanded that they bring their youngest brother before him to prove their words. Was this the reason they suddenly began to express their remorse for how they had treated Joseph 20 years earlier? Had the consequences finally caught up with them? If so, then theirs was not true repentance.

The acid test of true repentance is, when one is no longer forced to pay for his sins, when the consequences are ameliorated, does sorrow for the sin still exist? Do we hate our sin because it is an affront to God? Do we genuinely desire to see sin as God sees it, and to agree with what he says about it? As he listened to their conversation, Joseph must have wondered if this was how his brothers felt about their past behavior. Had God brought about true change in their lives?

We would do well to ask ourselves if we truly hate sin or do we merely dislike it when we are faced with the consequences of it. I know that I have deceived myself many times in this area. We must all ask hard questions of ourselves with regard to our motives. Take our thought life, for instance. If we secretly admire sinners, and wish we could act like them, then it may be that we do not hate sin as much as we think. It's critically important to ask these questions of ourselves.

Joseph determined to find out how his brothers would answer those questions.

Now it came about as they were emptying their sacks, that behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed. And their father Jacob said to them, "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin; all these things are against me." Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, "You may put my two sons to death if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my care, and I will return him to you." But Jacob said, "My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow." Now the famine was severe in the land. So it came about when they had finished eating the grain which they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, "Go back, buy us a little food." Judah spoke to him, however, saying, "The man solemnly warned us, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' If you send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. But if you do not send him, we will not go down; for the man said to us, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.'" Then Israel said, "Why did you treat me so badly by telling the man whether you still had another brother?" But they said, "The man questioned particularly about us and our relatives, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' So we answered his questions. Could we possibly know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down?'" And

Judah said to his father Israel, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, we as well as you and our little ones. I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame before you forever. For if we had not delayed, surely by now we could have returned twice."

Jacob's words to his sons, "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin," must have burned the already awakened consciences of these men. His words were truer than he knew. He had already lost Joseph forever. Simeon was now in the hands of the Egyptians, and they were demanding that his youngest son Benjamin be presented before them. Prompted by their awakened conscience, the brothers Reuben and Judah make an offer to their father.

Notice how differently these offers are received. "Kill my children if I do not return with Benjamin," Reuben offers. Jacob refuses this ridiculous gesture. What good would killing two innocent children do if Benjamin failed to return? Reuben would later be described by Jacob as "a man unstable as water." This son was apt to make emotional responses. He did so when they threw Joseph into the pit; when he was questioned by Joseph in Egypt; and again here. He always expresses his feelings, but seldom follows through on what he promises. He is a hand-wringer who doesn't accomplish anything. Reuben resembles many Christians. He honestly feels, and he expresses his honest feelings to all who will listen, but he lacks one thing: determination to change, to be different.

But observe, by contrast, Judah as he is revealed in his words in verse 3 of chapter 43. Judah, as we discovered earlier, was a tough, hardnosed man. He had little qualms about picking up prostitutes, about abandoning his daughter-in-law. Yet in chapter 38, when he discovered that it was Tamar, his dead sons' wife, whom he had picked up, he admitted, "She is more righteous than I." He was at last becoming God's man. He may well have been the brother who asked, in 42:28, upon discovering the money in his sack of grain, "What is this that God has done to us?" His conscience had been awakened, so much so that when he told Jacob he would be responsible for his brother Benjamin he refrained from making emotional promises and threats but instead undertook the welfare of his younger brother. Jacob, for his part, was assuaged by the evident conviction of his son's words.

So the brothers returned to Egypt to buy food, taking with them their brother Benjamin, as Joseph had commanded them. They were justifiably nervous about their return. They assumed they would be regarded as thieves because they had their money returned to them. But Joseph's servant assures them that their accounts are in good standing. Then Joseph himself invites them to dine with him. This makes them doubly nervous. They feel that God is somehow involved in all this, but what exactly he was doing was a mystery to them. The conversation they have with Joseph at the banquet does nothing to enlighten them. They are further mystified that Joseph has arranged it so that they are seated according to birth order, and Benjamin is given five times more food to eat than anyone else. It's the same old story, the older brothers must have surmised; the favorite son routine once more.

Then Joseph turns the screws a little tighter. He wants to find out what is really going on inside his brothers. He sends them back to Canaan, complete with grain and money, but this time he slips his favorite goblet into Benjamin's sack. When they are a few miles into their return journey, an official catches up with them and charges that one of them is a thief. The brothers are horrified when the goblet is discovered in Benjamin's sack. Joseph had heaped favor upon Benjamin at the banquet, and then he had provided an opportunity for his brothers to once more abandon the favorite son of Jacob's favorite wife. What an opportunity to be rid of him forever! Joseph set this up as a final test to see if God truly was working in their lives, if they had truly repented of the past.

In response to the danger confronting Benjamin, Judah, the former tough, makes an impassioned plea to Joseph, setting out the pain his father would suffer if Benjamin were not allowed to return to Canaan. Here is how Judah concludes his speech:

'Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, since his

life is bound up in the lad's life, it will come about when he sees that the lad is not with us that he will die. Thus your servants will bring the gray hair of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow. For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever.' Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me, lest I see the evil that would overtake my father?" Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me." So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

Judah's story is the story of salvation. He was a rebel, a self-centered man who had no interest in spiritual things. But he repented. He learned to be concerned about others and about what God was doing. Eventually he came to the place where he offered his own life for that of his brother. His is the story of a man truly renewed by the Spirit of God. Christians have a magnificent message to offer to the world. Jesus Christ can bring about renewal no matter how hardened and selfish we have become. We are not doomed to live for ourselves forever. We can repent, and we can be changed.

But it is possible to come to a phony repentance. It is possible to repent only in words, without true conviction, without a change of heart. There is a kind of repentance that is brought about only by fear of certain consequences, not by hatred of sin. Joseph forced his brothers to answer the hardest of questions. When they had answered, he felt free to reveal himself with joy. He knew that during the years when God was at work in him, he was also at work in his brothers--at least in the life of Judah. So change is possible, but we need to ask ourselves whether we have allowed God to change us from the inside.

Once again we find in generation after generation of Abraham's family that the Lord God acts to save and restore fallen humanity. What a family! Abraham, the friend of God; Isaac, the lethargic; Jacob, the fearful; Joseph, the golden boy; Judah, the thug. Each of them is made a "new creature in Christ." We, too, can become children of Abraham, but only by means of real repentance and real renewal. Will you be made new by the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Judah?

Our Father, we come to you knowing that we require repentant hearts and spiritual renewal. We would easily settle for less, but we ask that you not permit that. Thank you for the life-giving testimony of Scripture. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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