

The Motley Bunch God chooses

There is a joke about a driver who is lost in the darkest depths of the countryside, and he's trying to find his way back to the hotel he's staying in.

He's desperate – a man has to desperate before he asks for directions – so he pulls over and asks a local how he can get to Hurst Green.

And the local looks at him for a moment, pauses for thought and says, "Well I wouldn't start from here."

- Maybe that's how we could sometimes feel about the church today.
- God promises that one day he will transform us so that we don't sin again. In Romans 8 that he is working today in all things for the good of those who love him, to make us more like his Son Jesus Christ. His Spirit is in us transforming us. And that transformation is part of God's strategy to save the world.
- Jesus said to his disciples, in John 13, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

- How are we going to get there?
- "Well," you might say, "I wouldn't start from here."
- We're a motley bunch, and at times we find it incredibly hard to get on with each other.
- As time goes by, we find it too hard to stay united in love together.
 - We fall into cliques of friends And other people feel isolated and left out.
 - Someone sins against us, and we find it hard to forgive them so we end up resenting what they did.
 - All of us know people whom we find it very hard to love.
- And a particular problem that causes division in our churches is selfish ambition.
- I think that lots of us find it hard when we see other people who are very gifted.
 - God tells us that we're all parts of a body, and we all have unique, different gifts to offer him.
 - But we end up coveting the gifts that other people have. Especially, if we see somebody being praised for the way they've used their gifts, or other people admiring somebody's gifts. We wish that we had that kind of praise and admiration for ourselves.
 - We feel competitive.

- Don't we sometimes find it difficult if somebody our age and stage of life is being asked to serve in certain ways, because people think they are gifted, and we aren't being asked? Don't we find it hard not to feel overlooked?
- Left unchecked, that kind of selfish ambition and vanity and envy is poisonous.
- At its worst we can even end up feeling slightly smug or happy or relieved when they slip up or fail at something.

- What a mess we are.

- If you were wanting to choose a group of people who would point people to God by the good lives they lead, you wouldn't start from here.
- But there is hope. A great deal of hope, and we see that as we look at what happened to Jacob's sons back in Genesis.

- If you've been with us, you'll remember that Jacob is Abraham's grandson, and so his family are the people of God in their generation.
- God promised to Abraham that the people of the world would be blessed through him and his offspring.
- But so far, Jacob's family have been totally unworthy of their calling.
- We've been left thinking, how is God going to use this group of scoundrels to bring him glory and show the world what he's like?
- If we were God, we certainly wouldn't have started from here.
- We would have looked for a family that was in good shape, where everyone was nice to each other.
- But in choosing this family, God is able to show us that you never earn your right to become one of his people. Salvation is all by his grace alone.
- Jacob had multiple wives. He preferred Rachel to the other mothers of his children, so he preferred the two sons born to her, Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph was a loud-mouthed bragger. The other brothers were jealous, and wanted to kill him. And instead they sold him as a slave for 20 shekels of silver and he was taken to Egypt.
- But now God has raised Joseph up in Egypt to be the prime minister, he has given him his Spirit so that he's guided Egypt to store grain during a famine that affected the whole land, and people from the nations are coming to him for food.
- The brothers have come to get grain, but they haven't recognized this supremely powerful chancellor as the brother they once sold into slavery.
- Now let's pick things up at the beginning of chapter 44. The story has three parts. Our first point tonight is, "Joseph tests his brothers with a challenge they've failed before."

1. Joseph tests his brothers with a challenge they've failed before (44:1-15)

- Joseph by now has been completely transformed from the spoilt young man he once was.
- And now this man of God, Joseph, sets up an ingenious test that will reveal whether his brothers have also become faithful to God in the years that have gone by since they sold him out.
- He orders his steward to put the grain in the brothers' sacks, along with the money they brought to pay for it, but then look at verse 2:
 - *Then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's sack, along with the silver for his grain."*
- Then in verse 4, the trap is set:
 - *They had not gone far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, "Go after those men at once, and when you catch up with them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid good with evil?'"*
- The brothers are sure of their innocence, so they protest too rashly – in verse 9:
 - *"If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves."*
- So the steward seems reasonable when he says in verse 10,
 - *"Very well, then, let it be as you say. Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame."*
- You can imagine the tension as each sack was opened.
- I don't know whether you've ever been in that kind of position, where even if you're innocent you start to feel guilty?
- I once had my bag searched flying into Perth Airport, and they said they were looking for drugs, and even though I knew I didn't have any, I was still shaking because it was so tense!
- Among the brothers there must have been a sigh of relief every time a bag was opened, but when they get to the last sack, Benjamin's sack, their hearts sink as the steward pulls out the silver cup.
- Verse 13 shows that they are devastated: *At this, they tore their clothes. Then they loaded their donkeys and returned to the city.*
- They throw themselves to the ground in front of Joseph in desperation.
- And Joseph tests them with his words of verse 15, "What is this you have done? Don't you know that a man like me can find things out by divination?"
- Joseph doesn't really use divination. It's part of the deception.
- So let's pause there, and can you see how incredibly clever this test is?
- It's a re-run of the dilemma they faced back in Genesis 37 with Benjamin's only full brother, Joseph. Think about the different scenes:
 - In both of them, a son of Jacob and Rachel has his future at the mercy of the other brothers.
 - Because he's the son of Rachel, Jacob their father prefers him to the other brothers, and they hate that.
 - In both cases, they have the option of selling him into slavery in Egypt.
 - They will have to go and tell their father what has happened, but here with Benjamin it will be easier than last time.

- With Joseph, they had to deceive their father Joseph into thinking Joseph had been attacked and killed. But here they'd just have to tell their father that Benjamin had been convicted of stealing in Egypt – which is true!
- And also, this time, the price for selling out on their brother is much more attractive than it was before.
- With Joseph, they got 20 shekels of silver, but here it's their own freedom at stake.
- They'd promised to become Joseph's slaves if one of them was guilty, but now they're being offered freedom to go home if they leave Benjamin behind.
- What will God's family do?
- But notice also that they are already beginning to pass the test.
- They tore their clothes, showing how upset they are at the position they are in. It's a far cry from the day when they tore *Joseph's* coloured robe off his back, and made their own father tear *his* clothes in sorrow at the loss of his son.
- It's a sign of their affection for their brother and for their father.
- God has been doing business with these brothers, and it's a different family now.
- And we need to hear that, for us to have hope as God's family today.
- So let's look at what happens next.
- Our second point is, Judah proves himself as the leader God has changed.

2. Judah proves himself as the leader God has changed (44:16-34)

- Judah's speech here is a key moment in the book of Genesis. He has already been identified as the leader of the brothers, in verse 14 – did you notice that? "Joseph was still in the house when Judah and his brothers came in ..."
- Judah isn't the oldest of the brothers, so he doesn't naturally have the right to lead.
- But Judah has earned that right.
- We see from his speech that he is the leader God's people need.
- God's grace has transformed him.
- In Genesis 37 it was his idea to sell Joseph.
- And in chapter 38 we were given a summary of what he has done in the 20 years or so since then.
- He married the wrong women – two of them. He was a bad dad, and his sons were wicked. Then he slept with his daughter in law because he thought she was a prostitute.
- But Judah has been broken since then. When he was confronted with his sin, he admitted that he was unrighteous, and we can tell here from this speech that God's grace has transformed him.
- When he sold Joseph, he shamelessly watched his Father mourn and grieve.
- But now he pleads with Joseph to let Benjamin go *because* of the pain it would cause his father to lose his favoured son.

- The jealousy that once plagued the family has gone. The selfish ambition that meant the boys hated Joseph for his privileges and his dreams has turned into a simple acceptance that this is the way things are.
- Have a look at verse 18:
 - *Please, my lord, let your servant speak a word to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, 'Do you have a father or a brother?' And we answered, 'We have an aged father, and there is a young son born to him in his old age. His brother is dead, and he is the only one of his mother's sons left, and his father loves him.'*
- Judah is willing to accept that Benjamin, as Rachel's son, is special to his father.
- Then that continues in verse 27 as Judah talks as though he's not even truly a son of Jacob:
 - *Your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One of them went away from me, and I said, "He has surely been torn to pieces." And I have not seen him since. If you take this one from me too and harm comes to him, you will bring my grey head down to the grave in misery.*
 - *So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy's life, sees that the boy isn't there, he will die.*
 - Verse 32: *"Your servant guaranteed the boy's safety to my father. I said, 'If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life.'*
- And then we get to the climax of the speech.
- And it teaches us something really important. The first step we need today before we can ever hope to become worthy of being the family of God who point the nations to him.
- The family of God need a leader like this.
- Have a look at verse 33:
 - *Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father.*
- It's the first time in the Bible that a man has sought to bear a punishment in the place of another.
- And Judah here is a shadow of his future descendant, Jesus Christ, who is the transforming servant leader that we need.
- Judah is the leader who would lay down his life for his people.
- It's this act that makes it fitting that Jesus will come from his line.
- Judah wants to be a slave so that his brother can go home to his Father. For us, we were guilty and in slavery to sin. But Jesus was led out of the city, as an exile, to be crucified, so that we, guilty sinners, could go home one day to the heavenly city of God.
- Judah pleads Benjamin's case before Joseph, and Jesus is the one who stands before *our* righteous judge and pleads his own life in our defence.

- Jesus is our brother, who was willing to be exiled from his father and his family so that we, his helpless, guilty brothers and sisters could go home.
- We're supposed to be moved by the love Judah shows here for Benjamin and for his father.
- But it points us to the greater ways that we have been loved like that, by a Father who cares for us – his lost children - more than Jacob cared for his son, so that he sent his perfect firstborn into the world because it was the only way to bring us back to him.
- Judah points us to Jesus, and Jesus is our saviour.

- And Judah is also an example to follow here, as the family of God today.
- Jesus says to his followers, “¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”
- So let's look at what happens next. Judah points us to the leader we need as the family of God.
- And in our third point tonight we see two key insights that can allow God's grace to transform *us* so that we love one another today.
- Our third point is, Joseph makes himself known to a family ready to rule.

3. Joseph makes himself known to a family ready to rule (45)

- Joseph surrenders his power and reveals who he really is. The family are brought back together and it's a reunion full of emotion and joy.
- Let's look again from verse 1 of chapter 45:
- *Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Make everyone leave my presence! So there was no-one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it."*
- Joseph has thrown out the Egyptians, and the riches he has with them, so that he can be identified as part of Jacob's family, God's people.
- *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. 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."*
- He reassures and comforts the brothers, and then have a look at verse 14:
- *Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterwards his brothers talked with him.*
- God, by his transforming grace, has broken apart and pieced back together this family so that they are ready to be his people and point the nations to him.
- What has changed this divided, hateful family into brothers who love each other so much?

- Well it's the same two truths about God's grace that can change us today into brothers and sisters who love each other even when we sin against each other.
- ***First, they've been convicted of the reality of their own sin.***
- ***And secondly, they've learnt to see everything that's happened from the perspective of God's sovereign grace.***
- Let's just look at those things in turn.
- First, they've been convicted of their sin.
 - In these chapters, the brothers have been wondering whether God is punishing them. And when they realise that this is Joseph, they're terrified.
 - Their fate is now in the hands of the one they betrayed.
- And we need that same conviction today. When we are sinned against by people in our church family, how important it is to remember our own sin. When we resent making sacrifices for someone in our church family, again it's vital that we remember what we really deserve from God ourselves. And when in our selfishness we resent the gifts or opportunities another Christian has, then it's an important tonic for us to focus on where we should *really* stand before God if it wasn't for his mercy to us.
- They've been convicted of their sin.
- And secondly, they've learnt to see everything through God's sovereign grace.
- Joseph has come to know, and brings his brothers to know, that God graciously works for his good purposes through all things – even through their sin.
- Have a look at verse 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." Verse 7, "**God sent** me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So it was not you who **sent me** here, but God."
- Joseph doesn't need to seek justice by condemning his brothers. And it's because he has had his eyes opened to see how God has been at work.
- And we need to hold on to that truth today.
- We are still responsible for our sin, and we're called not to sin.
- When somebody sins against you, doesn't it make all the difference to know that God can even work through the bad way they've treated you to bring about his good purposes
- He did it with Joseph; he did it with Jesus. It's the way that God works today.
- However aggrieved we feel in our church, God directs the mess of human history and the maze of human guilt to achieve his good purposes, and to make his people more like Christ.

- And as with the brothers, let's let these truths cure us from the dangers of selfish ambition and jealousy. When we see someone at church who is more gifted than us in a certain way that we'd really like to be, then instead of resenting them, let's remember that God is sovereign, and God is gracious, so that we can thank God that he is using that person and their gifts towards his good purposes for the world.
- To conclude, God has saved us to be His family in the world today, and to point the world to him by the way we love each other.
- He's given us the leader that we need, who stands in our place for our guilt.
- And He gives us hope that He can transform us by His grace. He does that by confronting us with the truth about the depths of our sin, but then opening our eyes to see his assurance that He is in charge, and He is working in all things for our good.

Let's pray.