Genesis 44-45 Sermon – The Blessing of Forgiveness

Children's Message:

Long ago, there was a widowed Chinese farmer. The farmer and his only son labored through the cold winds of winter and scorching rays of summer with their last remaining horse. One day, the son didn't lock the gate of the stable properly, and the horse bolted away.

When neighbors learned what happened, they came to the farmer and said, "What a sadness this is! Without your horse, you'll be unable to maintain the farm. What a failure that your son did not lock the gate properly! This is a great tragedy!"

The farmer replied, "Maybe yes, maybe no."

The next day, the missing horse returned to the farmer's stable, bringing along with it six wild horses. The farmer's son locked the gate of the stable firmly behind all seven horses.

When neighbors learned what happened, they came to the farmer and said, "What happiness this brings! With seven horses, you'll be able to maintain the farm with three of them and sell the rest for huge profits. What a blessing!"

The farmer replied, "Maybe yes, maybe no."

The next day the farmer's son was breaking in one of the wild horses. The son got thrown from the horse, fell hard on rocks, and broke his leg.

When neighbors learned what happened, they came to the farmer and said, "What a great sadness this is! Now, you'll be unable to count on your son's help. What a failure to break in the horse properly! What a tragedy!"

The farmer replied, "Maybe yes, maybe no."

The next day, a general from the Imperial Chinese Army arrived to conscript all the young men of the village into the army. Their assignment was to fight on the front lines of a battle against a terrifying enemy of overwhelming force. The farmer's son, because of his broken leg, was not taken.

When neighbors learned what happened, they came to the farmer and said, "What a great joy! Your son avoided facing certain death on the front lines of the battle. What a blessing!"

The farmer replied, "Maybe yes, maybe no."

Let's Pray:

Last Sunday we focused on the transformation of Judah, and how his humility and repentance allowed him to become the leader that God desired for his people, setting a precedence of self-sacrifice that is fulfilled in Jesus, and brings healing to his family. When before he sold his brother into slavery, now he willingly offers himself as a slave for his younger brother. He looks past his father's favouritism, his brother potentially stealing the cup to begin with, and hands himself over, seeing it a part of God's plan in judgement of his previous sin of selling Joseph into slavery beforehand.

Today, we look at the other side of Judah's confession, Joseph's forgiveness. Yes, Judah repents and takes responsibility for his place in the family, sacrificing himself for his younger brother, but he still was complicit in a horrible evil. After all, it was his idea to sell his younger brother into slavery. Joseph had been alienated from his family, sent away from his homeland, sent to live in a place where he was treated as property, sat unjustly in prison for years because of what Judah and his brothers had done. He has every right to hold him accountable, and now, in his Egyptian status, he has every ability to do so.

Genesis 45:

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. [2] And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

[3] Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

[4] Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! [5] 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. [6] For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. [7] But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. [w]

[8] "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. [9] 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. [10] You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. [11] I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.'

12 “You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am
speaking to you. 13 Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about
everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly.”

14 Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced
him, weeping. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers
talked with him.

16 When the news reached Pharaoh’s palace that Joseph’s brothers had come, Pharaoh and
all his officials were pleased. 17 Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Tell your brothers, ‘Do this: Load
your animals and return to the land of Canaan, 18 and bring your father and your families
back to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you can enjoy the fat of the land.’

19 “You are also directed to tell them, ‘Do this: Take some carts from Egypt for your children
and your wives, and get your father and come. 20 Never mind about your belongings,
because the best of all Egypt will be yours.’ ”

21 So the sons of Israel did this. Joseph gave them carts, as Pharaoh had commanded, and
he also gave them provisions for their journey. 22 To each of them he gave new clothing, but
to Benjamin he gave three hundred shekels of silver and five sets of clothes. 23 And this is
what he sent to his father: ten donkeys loaded with the best things of Egypt, and ten female
donkeys loaded with grain and bread and other provisions for his journey. 24 Then he sent
his brothers away, and as they were leaving he said to them, “Don’t quarrel on the way!”

25 So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. 26 They
told him, “Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt.” Jacob was stunned; he did not
believe them. 27 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.
28 And Israel said, “I’m convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I
die.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Sometimes, when a story is so familiar to us, and it’s turned into cartoons and musicals, it loses the dramatic effect that it should have. This has got to be one of the most dramatic stories in the whole Bible. Just the way that Joseph needs to tell his brothers twice who he is shows just how shocking it would be for him to reveal himself.

Let’s just for a minute imagine what it would be like to be in the brother’s place, standing before Joseph. Remember, they are already uncomfortable with the whole stolen cup ordeal when Judah makes this grand self-sacrificial speech. Then this unpredictable man sends out everyone and starts crying so loudly that everyone can hear. He might as well

had them in there if you were going to make a scene like that! After this he claims to be the brother who you sold into slavery twenty-two years ago and have been eerily reminded of for the past few months traveling back and forth to Egypt with another brother missing.

Moses, the author of this book, says they were terrified. Other translations say stunned, dismayed, or troubled. We might imagine they were dumbfounded, that is, unable to speak out of their shock. It is one thing for Judah moments earlier to say that God had uncovered their guilt and accept responsibility. It is another thing to then see your guilt standing before you with every opportunity to get vengeance. This is a terrifying encounter.

Joseph then calls them to come forward, and the question is, how is he going to respond to them? I'm sure the events of the last few months now seem to make sense. But they're now asking themselves, was he just toying with us? Does he want us to feel the same pain he did? What kind of vengeance is he going to seek? It is clear that he is upset as he just cried out loudly. It is clear that he is a man of authority. It is clear that they are guilty, and he knows this better than anyone. He clearly has something to prove, as he has been playing a game with them.

Like the Chinese farmer in the parable, people might say, "it is terrific, your brother is alive!" To which they can only say, "Maybe."

On Joseph's side, we might ask the same kind of questions. What was he thinking as he finally reveals his identity to his brothers in a puddle of his own tears? Did the pressure of the game he was playing to test them finally wear him down? Was Judah's speech just too much for him to bear? Was Judah's admission that God had revealed his guilt what he was waiting for, or did it catch him off guard? Was he expecting to catch his brothers betraying Benjamin, and so look them in the eye when he condemns them for doing the same thing to his brother as they did to him?

My guess is that Joseph, with all his administrative ability, had set up this elaborate test with holding Simeon back to get Benjamin to come, and then favouring Benjamin with the five-times the dinner portion, and then further framing him for theft of the divining cup because Joseph wanted to catch his brothers doing the same kind of sin again. When Judah stands in the place of his brother, and accepts Benjamin's punishment on himself, this disarms Joseph and his elabourate plan and he is left in tears.

Joseph must still have a huge level of emotional pain from what he went through. The sheer sight of his younger brother causes him to flee to cry alone previously, as did hearing his brother Reuben confess to his guilt in ch.42. The testing that he is making them go through is that of a wounded person not wanting to get wounded again.

Joseph's plan falls to pieces because of Judah's repentance. Judah is a changed man, humbled from his life, as we saw last week. But it leaves Joseph with a choice. He can't now point to a current sin in his brothers and really reveal them, but he can now point to their past sin and give them the guilty verdict they know they deserve.

While we might have been impressed with Joseph's wisdom and poise in continually trusting in God throughout all the adversity he faced, now we see him relying on God in what might be the hardest thing he has had to do yet, forgiving his brothers.

Surely, Joseph would have been justified in sending them all to prison for man-theft, even if it was twenty-two years later. God's Law will eventually come to say, "Anyone who kidnaps someone is to be put to death, whether the victim has been sold or is still in the kidnapper's possession" (Ex.21:16). There is no doubt that they are guilty in this, and now, the most powerful person in Egypt is the victim. One does not need God's law to know this is evil, and Joseph would be justified in sentencing the brothers for this crime.

But Joseph shows us a better path forward, and because of his forgiveness we see reconciliation. One of the wonderful things about this story is how relatable it is to our lives. Of course, we most likely won't be kidnapped and rise to become the prime minister, but there is something very universal in the story. We noticed last week how Judah's repentance was essential in making amends in family strife. We see here how Joseph's forgiveness does the same. And both of these are possible because we are able to look to God's hand in all things and trust him.

In Joseph's story there isn't big miracles or obvious signs that God is ordering things, but time and again, when the characters are given a moment of clarity, they use this to point to God and his providence. In this, Joseph's life looks a whole lot more like our lives. We, most likely, will not see big miraculous acts of God in our lives, but with eyes to see, we will see God's hand directing our paths towards something greater. Joseph is forced to try and discern where God is working in his life, not being given a clear sign. And yet, he still trusts that God is in control of all things despite not knowing exactly how.

To forgive his brothers, Joseph doesn't focus on his own injuries, but looks at his life from God's point of view. He sees a greater plan in play than simply his own immediate happiness in this life. He says, "God sent me ahead of you" three times in his reply to his brothers, and each time he does so he references an aspect of God's plan of salvation. That he says this three times is not simply a coincidence, he is pointing to the perfection of God's plan in his life.

First, he says in verse 5 that, "it was to *save lives* that God sent me ahead of you." The word for 'save lives' or 'preserve life' is the same word that is used earlier in Genesis for the

preservation of animal life on the ark with Noah. Just like in the story of Noah, Joseph recognizes that there is pain in God's judgement in this famine, but he is providing a way to come through it. This time, not only for a chosen family, but for all who are willing to come to Joseph.

Second, Joseph says in verse 7 that, "God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance." This word 'remnant' will become a very important term as the story of God's people progresses. Continually, we see a cycle of God's people being brought into the promised land by God's grace, to then be exiled in his judgement, and in exile God preserves a remnant. That is a group of people who find a way to remain faithful to God while outside of the promised land. Joseph's story is the first of these examples, as God's people are to be brought to Egypt in a kind of exile.

This exile, like the life of Joseph himself, is to bring his people out of the place of blessing for a time (usually in judgement), to bring about a greater blessing later. As we all know, when we are high on the hog, or everything is going as we like, we often forget about God. It is only when we face adversity that we are pulled back to God to rely on him. God's people have to go through this just like we do. We are given Joseph's story to see God's work in our story and so trust him with our lives. This makes us part of the remnant too.

Third, Joseph says in verse 8, "it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh…" In this, Joseph sees that God is planning something much greater than could have ever been anticipated. God is able to take over the greatest empire at this time, and didn't use a single army. The brother's actions, meant for a horrible evil, were used by God in the most unlikely way for an astoundingly good end.

As we see Joseph become a "father to Pharaoh," we remember that God is blessing his people in order to bless the whole world. Part of being "a father to Pharaoh" is in Joseph's forgiving his brothers by pointing to God's providence. Remember, Joseph's weeping is heard by Pharaoh's whole household. In this we see how the example of Joseph's forgiveness is a witness to the world he lives in. Pharaoh himself responds by in blessing the whole family after hearing about Joseph's story. This is just a glimpse of what will come with Christ, when all the nations are blessed with the gospel.

When we take this perspective for our lives, to rise above what we can see happening in our lives to see what God might be doing through us, or through a tragedy, then it becomes possible to forgive. Like Joseph, we might have a real strong and justified impulse to hold people accountable for what they have done to us, or to those that we love. That is to be expected, but it will not ultimately bring healing. But when we see God directing everything,

and that he will ultimately direct all things in his perfection, then forgiving others is a matter of trusting him, and his plan for our lives and those around us.

Remember when we looked at Joseph's wisdom, what is the key to understanding his interaction with Pharaoh? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, not the fear of a great man. Here too, what is the beginning of wisdom in learning to live with family? Fear the Lord. Trust that he is ordering your way, that what might appear to be a horrible evil now, might become a beautiful image of God's grace, an eternal thing coming out of a tragedy.

That is how God shows his glory, using the weak to shame to strong, What the world thinks makes someone great is nothing in God's kingdom, and what is foolishness in the world is eternal goodness in the kingdom.

And often, we can't even enjoy the good gifts of God until we go through the hard parts of life anyways. Otherwise, we make those things our god, rather than putting the true God in that place.

Look at how the chapter resolves. The repentance of the brothers and the forgiveness of Joseph result in blessing for all. First, the text says that Joseph and his brothers were able to speak again (v.15). Back at the beginning of the story, it says, "when his brothers say that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him." But here, after all this, the relationship is restored, and they can speak to each other again.

Even look at the gifts that Joseph and Pharaoh give, the silver that they bought him with is multiplied. And they are also given new robes. Remember Joseph himself was once robed by his father. This gift was tainted with the sin of favouritism, but here, all the sons are robed by Pharaoh himself.

All this ends with an awesome anticipation of the resurrection. As the sons return to see their father, Jacob, they arrive with all the gifts Joseph and Pharaoh had given them and give their father the good news that Joseph is not dead, but alive. At first, he does not believe them, but after they confess the whole story to their father, he does. And he doesn't simply believe, but Jacob himself is revived. We might remember that Jacob repeatedly talks about how the death of Joseph would "bring his grey head down to the grave," and how the loss of Benjamin would do the same, and now he is revived.

At first, he doesn't believe, he was still in the fog of lies that the family had been trapped in. But when the truth comes out, and the brothers confess to him what they had done, it all starts to make sense. I wonder if his faith is then revived too, that what God had promised would come true, that what Joseph had dreamed would come true. Maybe he remembered

how way back he pondered the dreams of Jospeh, and what they might mean, and now is able to see what God was doing the whole time.

Had Jacob maintained faith in God's word he would not have needed to struggle so much, but now he is revived. Same thing for us, if we like Jacob forget God's promises, it only makes our lives worse. If we, like Joseph, remember who God is, and who we are, we will be able to live lives of wisdom, to avoid sin, to speak truly, and to offer forgiveness. The fruit of this life is seen in the restoration of this family, able to live as God designed them.

For Jacob, hearing about his son being raised from the dead is good news because Joseph loved and forgave. Had Joseph chosen not to forgive, but to imprison, and put to death his brothers, as they deserved, hearing about Joseph being raised from the dead would not have been good news at all. Jacob's spirit would not have been revived at that. Likewise, that Jesus died and rose again is only good news for us because he too loves us and covers us with his blood.

It is through the wonderful grace of God that he turns what we mean for evil to good. This is what we see most clearly on the cross, where we all crucify Christ daily with our sin, all of us were there shouting "crucify him" with our actions, and yet he chooses to forgive us. This is why we, like the Chinese farmer, don't reply, "maybe," when tragedy or prosperity strike, but see all events as God's blessing or judgement, either way, they are directed to our ultimate good in him, as we see on the cross.