

AUTHENTIC RECONCILIATION

by Alastair Buchanan

THE EXAMPLE OF JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS APPLIED TO THE CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

Have you ever asked yourself, "Why did God allow Joseph to put his brothers through such a tortuous process before reconciling with them?" Many who are seeking reconciliation in South Africa are also asking a similar question: What will it take for us in South Africa to get to this full fellowship restored - to an authentic rather than, as experienced by many, a superficial reconciliation? The story of Joseph and his brothers can be paralleled into our post-apartheid South Africa today. The Biblical story begins with Joseph's rejection and abandonment by his brothers but even though he initially hid his identity from those who had so painfully rejected him, it ends with him finally opening his heart to them in full and genuine relationship. What did it take for Joseph and his brothers to get there? What will take for us as brothers in South Africa?

POWER, TRUST AND RECONCILIATION

The essence of how this bible story relates to our journey of reconciliation in South Africa begins in Genesis 45:1. Joseph, now the most powerful man in the most powerful nation in the region, reveals that he is the one they abused, humiliated, left for dead, and then sold into slavery. It's no wonder his brothers were terrified (v 3). Taking revenge on his brothers for all the pain, hurt, rejection, loneliness and humiliation they had caused him must have been very tempting. That would seem to be the obvious option; it would be only fair and just. However, Joseph wasn't just interested in the arid hills of justice, he was looking for more. He was after the fertile fields of relationship and family. For this to happen, mercy had to be added to justice!

He finally opened his own heart to them once he was convinced their change of heart had happened. Now, at last, here was an embrace he could trust and give himself fully into, without fear of another betrayal. Joseph shows us the grace of forgiveness like Jesus, of whom Joseph was the forerunner. The fact that he allowed them to live at all shows he was already operating graciously towards them. That he took some time to trust them again should encourage us in this country today. Righteousness (Justice), demands that payment is made, and peace (Grace), longs for the relationship to be restored. In Jesus, who bore the full cost of our guilt on the cross, "righteousness and peace kiss each other"(Psalm 85:10). The claims of both Justice and Grace are resolved in Him on the cross. Many of our black, coloured and Indian Christians have demonstrated the same heart as Jesus towards their white brothers by showing forgiveness and grace. It is now up to us to demonstrate the change this forgiveness ought to produce.

CHALLENGE OF A CHOICE TO DEMONSTRATE CHANGE

A key turning point comes when Benjamin is about to be arrested and taken into captivity (44:12). His brothers now have the food they came for and they are just about home and free. Here is the high point of hope in this story; it showed they were changing at last. All they had to say was, "Oh, bad luck, brother Benjamin, we'll pray for you", but they didn't. Faced with another choice between the selfishness and carelessness shown before, and a determination to suffer rather than lose another brother, they "all packed and returned to Egypt". What a change from those brothers who sold their other brother into slavery! Our brothers who have also been betrayed, must see a change in us too. They have to feel sure that those who betrayed them will, if faced with a similar situation, not make that choice again.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

An opportunity came up for Joseph's brothers through poverty and deprivation as a result of a famine. So, too for us, it seems the rising poverty, unemployment, HIV-Aids and related suffering are providing the church in South Africa with an opportunity to right the wrongs of the past.

DIVISION OF WEALTH

Does the discrepancy in wealth in this country provide us with that opportunity? White Christians in SA are in a very similar place to the brothers of Joseph at this point. We are almost back to the "happy life" we had before. We have the food and supplies we need, BUT this could change when confronted with a choice to carry on in our safe place or risk everything by going into an uncharted, strange and unsafe place. It's a relationally and emotionally vulnerable place in a time of economic stress (as was the time of famine in Israel). In addition to the security of our supplies becoming at risk we then have to choose between our own and family's safety and turning our backs on another brother.

RESTITUTION

Joseph made the right choice and it led to huge abundance and blessing for their families too. What I am talking about is not 'hand outs' but 'restitution'. This is not only a matter of compassion but also of justice. Most Christians agree the concept of 'hand-outs' is wrong. But have we seen why? The oft-quoted Chinese proverb that says "Instead of a fish it is better to give a fishing rod" misses the point here. This is a matter not so much of giving a fishing rod but of returning the fishing rights so unjustly removed and of restoring the fishing boats that were stolen. The word, 'hand-out' gives a sense of one group having all the answers and the other group all the problems. The word 'restitution' on the other hand, brings the correct perspective. Those helping (like Joseph's brothers) are doing so in a spirit of humility of having "blown it" badly in the past. When we use the 'Restitution' word there is no chance of our help being mistaken for paternalism or our compassion for superiority. So what do we as brothers need in order to come to this choice in South Africa today?

THE CONVICTION OF SIN

They said to one another, "surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us."(42:21). Only those who have acknowledged and accepted responsibility for their individual and corporate sin are going to be free to begin putting right what was wrong. In v.22, Reuben, while personally distancing himself from some of the sin, yet accepts that he shares in their common fate as a result.

SELF-SACRIFICE

What ultimately turned Joseph's heart however was the substitutionary self-sacrifice of an older brother. Judah (prefiguring the much greater sacrifice of our older brother and substitute, Jesus), says to Joseph, "now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in the place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers"(v44:33).

THE FATHERS LOVE

This sacrifice is motivated by the older brother's insight into how deep is his father's love. Not just for himself this time, but for his brother. "So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father, and when your servant my father whose life is bound up with the boy's life, sees that he isn't there, he will die". (44:30-31. The real reason things fell apart between white and black Christians in this country was because none of us took seriously enough how "closely bound up our Father's life was with his children".

MOVING FORWARD

How much are we willing, as Philippians 2:5 says, to "have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus"? Can there be any real fellowship any real reconciliation without some self-offering, some return of what was taken? "Let your servant remain here as my Lord's slave in return for the boy and let the boy return to his father." The first issue here is not about restoring money, jobs or property. No, the first issue here is about returning to the passion of the father expressed in the compassion of the older brother. All Joseph's suffering was based on the failure of both of these in his brothers. What was it that eventually opened Joseph's heart to trust his brothers again? Wasn't it seeing his older brother's commitment to making sure that he never lost another brother again - even to the extent of losing his life?

Are we willing to lose not just our lives for each other but our time, effort, jobs, and money rather than see a brother starve or be humiliated?

I can remember standing on the Grand Parade in 1990 listening to Nelson Mandela on the day he was released from prison and thinking, "This is a massive gesture of grace made towards the white people in this country". Subsequently I have looked for an equivalent gesture from us as whites and still feel it is lacking. The church leaders of South Africa need to rise up and understand the moment for greatness that is upon us and lead. A fitting start would be the inauguration by it's leaders of a mass demonstration of repentance in the church starting with those who have this world's goods, giving in restitution to those who don't.

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