

Genesis 42-45

Our last article ended with Joseph being placed in charge of the plans to prepare Egypt for an impending famine. Joseph organizes the nation and stores up enough grain to feed the people during the famine which begins at the end of Chapter 41. This sets the scene for the next four chapters.

Chapter 42 opens with the famine reaching Canaan, where Jacob (Joseph's father) and his family are still living. Hearing there is food in Egypt the sons hit the road and head there to buy food. When they arrive, they come and bow before Joseph, but do not recognize him, while he knows them. Joseph, could have made slaves of them because of what they did to him. Instead he first accuses them of being spies. They insist that they are not spies but are all members of the same family. Joseph asks for proof of their story; the proof being the brothers go home and return with their youngest brother Benjamin. To insure their return, Joseph has Simeon bound and imprisoned until they return. The brothers realize that this treatment is punishment for what they did to Joseph. As they prepare to go home, Joseph has his servants not only fill his brothers' bags with grain but with their money. Upon their arrival at home, Jacob refuses to send Benjamin back with them...and so time passes.

Chapter 43 reminds us that the famine was getting worse and the brothers would have to go back (though they seem to have forgotten about Simeon in prison). Even with starvation at the door, Jacob (now referred to as Israel) refuses to send Benjamin with his brothers. Judah convinces him to do so, pledging that if Benjamin does not return alive, Israel can kill Judah's two sons. As the brothers prepare to leave, Israel, always the schemer, tells them to take gifts and double the amount of money found in their bags, as a gift to Pharaoh's servant. Upon their arrival, Joseph has them brought to his house (which makes them fearful). When they try and explain about the money mysteriously appearing in their bags, Joseph attributes the miracle to God. They all then have dinner and "were merry."

Chapter 44 is a reprise of Chapter 42 where Joseph has their bags filled with grain and gold, but this time he has his cup placed in Benjamin's bag. After they leave, Joseph sends his servants to find the cup "thief." The brothers insist they have stolen nothing, but that if a thief is found, that person will be put to death. When the cup is found in Benjamin's bag, they all tore their clothes in grief. Upon returning to Joseph's house, Joseph sets aside the death penalty but insists that Benjamin become his slave. Judah, then offers himself in exchange for Benjamin and explains that if Benjamin does not return home it will kill their father. This is too much for Joseph.

Chapter 45 is the big reveal. Joseph can bear the charade no longer and reveals himself to them. Rather than seeking revenge, Joseph explains that God sent him to Egypt to not only feed the Egyptians but his own family. The outcome is that the sons return home with gifts, and an invitation for the entire family to come and live on the best land that Egypt has to offer.

Reflections: The writer offers us a glimpse of justice mixed with mercy. For justice to be done, the brothers' lies, and treatment of Joseph had to be atoned for. This occurs when they are forced to confront their deeds and Judah offers himself as a slave. Mercy is offered when Joseph treats them with love and compassion by not only giving them food to eat but forgiving them for their deeds. In addition, Joseph sees God's mysterious hand in this entire incident.

Questions

1. What do you think of Joseph "messing" with his brothers? What would you have done?
2. What do you think of Judah's offer to be a slave? How does that help atone for his earlier deeds?
3. How do you mix justice with mercy? Or do you choose one over the other and why?