

TOO GOOD TO BE

by Steve Zeisler

"It's too good to be true," is a piece of folk wisdom we hear on occasion. We warn our children to not accept candy from strangers. It may be a bona fide offer we tell them, but it's probably too good to be true. "There's no such thing as a free lunch," goes another saying along the same lines. There must be a catch to it somewhere. Our skepticism really shows, of course, when we hear of used car bargains. "That's too good to be true," is our usual response. The result of all this skepticism is that we learn quite early in life to be suspect of blessings and benefits that come to us unexpectedly. They're just too good to be true, we reason.

As Christians, we know that the very best news of all, of course, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is one thing that in no way can be described as being too good to be true. Yet we find the good news difficult to believe at times because of the training of a lifetime that teaches us to be skeptical of a free offer, of something that cannot be worked for and earned. Let us keep this in mind this morning as we come to one of the most dramatic scenes in literature, found in the story of Joseph and his brothers in the book of Genesis. What a remarkable, astonishing scene this is! Joseph's brothers are overwhelmed with such good news they find it almost impossible to believe their eyes and ears. We can almost hear them say, "This is too good to be true."

In our last study we discovered that certain remarks by Joseph's brother Judah were given prominence in chapter 44. Judah was the hardhearted, tough individual who used people for his own ends. There was nothing tender about him. But over time this man, whose main interest in life seemed to involve taking care of number one, began to question his priorities. God gradually broke through his hard shell of self-reliance, pointing out to him his failings and where he needed to change. Judah's heart is gradually softened; he begins to think of others rather than himself. He finally starts to trust God, not himself, to accomplish what needed to be done in his life.

We find evidence of this change in Judah's life in the speech we have mentioned which he makes in chapter 44. There he states his willingness to become a hostage and remain on in Egypt in place of his brother Benjamin. Judah's concern for his aged father drives him to offer himself as a sacrifice lest Jacob die of a broken heart. What a change has taken place in the life of this former self-made man!

We pick up the account again following the conclusion of Judah's words. Joseph at last reveals his true identity to his astonished brothers. Genesis 45:

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. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

"Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, 'God has made me lord of all Egypt;

come down to me; do not delay. And you shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children and your flocks and your herds and all that you have. There I will also provide for you, for there are still five years of famine to come, lest you and your household and all that you have be impoverished.' And behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth which is speaking to you. Now you must tell my father of all my splendor in Egypt, and all that you have seen, and you must hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept; and Benjamin wept on his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept on them, and afterward his brothers talked with him. Now when the news was heard in Pharaoh's house that Joseph's brothers had come, it pleased Pharaoh and his servants.

What a marvelous scene this must have been! All of the sons of Jacob were together at last, seated in Pharaoh's opulent palace. Joseph, second only to Pharaoh himself, probably was sitting on a raised throne, surrounded by servants and slaves. Here was the man who had formulated the plan to save the world during the seven years of famine. His word was law; he was feared and respected by all. Joseph's brothers stood before him as beggars. Canaan, the promised land, was unable to feed them, so they came seeking food from this mighty man of Egypt.

They had already encountered this extraordinary figure who was addressing them. Joseph seemed to know quite a lot about them. He asked questions of them that only someone with strange powers could possibly ask. How could he know their ages so that they were all seated according to their years? Was he the one who had arranged for their money to be placed in their sacks, together with the grain they had bought, on their first journey to Egypt? Why would a perfect stranger, a high and mighty Egyptian, do that? Then, on their second journey to Egypt, once more their money was returned to them, only this time they were charged with stealing a silver goblet from Joseph. And now Benjamin stood accused of that crime. But he was innocent; they were sure of that. If anything should happen to him, one thing was certain: their father Jacob would not survive the news of it.

Nothing made sense to these brothers anymore. Why should these mysterious things happen to a bunch of nomadic brothers, nobodies, from Canaan? How Judah's knees must have trembled, his hands sweated, as he pleaded for the life of Benjamin and offered his own in return! Nevertheless he was sure he was doing the right thing. No more was he counting the cost, figuring the angles, cutting the deals to benefit himself. He was trusting the God of his fathers to intercede for his brother Benjamin, and entrusting himself and his future to the same God. Judah had returned to his spiritual roots.

Consider what must have been going through Joseph's mind during this encounter. How his heart must have raced as he tried to gather his thoughts to share his true identity with his brothers! It must have been an extremely emotional time for him. The tears flowed, his voice wavered as he tried to control his emotions. He knew the answers to all the questions his brothers were asking themselves about this encounter. He had wined and dined them in the past, then he had turned the screw a little tighter on them to see how they would respond; to learn if they had truly repented and had indeed changed. He had blessed them by restoring their money to them; then he had frightened them by demanding which one among them was a thief. He had yet to know for certain if they would allow the second son of Rachel, his brother Benjamin, to remain on in Egypt alone. Had times changed, or was being a son of Rachel still the kiss of death in that family?

Joseph's knees must have trembled too as he listened for evidence of change in these violent men, his own brothers, who had mistreated and abandoned him as a teenager. Would they do the same with Benjamin, and leave him to rot in Egypt too? He was as anxious as his brothers, but for a very different reason. Then came Judah's selfless offer: take my life as ransom but release Benjamin; send him back to Canaan so that my father Jacob may not die in loneliness. Joseph listened, his heart pounding, to Judah, the spokesman for the family. How can we express his relief, his joy on discovering that they had indeed changed; that the God of his fathers had invaded their lives and they were truly repentant for what they had done to him. At last he finds they are willing to serve--even to sacrifice--rather than be served. Yes, God had been at work with his brothers. Judah's offer of his own life was evidence of that. His sacrificial offer demonstrated that he had crossed over

from darkness to light. He would never be the same again.

To the rich young ruler who found he could not forsake his comforts and wealth, Jesus said, "There is one thing left which you must do..." Judah, too, found there was one thing left for him to do. After a lifetime of taking care of himself he at last chose to forsake his old ways and do things God's way. What a great moment that must have been! At last Joseph has heard all he needed to hear. He cannot contain himself any longer. His joy is complete. All except his brothers are ordered out of the room and he gives full vent to his emotions. His weeping is so loud that all in the palace hear it. "I am Joseph!" he cries to his brothers. They are so dismayed they cannot utter a word.

Let us contemplate this scene further. What God did in this joyful reunion mirrors what happened to each one of us when we came to Christ. The only difference, perhaps, was that we did not experience so outwardly dramatic a change in relationship as did this family. But when we come to repentance, God pours himself out for us and changes everything in our relationship to him.

First, we might remark that the good news seemed to us then too good to be true. Of course, we hastened to add, it would be wonderful if it were. Just imagine the notion of God becoming a man, the notion that someone would pay the penalty for our sin and lift the burden of guilt from us forever. To be "accepted in the Beloved"; such an unexpected blessing was just too good to be true, wasn't it? Were we just hoping for the best? What about facts? Was there any evidence we could to examine which would back this up?

This was what these brothers struggled with when Joseph revealed himself to them. It was just too good to be true; they couldn't believe their ears. They were dumbfounded. Then, sensing their incredulity, Joseph asked them to come closer to him. They came forward timidly, fearfully. They examined his face, looking for familiar features. It would indeed be wonderful if this man was telling the truth, but they needed proof. The disciples of Jesus were equally skeptical when the women raced back from the tomb on that Easter morning and declared that he was risen. It's too good to be true, they said. Sure, he had predicted that he would be resurrected, but they know he was dead; everyone knew that. Some of them went to see the empty tomb for themselves before they believed.

Haven't we all, at some point in our Christian life, asked, "Did it really happen? Does history attest to it? Is it intellectually credible, or is it just a fairytale we want to believe?" The Christian faith is none of those things, of course. It can withstand whatever test man can come up with. Joseph had to invite his brothers to take a closer look. Jesus had to do no less with the doubting Thomas: "Come closer. Put your hand in my side and see that it is me." "Yes, I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt."

Not only did Joseph's brothers doubt the facts, they doubted themselves as well. Verse 5: "...do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here..." Have you fought that battle too? Once we become convinced that the announcement of the love of God is just what it claims to be, a sense of our own unworthiness enters in and we have another fight on our hands. We say, "I know myself too well. I know what I've done and what I'm prone to do. No one, not even God, could do that for me." In the face of news that's too good to be true, that's how we often respond, isn't it? But here Joseph steps in and ministers to his brothers' feelings of unworthiness. "Don't weep or be angry with yourselves for what you've done to me," he tells them, "for God has caused it to work for good. What you did has redounded to his glory. There is no need for self-recrimination."

Imagine how overwhelmed Joseph's brothers were by his words. Their brother had become lord of all Egypt, the counselor to the Pharaoh himself. He was responsible to distribute the food which would save the whole world; and he had predicted that there were yet five more years to go before the famine had run its course. Now he was telling his brothers that he had a place for them and their families to wait out the famine. They would be together again. No longer was this brother of theirs the arrogant youth who wore his multicolored robe every hour of the day just to demonstrate his favorite sonship. Nor was he anything like they themselves had become--ordinary, run-of-the-mill nomads who whiled away the hours tending their flocks. What God did by taking their rebellion and wickedness into his own hands was not just give them the relationships and circumstances they would have expected if they had not attacked Joseph. He gave them much more. Imagine if they had said to themselves, "What if God gave Joseph back to us and he became just like one of us--a

successful herdsman." That would have been amazing. But they found that Joseph had become lord of all Egypt, the one who would save the world from famine. When Jesus was raised from the dead, he did not return as the Galilean carpenter he had been before he died. Instead he returned in a glorified body. Resurrection does not merely cancel out death; it overwhelms it.

The good news of the gospel is not simply too good to be true; it is overwhelmingly good, overwhelmingly true. The apostle Paul says in Romans 5, "If by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one Jesus Christ." It is not just that death once reigned but now life has taken its place. It is, death once reigned, and much more will life reign. When God dealt with the mess we had made of our lives he did not merely take away our wrongdoing so that we became, as it were, neutral beings. No, he did much more than that: he gave us abundant life. The good news of the gospel is infinitely greater than something we could be tempted to regard as too good to be true. It is much better news than we could ever imagine it to be, and it is overwhelmingly true.

If the brothers cannot believe their ears--they are struck dumb at Joseph's words--Pharaoh's response is one of utter delight at what has been revealed. The fact that Joseph has been reunited with his long lost family is a source of great joy and satisfaction to him. I am reminded of what Jesus said happens in heaven some someone here on earth repents: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." That is not apparent to the sinner who for the first time is driven to his knees in repentance. He may be like Judah, with trembling knees and sweaty palms. He has no idea of what will happen next, and may even assume the worst. Although it may not seem to the repentant sinner that anything of any great significance is happening, however, the praises of God are being sung in the heavenlies for that one act of repentance. The angels sang when you and I became Christians. You may not be able to pinpoint the exact moment you came to faith, but the angels marked the moment by breaking into a song of praise.

Lastly, notice how everything changed so utterly for these brothers of Joseph. Judah's offer of his life for Benjamin's was the turning point. Reconciliation was now possible for all of the sons of Jacob. That too is what happens between God and us when we are made new in Christ: Everything changes. And not only do we have reconciliation with God, we are also have the possibility of reconciliation with our family members and others. Furthermore, we become members of a new family--the body of Christ on earth. That is what happens when we come to Christ, when we entrust ourselves to God as Judah did.

Let us review what we have learned in this section. Early in chapter 45 the brothers of Joseph had honest questions about the identity of the man before them who said he was their brother. They decided to come closer to him and see for themselves. And it was as he had said; he was indeed Joseph. The faith of those who have put their trust in Christ is also based on facts, not wishful thinking.

Then the brothers began to question themselves, dwelling on their own unworthiness. But Joseph reassures them that they don't need denigrate themselves. God had accomplished great things and they had no need for self-recrimination. Furthermore, Joseph declares to them that God had brought good out of their wickedness. Sin is not merely canceled when God acts on our behalf; it is totally overwhelmed. The brothers sinned but God saved the world through their actions. The Messiah was put to death but God raised him in greater glory. God overwhelms the choices of sinners; he doesn't merely cancel them.

And lastly, when we forsake our rebellion and instead become sons of God, that decision changes everything else; all things become new. When Joseph's brothers took a step of faith, they immediately were granted dramatic evidence that they had done the right thing. The ruler of all Egypt came down from his throne to weep tears of joy with them. Although we don't usually experience anything as visibly impressive when we come to faith, yet God's response to our act of faith is just as dramatic. Joseph reached out to his brothers and placed them in circumstances where they had to make a choice. God too does that for us. And when Judah made the choice to act by faith, all heaven sang for joy. God likewise places us in circumstances where we must walk by faith, and when we do, all of heaven rejoices.

Jacob reenters the picture in the closing verses of chapter 45:

Then they went up from Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan to their father Jacob. And they told him, saying, "Joseph is still alive, and indeed he is ruler over all the land of Egypt." But he was stunned, for he did not believe them. When they told him all the words of Joseph that he had spoken to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. Then Israel said, "It is enough; my son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die."

More than 20 years earlier these same sons had returned home with a report that Joseph had been killed. The loss of his favorite son had hit Jacob hard, and for all those years his spirits had flagged. Now this astonishing news that Joseph is still alive elicits the familiar "it's too good to be true" response from Jacob. His problem is different than Judah's. Judah's problem was guilt; Jacob's was sorrow over the loss of his son. But God ministers to the sorrowful as he ministers to the guilty. How was it possible that the son whom he had mourned all those years was still alive? Jacob's sorrow had an answer, just as Judah's guilt had.

What a marvelous word Jacob utters when at last he believes the news that his son is alive: "It is enough; my son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die." All his prayers had been answered. His spirit within him was revived.

Many are tempted to accept one substitute or another for God's powerful transformation of the truly repentant. On the one hand, we may want our religious experience to be routine and predictable. We fear new things and don't want to be shaken up too much. We want to attend the same church, go to the same Christian conferences, and hear the same things said year after year. We just don't want anything different or remarkable to disturb the status quo; we want God to be predictable. Or, by contrast, we may want instead what I call magic shows. We begin seeking an emotional, short-lived religion of thrills. We even begin to expect God to become, in a sense, a magician who will do wonders at our bidding. This is the kind of response that is fascinated by the claim made recently by Oral Roberts to have raised someone from the dead during a service he once held. But both of these responses are an inadequate substitute for what the Lord God does when he interacts with human beings. The book of Revelation says that the earth shakes, the stars fall from the heavens, the sun turns to blood; everything that can be shaken is shaken. That, in a sense, is what happens when God touches a life and changes it. It is not a run-of-the-mill event, nor is it a magic trick. If we could see things from a heavenly, eternal perspective--as God sees them--we would never again long for the routine or the merely sensational. Rather we would long for real, profound interaction with God.

If your life has become like Jacob's life was, chaotic and unpredictable, touched by the loss of his son, threatened by famine, it is worth asking whether you serve the same kind of God as Jacob and Judah did. Are you willing to believe that the good news is thoroughly good and true and then begin to face whatever circumstances are now besetting you? Do you believe that God is determined to bless you, despite your present circumstances? He is the same God today as he was back then when he met the needs of Jacob and his family in ways that that no one could have predicted. He is the same yesterday, today and forever, Scripture declares.

Do repentance and redemption count for much in your life? Many of us treat evangelism, and our own coming to Christ, in a cavalier fashion. We are tempted to downgrade someone's conversion experience and to treat lightly our own coming to faith. We just don't see anything earth-shattering about it, unlike what Scripture says occurs in the heavenlies when one sinner comes to repentance. When Judah took his step of faith, everything in his life and in the life of his brothers changed utterly. From God's perspective, nothing is more important than having one individual's history completely changed by an act of faith that delivers from death to life. Let us not demean and undervalue such a dramatic change in our own lives or in anyone else's.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

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