

FAMILY REUNION

Genesis 45:1–15; 46:26–30

This month in Junior Church the children have been following the story of Joseph and today we're looking at how the story ends. It ends with a family reunion. I wonder what those words conjure up in your mind, family reunion: perhaps an idealised scene of harmony and happiness. We'd all like to think that our families were like that. But more likely the image in your mind will be of squabbling relatives and uncomfortable atmospheres, a sense of relief when everyone goes their own way again. Looking around at the people there Joseph's family reunion reminds me of four things.

GRIT

The New Testament reminds us that Joseph lived by faith. What does that mean in real terms? It didn't mean that he had an easy passage, everything turning out just the way he would have wanted, in fact, quite the opposite.

Joseph had been treated unfairly by his brothers, sold as a slave. He had been treated unfairly by the wife of his owner, Potiphar. She tried to seduce him and then when he rejected her advances she accused him of trying to rape her. Joseph was put in prison and there he was treated unfairly by Pharaoh's cupbearer. He was glad enough of Joseph's help when he was in prison but when he got out he forgot all about Joseph.

Through all these misfortunes Joseph refused to give up or give in. He believed that God had spoken to him in those boyhood dreams. That's what faith is all about. It's not just believing when everything is hunkydory. It's not just believing because there are no problems. Faith is proved in adversity. Real faith is believing in spite of difficulties and setbacks, keeping going when the going gets tough.

The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this. 'Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see' (11:1). This is how Peter puts it, 'Now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. • These have come so that your faith ... may be proved genuine' (1:6, 7).

How does your faith measure up? Is it just fair-weather faith? Or is it genuine faith? Faith means grit, determination, perseverance, stickability.

For Joseph, finally, faith won through and his fortunes changed. He was released from prison and elevated to the highest position in the land after the Pharaoh himself. God has forever linked faith with victory. You may have to wait for it. You almost certainly will have to wait for it, but God has promised victory. Listen to these words from 1 John chapter 5. 'Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith' (verse 4).

So don't give in. Don't give up. Keep going. Keep believing. Keep looking to Jesus.

Turning from Joseph to his father, Jacob, we see a picture of

GRIEF

His bent body, grey hair and wizened features betray his age. But the furrows on his brow reflect more than just the passing of the years. They're etched there by sorrow. The grief of Jacob. What a character Jacob was, brash and rebellious, but his spirit was broken by a series of sorrows: the death of his doting mother, the death of his wife, Rachel, the death – apparently – of his dearest son, Joseph. Genesis 37:31–35 describes what happened after the brothers sold Joseph into slavery.

'Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces." Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him.'

Jacob was stricken with grief. When famine struck and his sons had to go to Egypt to buy grain he wouldn't let his youngest son Benjamin go with them. 'But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him' (42:4).

Jacob's grief overshadowed all his thinking and generated fear in his heart. 'He was afraid...' It created a dark cloud which overshadowed his mind and made him think the worst would happen. It wasn't so far from the truth. When Joseph's brothers went to Egypt Simeon was held captive there until Benjamin could be brought.

'Their father Jacob said to them, "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!" Then Reuben said to his father, "You may put both of my sons to death if I do not bring him back to you. Entrust him to my care, and I will bring him back." But Jacob said, "My son will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left. If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my grey head down to the grave in sorrow" (42:36-38). 'Everything is against me!'

Sin has many children. The children of sin are guilt, shame, pain, distress. And one of the children of sin is sorrow.

Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why is there so much sorrow? Why is there so much pain? It all stems from sin, and that's why God sent Jesus to save us.

Jacob finally agreed that Benjamin must go with them to Egypt but it broke his heart. He said, 'May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man so that he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved' (43:14).

The ending of the story sees Jacob's grief lifted. 'But when they told him everything Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts Joseph had sent to carry him back, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. And Israel said, "I'm convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die"' (45:27, 28).

As the story of Jacob's family reaches its climax there's a sound that gets louder and louder, a sound that comes more and more frequently, and it's the sound of weeping. Tears are God's gift to us to help us with our grief, but ultimately Jesus wants to take even our tears away. Revelation 21:4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

Grit and grief. As we look around the people at this family reunion our eyes fix on the brothers. They are full of

GUILT

Guilt made liars of them. 'They got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." (37:31, 32). Guilt made them

deceivers. The longer the deception went on the more impossible it became to get out of it. It soured the atmosphere in their home. It was a massive burden that they carried with them every hour of every day. It made their words sound hollow.

When the brothers first came to Egypt to buy grain Joseph said, “You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected.” “No, my lord,” they answered. “Your servants have come to buy food. We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies” (42:9–11). Those words, ‘honest men’ keep recurring.

It’s interesting to see how they came to see that the feeling of guilt was from God. When Benjamin’s silver was returned in his sack they said, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’ (42:28). It all came to a head in chapter 44:verse 16 when Joseph played his final trick on them. “What can we say to my lord?” Judah replied. “What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants’ guilt.’

That sense of guilt which can hang so heavily over us is from God and it is for our good. Ephesians chapter 4 verse 19 describes a state where conscience has been stifled. ‘Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.’ 1 Timothy chapter 4 verse 2 talks about people ‘whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron’.

It is far better to be weighed down by a sense of guilt than to be heading for hell with no sense of danger.

Finally, the story of this family reunion, Joseph, his brothers and their father, Jacob, is a story of

GRACE

All through these chapters we keep getting reminders that God was still there, working out his plan, overruling the results of sin, working in human hearts.

Chapter 39 verses 2–4. When Joseph was made a slave, we read, “The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favour in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.’

Chapter 39 verse 5. ‘From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.’

Chapter 39 verses 20–21. When Joseph was sent to prison on a false accusation, we read, ‘Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warden.’

Chapter 41 verse 16. When Joseph was brought before Pharaoh to interpret his strange dream he said, ‘I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.’

Chapter 41 verse 39. When Joseph gave the correct interpretation Pharaoh said, ‘Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you.’

We see Joseph’s awareness of God’s grace in the naming of his children.

Chapter 41 verse 51. ‘Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.”’

Chapter 41 verse 52. 'The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."'

Chapter 45 verses 5–9. Finally, when Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers he said, 'And 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. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be ploughing and reaping. But 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. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay.'"

There is always a need for grace and even after Joseph had been reconciled to his brothers there's that telling little comment in chapter 45 verse 24 when he sends them back to their father: 'Don't quarrel on the way.'

By grace you have been saved through faith. God's grace is sufficient for you, for God's power is made perfect in weakness. The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. We are justified freely by his grace.

The family reunion brought together a history of suffering and the answer was grace. The family reunion brought together a history of sorrow and the answer was grace. The family reunion brought together a history of sin and the answer was grace.

The story of Joseph is a wonderful story of God's faithfulness to an individual, but it is far more than that. It's the story of a man who received God's promise but found himself a slave in Egypt. Years later that story was to be repeated, not in the life of just one individual but a whole nation. As they suffered under the oppression of their Egyptian taskmasters the story of Joseph was a beacon in the night. The God who had delivered Joseph would deliver them also.

Our vision is very limited. We can't see much beyond ourselves but there is a bigger picture and our lives are part of that greater plan by which God is fulfilling his purposes.

Are you burdened with sin? There is salvation in Jesus. Are you bowed down with sorrow? There is comfort in Jesus. Are you battling through suffering? There is hope and a future through Jesus. God says to you today, 'My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in weakness.'