

Genesis 44:3-34 & Lord's Day 15 >> Joseph 5: The Substitute

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Trouble in the Text

Anything that can go wrong *has* gone wrong.

There is famine in the Holy Land. Jacob and his family have run out of food. Jacob sends all his sons to Egypt to get grain – all his sons, except for Benjamin, that is, who has replaced Joseph as Jacob's favourite. The brothers encounter a cruel prime minister in Egypt who accuses them of espionage. To prove their innocence, the brothers must leave Simeon behind as collateral as they go home to retrieve Benjamin and then return. When they arrive home, they discover in the sacks of grain they have purchased in Egypt all the silver they used to purchase that grain; now to their father the brothers look like thieves.

Jacob refuses to risk losing yet another son by sending Benjamin down to Egypt. But now the grain they've purchased is gone. Once again Jacob and his family have run out of food. Judah finally convinces his father to let Benjamin accompany them back to Egypt. But now on their return trip home, it's discovered that someone planted the prime minister's silver cup in Benjamin's sack of grain. Once more the brothers are hauled into the prime minister's presence, where he demands that the thief – Benjamin – remains in Egypt as his slave while the other brothers are free to return home to their father.

As I said, anything that can go wrong *has* gone wrong.

And the sons of Jacob do not simply see their litany of woes as just dumb bad luck. With each reversal, they feel another slicing pang of guilt for how they sold their younger brother Joseph into slavery so many years ago. "Judah says, in no uncertain terms, they [are] all guilty."¹ Judah actually states that Joseph "is dead" (44:20). Although they sold him into slavery, Judah owns up to the fact that it was brothers' original intention to kill Joseph. Now the sinful plots and actions of their past have caught up with them, and it seems that everything is going wrong because of it.

Trouble in our Lives

We live in a Murphy's Law world, perhaps more so than we realize. If something can go wrong, if a relationship can be broken, if a body can develop a sickness, if a trust can be betrayed, if hopes can be squelched, Satan will jump at the opportunity. We live broken lives marked with sin in a broken world marked with sin.

No other historical event drives that home more than Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday. The brutality and pain – not to mention the injustice of it all – are beyond describing. The sinless Son of God is falsely charged, beaten to barely an inch of his life, ridiculed, insulted, crucified, forsaken (*cf.* Mk 15:1-37). Satan and his cronies must have been howling with delight. Their victory and Jesus' defeat – our defeat – seem sure.

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Joseph: A Man of Integrity and Forgiveness* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 138.

But if Satan does not understand on Good Friday how Jesus' death will actually deal Satan a crippling blow, Satan will find out soon enough. Perhaps Satan, along with the crowds who are thinking that they're watching just another Roman execution, would have found clues in Judah's speech to the Egyptian prime minister that there's more going on here.

Hope in the Text

Ironically, the Egyptian prime minister is none other than Joseph, whom Judah and the others had written off as dead! The one they had sold as a slave for 20 pieces of silver is now their Egyptian lord.

To this powerful Egyptian ruler, "Judah speaks straightforwardly and sincerely" while also "in a highly deferential manner."² Judah's speech is the longest one recorded in the entire book of Genesis, and it's been referred to as "a literary masterpiece."³ After essentially retelling the entire story to this point from his perspective, Judah tells the prime minister that the brothers simply cannot return to their father without Benjamin with them: "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. Your servants will bring the grey head of our father down to the grave in sorrow" (44:30-31).

Judah's concern for his father and his brother is remarkable considering he's the same person who said years earlier, "Come, let's sell [our brother] to the Ishmaelites" (37:27) and proceeded to help bloody Joseph's robe in order to convince his father that Joseph was dead.⁴ Now instead of trying to ditch one his younger brothers, Judah is pleading for his brother Benjamin. Judah—together with the rest of his brothers who have gathered around the Egyptian prime minister—are all changed men. "A formerly calloused Judah is now compassionate."⁵ Joseph's tests are proving it.

Judah's speech concludes with a proposal: He proposes a trade, a substitution. "Please let your servant," says Judah, referring to himself, "remain here as my lord's slave *in place of the boy*, and let the boy return with his brothers" (44:33, emphasis added). It's the very "first instance of human substitution in Scripture"⁶—where one person willingly gives up him- or herself in place of another. Judah is willing to sacrifice himself for the wellbeing of his family. We see irony here, too, in that it's Judah offering the substitution, "for he would then become the slave of the very one he had made a slave!"⁷ *Please, let me take my brother's place!* is Judah's impassioned plea.

² Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis" in *New Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 1; L.E. Keck, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 639, 640.

³ *Ibid.*, 639.

⁴ This says nothing about Judah's abhorrent immorality in the story of Tamar (*cf.* Gen 37). In his desire in Gen 44 for the good and right thing to be done, Judah reveals that through the years he has indeed become a different person. The tests that Joseph puts his brothers through confirm this for everybody.

⁵ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 562.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 562.

⁷ Fretheim, 640.

Hope in our Lives

In this very first book of the Bible, in this story of Joseph, “in Judah’s plea, here we can see a picture of Jesus – the greatest Substitute of all time – shining through.”⁸

Not unlike Joseph being dragged off to Egypt by the Ishmaelites, a guiltless Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot for a handful of silver (*cf.* Mt 26:14-15).

Not unlike Joseph arising to power and distributing food during a famine, God used that betrayal and the torture and the death on the cross that followed as His way to save countless people.

And not unlike what Joseph hears coming from Judah’s mouth, through the willing sacrifice of One, today all have the offer of freedom.

What Judah desires to do for one person, we see Jesus do for all humanity. The big name we call it is *substitutionary atonement*: As our Substitute, Jesus atoned for our sins, something we are unable to do. One Reformed theologian writes, “Christ’s sacrifice was fully ‘in behalf of’ because it took place ‘in the stead of.’”⁹ Because of our sin, we deserve to have been nailed to the cross. But “when we were condemned as guilty sinners, Jesus stepped into our place to suffer our punishment.”¹⁰ Jesus said to His Father, *Please let me take the place of my adopted brothers and sisters.*

“His voluntary suffering heals the breach between God and human beings.”¹¹ When God looks at us, He now sees Jesus where otherwise He would have seen our sin and banished us from His holy presence. To quote the catechism: “...By His suffering as the only atoning sacrifice, He ... set[s] us free, body and soul, from eternal condemnation, and gain[s] for us God’s grace, righteousness, and eternal life” (Lord’s Day 15 Q&A 37). Jesus was and is our Substitute, reconciling us to God and making us holy through His Spirit.

On this Good Friday, we are invited to respond to this substitution.

Maybe it moves you to tears like it does for Joseph as we read in the next chapter (*cf.* 45:2).

Maybe it inspires you to self-sacrifice for the good of someone else in gratitude for Christ’s ultimate sacrifice for you.

Allow me to invite you to respond in a way that looks a bit like what father Jacob does in our Scripture reading this past Sunday (*cf.* 43:11-14). As you recall, Jacob refuses to let Benjamin – his new favourite in which he puts so much hope – Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go down to Egypt in case he doesn’t return like Simeon or in case he is killed like Joseph (allegedly).

But “by [finally] letting Benjamin go, Jacob [forsakes] his fearful habit of holding on to anything connected with [his beloved deceased wife] Rachel. The moment he agree[s] to let Benjamin go, he surrender[s] himself and his house to God the Almighty.”¹²

So I invite you to let go of what you’re holding on tight to in place of Jesus, and surrender yourself to God the Almighty. He longs to be reconciled to you, making that possible

⁸ Robert M. Brenton, “Israel’s Story” in *Today* 51.2 (Mar-Apr 2001), 21 Mar.

⁹ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 309.

¹⁰ Brenton, 21 Mar.

¹¹ Waltke, 567.

¹² S.G. deGraaf, *Promise and Deliverance: From Creation to the Conquest of Canaan* (H.E. Runner, et al, trans.; St. Catharines: Paideia, 1977), 235.

through Jesus' substitution, as He takes our place on the cross. Judah's offer of substitution – as magnanimous as it is – actually pales in comparison to marvellous gift of freedom and life which God offers you and me in Christ.

Allow Jesus to be your Substitute.

It's what will make a Good Friday a truly Great Friday.

Sung response: "Man of Sorrows – What a Name" (*Psalter Hymnal* 482 #1-3),
which includes these words:

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
in my place condemned He stood,
sealed my pardon with His blood:
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

(Words: Philip P. Bless. Public Domain.)