

God's grace in Jacob's family: Famine becomes feast

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[0 : 00] three, to see God's grace in this story, to Jacob's family, particularly this week to his brothers as their famine becomes a feast, to see that God's grace stands right at the heart of the storyline of the Bible and at the heart of this story too. We have as a family, as an extended family, been on a weekend up in Creaf, enjoying some very windy and wet weather, which is fine, but one of the great things about the house is it had an open fire, which you don't often get to enjoy anymore. So it's been funny to see each night how family divides. So the fire gets put on sometime around seven o'clock and by about half seven the room divides into the people who love the heat and who get closer and closer and then the people like me who gradually scale further and further back. Heat divides. Some of us love to get close. Some of us stay further back. John Stott said this in his book, *The Cross of Christ*. The cross of Christ is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled, but we have to get near enough for its sparks to fall on us. The cross is the one fire where we all want to draw near. To become a Christian, to grow as a Christian, we need to come near to Jesus. We need to come near to the cross to receive his grace, to let the sparks of his grace and love fall on us. That's what we're going to think about this morning. What is grace? We can think of grace as God's unconditional love to the undeserving, indeed to the unlovely. We can think of God's grace as that love that stoops down to us, to seek us, to find us, to rescue us, to comfort us in our needs.

John Newton, 18th century pastor, said the shortest definition of grace that he knew was to know Christ. Because when you know Christ, you receive every spiritual blessing from God. That's grace to us. And that grace that we find throughout the Bible, its flame burns brightest at the cross, but we see it all through the Bible, Old Testament and New. And so I want us to see it here in the story of Joseph. To see grace as something that's profoundly hopeful. This is the very opposite of karma that so many people believe. Do good and good happens. Do bad and bad happens. What do we see to bad brothers?

They receive grace. It's the opposite of a religion that says you need to prove yourself. You need to earn God's favor. Rather, we see it as a loving invitation to all of us in our misery, in our need, unable to reach up to God. To reach up to God. God has come down to us in wonderful love. So I hope as we look through Genesis 43 this morning, we'll see that grace shines through the story, that it points us once again towards Jesus. And I hope also that we'll see how it connects to our story, that we'll be thinking to ourselves, am I close enough for those sparks of God's love to fall on me? How have I responded to Jesus as Savior? Let's look at how God's grace, first of all, changes Judah's status.

In verses 3 to 10, Judah finds a prominent place. I've been reading a lot of John Newton this week, so John Newton can be a helpful picture of the transformation that God works in a person. So if you don't know the story of John Newton, 18th century, he was a notorious slave trader. But then in the middle of a storm, when he thought he was going to die, he called out to God for mercy and his life was changed. And he became a pastor, he became a preacher of the gospel. And he worked with Wilberforce, William Wilberforce, towards the end of his life to abolish slavery in Britain. From profiting from slavery to abolishing slavery. And if we were to ask John Newton, how did that dramatic change happen in your life? He would say, amazing grace. Sufficient grace is the only explanation for that kind of change to take place in a person's life. We can see a dramatic change in the life of Judah, one of Joseph's brothers. For those of us who haven't been here for the whole story, in chapter 37, we meet Judah. He is one of the ten brothers, and he is the one who decides what we should do with Joseph, because we don't like him, because he's our father's favorite, we should sell him into slavery. So that was Judah. Let's sell our brother off to Egypt. And then in chapter 38, we meet him again. And there we find him being unfaithful to his promises to his daughter-in-law.

And then we find him engaging in immorality as he sleeps with someone he presumes is a prostitute, but it turns out it's his daughter-in-law. So this is a man with a very messed up back story.

[6 : 10] But God is raising him to a position of prominence in this family. His place in the family, he's the fourth eldest, so he doesn't have a natural claim to take headship. He has no claim to be family head.

All that we see in Judah's story is God's work. God is raising Judah as family head. God will raise him so it becomes clear by the end of the story. He is the son of the promise. Judah is told that kings would come from him, and ultimately Jesus will be part of Judah's family line. So we're seeing in this story how God is working spiritual change in his life. In verses 3 to 10, Judah is speaking to his father. The famine is still there, and they're wondering how food will be provided. And Judah gives the logical argument that they have no other option. If Jacob is unwilling to send his precious son Benjamin, as requested, they will certainly all starve. Judah says, if you are willing to send Benjamin, there is hope that we will get food and that we and our family will survive.

But another interesting development beyond just his sort of strong logic, and he takes responsibility and authority. Verse 8, he is willing to bear responsibility. Send the boy along with me and we will go at once.

I myself will guarantee his safety. You can hold me personally responsible for him. Even in the last chapter, we saw a bunch of brothers who weren't willing to volunteer, who weren't willing to make any sacrifices, but Judah's changing. Judah's saying, I am willing to bear the sacrifice. You can blame me for anything that I am willing to bear the sacrifice. You can't believe in the last chapter. You can't believe in that. You can't believe in the last chapter. You can't believe in the last chapter. You can't believe in Jacob and Judah. Jacob relents. Jacob says, okay, you can go. Jacob, we can see in verse 11, obviously is now in a position where he trusts Judah. And equally significant in verse 15, the men, those brothers, took the gift and double the amount of silver, and Benjamin also. So Jacob, the father now trusts Judah and Benjamin too entrusts himself to the care of his elder brother. Gone is the fear of chapter 42, where Jacob said, there's no way I'm sending Benjamin down to Egypt because he was afraid of what might happen to him. But Judah is changing and it changes the family. His status is changing by God's grace. And this is a pattern that we see in Jesus' family tree. So often, if you look at the genealogy of Jesus, you see that it's marked by grace shown to the undeserving and the unlovely. There are so many surprising people who are part of God's family. And on the one hand, it humbles us and it reminds us that none of us, just like Judah, none of us deserve a place in God's family because we all have a past that is marked by sin in various ways. But the story of Judah and the story of Jesus and the story of grace also gives anyone and everyone hope.

The love of God invites people to receive Jesus and to receive salvation, not on the basis of our merit, but on the basis of his merit. And more than that, the story of Judah helpfully reminds us of Jesus, our elder brother, who offers himself. When we were facing spiritual death, living in spiritual famine, unable to hear the word of God and facing certain death and judgment because of our sin, Jesus, our elder brother, he steps in.

[10 : 41] Jesus comes and gives himself as a sacrifice to give believers life. Jesus, the Son of God, the perfect Son of God, through faith in him, he offers to change your status and mine. When our faith is in him, we are adopted as children of God. So no matter who we are, no matter whether society thinks we're high or low, in God's eyes, we are precious to him. Adopted into his family. And so that invitation is there to come and to join the family of God through trusting in Jesus, asking him to take our sin and to have him as Lord and Savior. And for us too, as we think about the story of Judah, we're reminded that every believer if you're a follower of Jesus today, you are a miracle of grace. You are a new creation in Christ, and that's a miracle that God works in the hearts and lives of his people. Every testimony, every story of how God has transformed us is a story that God has written because of his love and grace and kindness towards you. Some of us have very dramatic stories, like John Newton or like Judah. You know, once we were so far away from God, and then God dramatically intervened and changed us, others, very gradual and very slow, but each story written by God. And it's all down to his grace. And so as the people of God, we are never to move from the foot of the cross, the place where we see God's grace, where we feel the warmth of God's love. We keep preaching the gospel to ourselves to remind ourselves that our status of being children of God comes from God's love towards us. Now let's think about how we see God's grace to

Jacob, the father. We see God's grace to Jacob in the promise that is kept. Now Moses, as he writes the book of Genesis, and indeed as he writes the book of Exodus, he brings us to these points of tension, where we might find ourselves as readers wondering, how is God going to keep his promise in this moment?

When Abraham and Sarah are promised that they will have as many children as the sand on the seashore, their descendants will be like the stars in the sky. But Sarah is barren and they're both old. We're wondering, how will God keep that promise? When the family of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, they're promised this land that would be theirs and they don't have any. And then they find themselves being slaves in Egypt. There is that tension. How will God keep his promise? And now a very basic level, in verse 1 of chapter 43, we find this family enduring famine. And if they can't get food, how will they survive?

And if they don't survive, how will the blessing of God come to the world? Will God's promise fail or will God keep his promise? Can we trust the character of God that we find in his word?

Now, when Jacob speaks to his sons in chapter 43 in verse 2, he makes it sound fairly straightforward.

[14 : 46] When they'd eaten all the grain they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, go back and buy us a little more food. That sounds like a routine journey and a routine command.

But what we know of the story is very different. It's almost as if Jacob is burying his head in the sand at this moment to all the difficulties, all the obstacles. So at this point in time, Simeon is a prisoner in Egypt. One of his sons is locked away. They are in the middle of famine.

They have no way to provide for themselves unless they go down to Egypt. But the last time they went to Egypt, they were accused of being spies and they were dealt with harshly as they saw it.

And there is for Jacob too, that fear of what will happen to Benjamin. You know, Judah reminds him, look, we can't go unless we do what the man in charge of Egypt says. So there is real fear and threat here. And so the tension point is, how will this journey go? Will God look after them? Will God's promise be kept? And of course, we got to the end of the story. Well, this part of the story. And we saw that God was faithful to them. And it establishes a principle for us that salvation always brings glory to God. Where they are helpless and powerless. God is acting to save and deliver.

So what does Israel, what does Jacob, what does Israel say to his sons once he's persuaded by Jacob's logic? In verse 11, we hear his side of the conversation. Again, two courses of action he proposes.

[16:50] First one in verse 11, he says, you need to send a gift. Send a gift to this powerful man. If you know the story of Jacob, you'll know he's already done this with his own brother Esau. Another set of brothers where there was tension, where there was division. Jacob was coming back to be reunited with Esau, but he was worried that Esau was coming to bring an army against him. And so he sent a gift to try and appease his brother. And so he takes the same strategy. Let's send a gift. Let's try and reconcile with this powerful man in Egypt. But more significant even than that, we find in verse 14, Jacob knows he needs to rest on the mercy of God. It's effectively a prayer. May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man. And there's a wonderful recognition here from Jacob. He understands that his God will have the final word in this situation. It won't be the gift. It won't be Judah's leadership.

It won't be this powerful man in Egypt. It will be God who will have the final word. And so he looks to God for mercy. He commits his family to the God who had made promises to him. There is an expression of faith here from Jacob. And what we see this week, and we'll see it beyond, is that as the story unfolds, God's promise to save and to bless will be kept. We will see God's gracious love to this family that God will stoop down to comfort, to rescue, to provide for them in their needs.

It's interesting that Jacob placed his hope in a peace offering. And again, that's a pointer to us of the gospel. Jesus is the sacrifice who brings peace, who secures peace between sinful people and a holy God.

Jesus has come and stood in our place. Jesus has become the sin bearer of the world. Jesus has come to satisfy God's anger against our sin as he takes our sin and he takes the wrath that our sin deserves.

There is, in the sacrifice of Jesus, our peace.

[19:42] Jesus has come and said, it's important for us to recognize that when it comes to the Christian faith, we can't provide the peace offering. When we know there is something wrong between us and God, we can respond in one of two ways. We can either try and make amends morally and religiously. We can try and turn over a new leaf. We can work really hard at reading and praying and trying to be a good neighbor.

That will not work because we cannot be holy as God is holy. Rather, we need to trust in the perfect sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. We need to receive as a gift of grace what Jesus did for us on the cross. He is our peace with God.

And just like Jacob will discover as the story progresses, every believer experiences God's grace in that God keeps his promise of salvation. God made promises to Jacob and he kept those promises.

Jesus is God's promise kept to you if you're a Christian. You can trust God's salvation in Jesus Christ, that we can know God's mercy from God's Savior.

One last way to see grace in this story this morning, and it's God's grace from Joseph as the brothers arrive in Egypt and what they receive is a generous welcome. It's one aspect of grace is that you get what you don't deserve positively, but also grace is not getting what you do deserve. And we see that in the story of these brothers. Just to remind ourselves again of these brothers, they have been ready to kill their brother. They're full of hate towards him 20 years ago. They betrayed him. They sold him into slavery. They then covered it up. 20 years of lying and deceiving their own father, who it turns out doesn't trust them. And we find them in the last chapter. No one was willing to volunteer, to stand in the place of the others. No one was willing to sacrifice for the others. These are not the good guys in this story.

[22 : 33] Because in the story of salvation, there are no good guys. There's Jesus and there's us as sinners. And it's so interesting to see their thinking. So verse 15, they're on the journey. Verse 16, Joseph sends his steward to welcome the men to his house. So there's an animal that's killed and they're going to have dinner. And rather than regard that as a high honor, in verse 18, the men were frightened. There is fear. What are they afraid of? They're afraid that they're going to be attacked.

They're afraid that they are going to be made slaves and their donkeys are going to be stolen. What they did to their own brother still weighs on their minds, as we thought about last week.

So they begin trying to defend themselves and they explain what happened as a way they hope to avoid the ambush they expect. You know, we brought the money, we paid. Oh, we don't know how it appeared in our sack. So here are these brothers with all their guilt and with their fear.

They're expecting judgment. What do they receive in Joseph's house? First of all, we see that they receive an invitation to a feast in verse 16. We see that they receive words of reassurance in verse 23.

It's all right. Don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks. And then we see in verse 24, they are cared for. They are treated well. Their feet are washed. Their donkeys are provided for. They had sold Joseph, their brother. Their ears were closed to his cries of distress while he was down the pit. But how does Joseph respond? Joseph protects them. Joseph provides for them. He honors them.

[24 : 51] He welcomes them. There's this wonderful picture of grace in Joseph's story. And then Joseph arrives at noon. Joseph's response. Now, can you imagine Joseph's emotions as this part of his story plays out? So here he arrives and the brothers bow down again. There's that reminder that God had made that promise through a dream that he would be raised up to a position of honor. He asks if their father is alive and he hears that his elderly father, whom he loves and hasn't seen for 20 years, he's still alive. And then in verse 29, he looks and he sees his brother Benjamin. For the first time in 20 years, he sees his little brother.

All the way along in chapter 42 and chapter 43, you see the hope for Joseph is that the family would be reunited. And so it's no wonder when we get to this stage that Joseph finds himself weeping with joy in verse 30. But as Joseph and his brothers are in this house together, there's this lovely bit in the story where it's almost as if he's giving clue after clue to try and help them to understand who is this man who is talking to them? Who is this man who they are in the presence of?

He's showing them little by little that he is their brother. So we see it, first of all, in the language of verse 23. So you've got an Egyptian steward speaking about your God, the God of your father.

Where do those words come from? They don't come from the steward. They come from Joseph. Calling to mind promises that God had made to their family, of which Joseph, of course, is a part.

And then we get that special welcome for Benjamin in verse 29. When the brothers arrived the first time, Joseph said, are you spies? But when Benjamin comes, he says, God be gracious to you, my son. There's a special affection for this particular brother. And maybe they're thinking, why? What about the table seating? Verse 33, the men had been seated before him in the order of their ages from the firstborn to the youngest. And they looked at each other in astonishment. So this is either an incredible coincidence. I asked a nephew of mine who's studying maths, what are the odds of being able to correctly place 11 brothers in age order? And statistically, it's a one in 10 million chance. So this is either incredible coincidence or maybe adding to their fear, this is some kind of special divine knowledge that's come to Joseph or he's been in this family lineup before.

[28 : 08] They don't see it yet, but they will. And then in verse 34, we see the special portion given to Benjamin. He's the little one, but he gets five times more than anyone else. Why is that? They must be asking themselves. And it won't be till next week that there's the revelation of why.

But when you look at this story, I don't know if you're like me, but it reminds me so much of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. You know that story where there's the father who has two sons, and he has a younger son who says to his father, father, I can't wait until you are dead. I want you to divide the inheritance and I want to take my money now. And so that younger son treats his father disrespectfully and shamefully, takes his money and engages in all kind of wild living. And then the money runs out and he finds himself in famine. He finds himself in a shameful situation, in a desperate situation. And in that misery, he recognizes it would be better to return and to be in his father's house. But he never expects to find a place as a son any longer. The best he hopes for is to be welcomed as a servant. He understands that he deserves that treatment. But what happens as this younger son comes home filthy and in rags and in shame, the father runs and the father welcomes him and the father covers his shame and clothes him in honor and holds a feast in his honor.

Grace is God's love to those who don't deserve it. Grace is God's love to those who are unlovely. And the story of Joseph's brothers shows it to us. The story of the prodigal son shows it to us.

The brothers, they came to Egypt due to famine. But what do they receive? They receive a wonderful feast of grace. It was something that they absolutely didn't deserve. The last time Moses records for us, when these brothers sit down to eat together, they're sharing their lunch while Joseph is in the pit.

They had absolutely no interest in caring for their brother. But Joseph, he returns love, not hate. Just like Jesus. Jesus who would pray on the cross, Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing. These brothers had refused to rescue Joseph, but Joseph would deliver them. He was raised up to be God's deliverer for them to rescue and to restore and to fulfill God's promise just as Jesus was raised up to do that for you and for me.

[31 : 18] And so grace, as we find it all through the Bible says, come to the feast. You don't need to pay for it. You don't need to earn it. You simply need to come and to trust in the Lord Jesus. Turn from sin and believe in him.

Whoever we are, whatever we've done, to enjoy God's grace in Jesus. So we see grace, the sparks of grace all through chapter 43. But of course, the cross is the blazing fire, the place where we see and experience the love of God at its greatest extent.

So today, have you got close enough? Have you got near enough to let those sparks of God's love fall on you?

To recognize God's kindness in Jesus, to see Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

You know, Jesus, after his resurrection, he told two of his disciples that when you read the Bible, you read it appreciating that all of the Bible, the Old Testament speaks about him.

[32 : 34] So Joseph is revealing to us something of the story of Jesus and God's grace towards us in the coming of Jesus. And it's not enough to admire Jesus from a distance.

To think he's a good man or a good teacher. We must draw near. We must find ourselves living at the foot of the cross. That must become our center.

We must constantly be warmed by his love to be drawing near. So the question we all need to ask ourselves today is, am I close to or am I far from God's grace, God's Savior, Jesus?

Perhaps today some of us are still living with fear like these brothers. We're still carrying a burden of guilt and shame. Maybe when you think about Jesus, you're not sure exactly who he is or what he came to do.

Or maybe you're not sure how he would receive you. What should you do if that's you? Well, you should go to the cross.

[33 : 53] And you should see his love there. You should see God's gracious provision for all of your needs there. And if you have come near, if you are following Jesus, if you've been surprised by his gracious welcome, then stay at the cross.

Keep feasting on God's provision for you. His love for you in Christ. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.