

You've Been Framed

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 May 2016

Preacher: Michael Reader-Harris

[0 : 00] Right back to the very beginning, in chapter 37, you remember how Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery. He was taken to Egypt. Then, soon after that, he was thrown into prison.

Owing to his God-given ability to interpret dreams, he ended up out of prison and in Pharaoh's palace. He ended up, in fact, number two to Pharaoh with responsibility for the grain distribution and, indeed, the whole planning of that project.

In fact, it's such an exciting rags-to-riches story that if it wasn't in the Bible, he wouldn't believe it. And then Joseph's story in chapter 42, that's the chapter before the one we're looking at tonight, there's an interaction again between the family, who are back in Canaan, and Joseph, who's in Egypt.

And the reason that Joseph's got so involved in all this grain storage and distribution is because there's a famine. Well, there's a famine in Canaan 2.

So they have to come, the ten sons, well, that's all except Joseph, of course, who they've got rid of, and Benjamin, who stays behind, come down to Egypt to buy grain.

[1 : 18] And they come to their brother Joseph. But, of course, they don't recognize Joseph, but he recognizes them. So Joseph throws them into prison on the grounds that they may be spies.

And when this happens to them, they become deeply aware of their guilt on selling Joseph. And they end up having to leave Simeon behind and go back to get Benjamin.

And to their horror, on the way back, they find that in their sacks, there's the money that they took to buy the grain in the first place.

And now we're going to hear chapter 43 read to us. Well, I want this evening to look at four characters as we consider that passage.

The first thing I want to look at is the role of Judah. He comes to the fore, as you saw, as it was read. He takes the lead even more in the next section that we'll be reading later on.

[2 : 30] Tonight, I think we're particularly thinking about Judah. Now, previously, Judah had taken a lead really in the matter of sin. That was his speciality.

In chapter 37, it was Judah who proposed that they should actually sell Joseph into slavery.

He presented it as being both financially desirable and really the moral thing to do because it was a lot better than actually killing him. He's a sort of wheeler-dealer type, I think.

He did the negotiations. He sorted it all out. Then he behaved equally badly in chapter 38, which I was glad I didn't have to preach on. That's the one where he broke his promise to give his daughter-in-law in marriage to his son, rather confusingly called Sheila.

Judah then slept with his daughter-in-law, thinking her to be a prostitute. Then when she became pregnant, he was the one who, with appalling hypocrisy, proposed that she should be burnt for her sin.

[3 : 41] So Judah has done really badly up to this point. He's been a disaster area. Yet, even in chapter 38, we see how Judah is beginning to see his own sin.

He said of his daughter-in-law, she is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son, Sheila. Judah. We'll come back to Judah at the end.

The second thing we might note is that Jacob still has a favorite. Jacob hasn't really improved during the story.

I mean, having a favorite was what caused all the trouble in the beginning. Giving him the special Technicolor dream coat or whatever exactly made it so special was what caused all the trouble at the start.

And now when Joseph has gone, what does he do? Well, he has another favorite. He has Benjamin instead. And that, you know, we often, we used to sing a chorus, I don't know whether we still did it,

it comes from the Psalms, Remember not, O Lord, the sins of my youth.

[4 : 56] But Jacob exemplifies the fact that you don't have to be young to be particularly sinful. The sins of the old are just as real as the sins of the young. So we have the surpassing sins of Judah, not so much in this chapter, but before.

We have the foolish favoritism of Jacob, which causes so much trouble. And then we have the brothers. What do you want to think about them?

Well, we're beginning to see a change in the brothers as the story goes on, I think. Whereas in chapter 37, they were dishonest. They were the ones who lied to their father and said that Joseph had been killed by wild beasts and here's the dream coat all covered in blood.

Now they're completely honest. They've got, as became clear in the previous passage, the silver returned to them and they go and say, here's the silver back.

We want to return it. We've got new silver to buy the next lot of grain. We want to give you the original silver back. And when they try to return the silver, they find, probably to their horror, that God is at work.

[6 : 25] The steward says, it's all right. Don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks. I received your silver.

Now, if you were right with God, you'd go, wow, how exciting. God's in action. Even in Egypt, it's not just in Canaan that we can experience him.

But if you're deeply aware that actually you behaved astonishingly badly, that you got rid of your brother, then when you discover that God is real and he's actually in action in Canaan, I mean, in Egypt, just as he was in Canaan, you feel, hmm, this isn't all that great, is it?

They already were aware in chapter 42 that that God was judging them because of, which is what, and now they discover that, well, they're not exactly judgment, but they're just aware that things are happening that are not quite what they had in mind.

And then, of course, that anxiety gets ratcheted up as the chapter goes on. There's that wonderful bit at the very end of the chapter which I love, which is when they're going to have the meal and there's Joseph.

[7 : 58] Now, he has to eat on his own because he's pretending to be an Egyptian and so he's watching from a distance and I think the implication is, although it's not actually quite spelt out in the original, that he actually places them one by one and all the eleven of them turn out to be in exactly the right order, which, if they were doing with little children it might be easy, but with people of their age, they'd all look much the same age.

There wouldn't be such an enormous variation. He manages to place the whole lot and they look at it in horror and see that as a sort of super, they see that, they presume that Joseph has some supernatural scheme, some supernatural knowledge.

Here's God in action and then Benjamin gets five times as much as everyone else.

Now, that to us is a bit weird because we're not really hungry and most of us will be horrified to be given five times as much. It wouldn't seem all that attractive to most of us. But here are people coming from a place of famine and it's clearly a real treat to get a five times as large meal and so Benjamin gets this super duper meal and in a funny way that's a wee bit like getting a Technicolor dream coat.

He's been marked out as the special one. But you see how the brothers have changed? They don't go oh no, Benjamin's got the special meal.

[9 : 35] They enjoy the they rejoice in Benjamin's good fortune. They are being changed. They've already been changed from liars into honest.

Now they've been changed from jealous into people who are feasting and drinking happily with someone who's received special good fortune.

And then there's Joseph. We've had the surpassing sinfulness of Judah, the foolish favoritism of Jacob, the anxious amazement of the brothers and then we've got the transforming tenderness of Joseph.

Because Joseph is at work in all these chapters and what Joseph wants to do is to see the brothers transformed and he believes they can be.

And that's really important because actually Joseph was the sort of dictator type role where he could have had them killed for some bizarre thing like not, well, the whole incident about the money or whatever.

[10:47] He could easily have found a reason to get rid of them if he'd wanted. But he doesn't do that at all, does he? He actually wants to see them change.

He helps them to change. He was the one who was responsible for the harshness they experienced in chapter 42. Now he's the one who's responsible for the generosity they experience in chapter 43. He's the one who sets up the special meal with them all seated in their special order. And now he wants to do one more test to see that they really are transformed.

And all this is out of love. I would have liked love but I needed tenderness to make it, get my alliteration but actually he does have a tender heart.

He has to keep rushing out of the room to cry where no one can see him. So what he wants to do and we're going to see that in a moment we're just about to come to our second reading is he wants to put the brothers back into chapter 37.

[11:57] That's why I summarized it at the beginning. He wants to go back into chapter 37 and see how they perform. They're going to have a second chance to do really well or really badly.

They could dump Benjamin like they got rid of him or they won't. Let's wait and see what happens. We'll call our lesson readers up to read for us again.

so we have the brothers setting off back. I think they must have been really relieved to get away after the meal.

Setting off home that was great. I mean the whole experience was pretty odd. Having so much contact with Pharaoh's number two was not what you would expect when you go shopping.

You will suddenly meet the prime minister or whatever. That's not the normal experience I don't think. Not when I go shopping anyway. And they're terribly small town I think in some ways.

[13:02] Small towns aren't the right phrase. But they're very anxious in the first bit about having their asses stolen. Given the amount of wealth that Joseph had seems a very unlikely thing to happen.

It's a bit like if one was to bicycle to a party at Buckingham Palace and leave one's bike tied up one might be worried that the queen would take it. That seems to be their concern. But of course their asses don't get stolen.

So they're on the journey home and they haven't gone very far when they get caught up with and there is the steward turning up and saying that there's been a problem with Joseph's special cup and it's missing.

And so the brothers offer far too much in verse nine. They say if any of your servants is found to have it he will die and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves.

They offer death to Benjamin and servanthood slavery for the rest of them. And then I love the steward's response. It's absolutely spectacular.

[14:13] Steward says 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. If you've ever been at a really bad meeting when someone summarized your point in completely different form from what you said this is it because the steward is absolutely determined he's been instructed by Joseph that what they're to be offered is that the one person who of course is going to turn out to be Benjamin will be can become a slave and the rest can go.

Freedom for everyone else slavery for Benjamin that's what they're offered and so they then come to unpack the stuff and of course the cup is found in Benjamin's sack.

So then they've got a decision actually at that stage if they were where they were in chapter 37 it would be pretty straightforward wouldn't it? You dump Benjamin and the rest of you go.

That's what you've been offered. It's easy really and we have to find some way of explaining it to daddy like we did last time. And that seemed to be quite clear.

And they could even in chapter 37 they'd have gone that's the favourite gone. They could even have been pleased to see that happen. But it doesn't happen at all like that.

[15:30] No, they all go at once to see Joseph. And now I'm not going to say, it's a particularly splendid bit I think in the Technicolor Dreamcoat musical.

I'm only going to say it because if I sing it no one would enjoy it. They go, save him, take me.

Benjamin is straighter than the tall palm tree. It's a calypso but I'm not doing it in that style.

And then look what Judah says in verse 16 when he gets to Joseph. He says, what can we say to my Lord? What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servant's guilt.

Well, Joseph of course understands this bizarre sentence terribly well. He knows exactly what sort of guilt has been uncovered. But had Joseph not been Joseph, I think he would have taken that to be a confession that they had stolen the cup.

But that's what makes the story such fun, isn't it? Because when we read it, we always know whoever one is. We have a complete understanding of what's going on.

[16:39] Whereas the poor brothers are still in the dark. They have no idea what's going on. But we know. And then Judah speaks. I believe it's the longest speech in the whole of Genesis.

And first he speaks about his father. His father still has favorites. He makes that very clear. I love verse 27.

Your servant my father said to us, you know that my wife bore me two sons. Well, it's true, but it wasn't the only wife. But he's still concentrating on special wife and special sons.

And in the past, the brothers were reduced to fury by that type of statement. But now they can cope with it.

Judah can cope with that. He's grown up to the point where someone else's sins aren't going to throw him off. It's not his problem that his father has a favorite.

[17:42] He's coping with that and getting on. He's moved on from jealousy. And he's determined to keep his promise. again, we talked about the brother's newfound honesty.

Well, he's promised that he will bring the boy back. 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. So I'm going to keep my promise. But most of all, he's moved from surpassing sin to selfless self-sacrifice.

He offers his life. He says, take me and let Benjamin go free. He's actually moved from supremely sinful to Christ-like.

God's work. And in a way, that's what the whole passage is all about. I see that as the key thought for this week.

[18:51] There are lots of thoughts that appear in every portion of Genesis. We can see God's sovereignty working through. We can see him working out his will. But what we see this week, more than every other week, is that it's about transformation.

because the passage shows that however bad I am, however bad you are, you can be a Judah, selling your brother, sleeping with your daughter-in-law, gross hypocrisy, but you can be changed. I can be changed. God is able to make us new. God's in the business of transformation, building his kingdom, building it by changing people one by one.

And that's an exciting thought for a non-Christian. It's that thought that whatever I've done, I can be one of God's family, I can be changed.

It's also a thought for us as a Christian. Nothing I've done can stop me being changed. Because God can change me as he changed Judah.

[20:05] But that transformation is made possible, obviously by the sovereignty of God and his ability to work.

But there are some particular things we might pick out. I think Joseph's willingness to believe that the brothers can change is important and helps. I've been at the sheriff's court this week as a juror, you'll be glad to know.

one day I saw three people sentenced and not the people we were actually trying, they were sort of from the previous week I think. And I don't think anybody came in to support those three.

I might be wrong, but the people I saw in the public gallery were essentially the jurors waiting to be picked for the next trial. Maybe someone had come to support them, but I think they were on their own.

the solicitor in each case said that they were willing to change and going to change, and I believe there were social workers who were going to help them.

[21:09] It didn't seem to me there was much helpful support from people who turned up to be there with them. I do think transformation is helped.

We can help other people to change. That's what Joseph did. And the brothers, second thing in terms of transformation is that the brothers face up to the consequences of their sin.

We saw that in chapter 42. That's what's coming through all the time. They realize what they've done. Some people think that guilt is bad. I heard on a radio program the other day the following sentence, guilt is only for Catholic schoolgirls.

But that's not true. sometimes I think we believe that actually the really important thing is to feel good about myself. And there are some strengths in that. I'm not saying it requires a little bit of thought and I'm not going to spend ages unpacking that idea. But actually guilt's important and guilt takes us in the right direction.

[22 : 20] here are some phrases. We use the confession tonight. The one I think that's the prayer book communion service confession in modern English.

But there are similar phrases in the prayer book morning prayer confession. We've offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done. We have done those things which we ought not to have done.

And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults.

Restore thou them that are penitent. But actually what I want to suggest to you tonight is that confession is not enough.

I mean, confession and forgiveness are really exciting. I'm really excited by them. I go, wow, yes. But actually, God wants more than that.

[23 : 22] God wants transformation. That's a second stage. It means change. That same confession I just read from went on, and grant O most merciful Father for his sake that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life to the glory of thy holy name.

Just as we also heard in the words that we used. And that challenged me because I thought, do I actually want that sort of transformation? The brothers were given a second chance, and they got it right.

Do I want to be given a second chance with my sins to get things right? Or am I happy to do things badly the way I've often done them in the past?

Because God wants a godly people. That's what he's saving the children of Israel to be. It's more than just keeping them alive through the grain and through the whole story.

That is what's happening. They are being kept alive, but he wants them to be godly. Because he wants them to be a godly people that can save the world.

[24 : 43] If I find transformation difficult because I don't like change, then it might at least be worth thinking about the two sorts of Judah. Judah. I'd much rather be the second Judah than the first.

I do want to be changed. Lord, help me to want it more and help me to spend more time seeking Christlikeness. Because it's not surprising that the tribe of Judah, which Judah wasn't the eldest brother, but that tribe becomes the one that's based in Jerusalem.

It's the one that survives when the northern kingdom is swept away. It's the one that's still there when the Lord Jesus. I'm not saying that's necessarily due to this one moment, but I think Judah's very important because he is a selfless person in the end, and he offers himself.

I think that's my thought really tonight.

That's what I wanted to say. I wanted to look at those different things, and I wanted to offer to you and to me that thought that God can transform us and then use us to transform the world.

[26 : 16] God. So I want to finish by saying a prayer together. I put the general thanksgiving on the sheet. I could have used a confession prayer, but we've already had a splendid one.

So I thought we'd use a thanksgiving prayer, which ends up in the same place. So we don't just give thanks, splendid though that is, but we actually offer ourselves to God.

So let's pray together as we sit. Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving kindness to us and to all men.

We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life, but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace and for the hope of glory.

And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be your honour and glory, world without end.

[27 : 53] Amen. Amen. Amen. And