

**Text: Genesis 45:1-14**

**Theme: God meant it for good.**

**Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi on Remembrance Sunday, 07/11/2010 at 10.30am.**

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There are no obvious supernatural miracles recorded in the story of Joseph, yet true repentance is a miracle to beat all miracles. The change in Joseph's brothers is truly remarkable, a sign of God's grace at work in them. In this chapter we will look at Judah's speech to Joseph in which he pleaded for mercy. His willingness to sacrifice himself on behalf of Benjamin marks a complete turnaround in this man and is a mark of true nobility of character. It is a lesson to us never to write anyone off. Radical change is evident in all the brothers, however. Not only are they being saved from death by starvation in the famine, but they are being saved from themselves - they are radically renewed.

Now this is consistent with the Bible's overall witness. God is in the business of saving and transforming people. Usually this transformation is not an overnight event but that is the kind of thing we all tend to look for in life. We try the cream that helps us lose our wrinkles and look in the mirror next morning expecting to see a difference. Of course, it never works like that, if it works at all! In the same way, in the spiritual realm, the renewal of men and women is not the work of a moment or an hour; it's not usually something that happens suddenly in a crisis of 'complete surrender'. It is more often a work that takes place over the long term, as the Spirit of God does his work within us, gradually weeding out the roots of sin in our hearts and loosening our grip on this world and its values. It is the spirit of Jesus that makes Judah offer himself as a substitute and slave in his brother's place. And it is the spirit of Jesus in Joseph that gives him the grace to forgive his brothers unconditionally for all they have done to him.

### ***Emotion released***

We have to try to read ourselves back into that era. Egyptians were far worse than we Brits at expressing their true feelings. They practiced that inscrutability that hides all emotion behind a façade of 'coolness'. Joseph himself had obviously had to take on the character traits of his adopted nation, but he hadn't completely lost his ability to express his emotions. Earlier, when he had overheard his brothers admit for the first time their wrongdoing in getting rid of him, he had slipped off on his own to weep, so moved was he. But in public he had shown that control which would be expected of someone in such a high-profile job. He had been inscrutable, reserved and self-controlled.

*"And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it."*  
(Gen. 45:2)

He must have made such a fuss, but who could blame him? What love he must have still had in his heart for his father and even for his brothers; how deep the heart of rejection must have gone; how great his joy must have been at the reality of being reunited and reconciled to his brothers. A complex confusion of emotions must have been released in him, but perhaps above all he would have known heartfelt satisfaction at seeing the evidence of their true repentance, a real change of heart and mind and direction in these brothers of his. It may come as a surprise to us that the dominant emotion he felt for them was love. That is not said

directly in the text, but it can be inferred from his attempts to comfort them and draw them close to him.

Some of us have baggage from our past, but it has left us bitter and resentful. What we need is for God to work his miracle in our hearts, enabling us to love the guilty as God has loved us. The Bible has a word for this – ‘grace’. Grace is about showing love to unworthy offenders. In God’s case, He shows love and mercy to us in spite of the fact that we have offended Him by sinning against him. **In our case, grace is our response with love and mercy to those who have hurt or offended us, when anger and judgement would be the expected reaction. How do we do that? There was grace made available to Joseph, and there is such grace available to Christians. The grace of the Lord Jesus is stimulated within us as we look to Calvary, where He bore our sins in His body on the tree.** There we see our Lord taking the place of His guilty people, and in spite of our ingratitude and rebellion, securing our relationship with God. Meditate on the wounds of the Saviour and know it was for you He died, and see whether the more you meditate on Him, the more you treasure and value and love Him, till you are so grateful for His love for you that you must be gracious to those who have injured you.

### ***God meant it for good***

Here is a man who has spent a large part of his life reflecting on God’s ways with him. When his story began, we saw Joseph sharing with his family what he believed was God’s plan for them all. That plan is now in the process of being fulfilled. Now he explains the bigger picture of God’s work in their lives and in history. He speaks not to prove a theoretical point, but to give them comfort. Like the apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, Joseph comforts them with the comfort he had received from God:

*“... ‘It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth... So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God... God has made me lord of all Egypt.’”* (Gen. 45:5-9)

Here is a statement of biblical realism. There are two aspects to every event in our lives. On the one hand there is human mishandling or what we choose to call the blind working of nature, and on the other there is the perfect will of God. The way of true freedom from the tyranny of our circumstances is to see the will of God behind the events of our lives. This is what put things into perspective for our Lord Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as He prayed before His arrest, he agonised, as any of us would do, over the dreadful events that were about to unfold. But out of that agony He accepted the betrayal, the trial and the cross as ‘the cup my Father has given me’.

God has a good purpose for our lives. Joseph had believed it for years and it had sustained him during the times when there was no obvious indication that such a view was true. Believing in the providence of God makes us able to rise above our circumstances rather than be victims of them.

Sometimes people are doubtful about the value of theology or doctrine, especially the doctrine of God as sovereign. God’s sovereignty refers to His right to rule His world as He pleases. Some of us trip up at this. Occasionally it is the events of life that make us doubt it: *‘Why should bad things happen to good people?’* Don’t you think Joseph could have asked that

question? Yet it was this view of God that kept Joseph going through all those years. It was a high view of God's purposes and character. Our problem too often is that we think of God as altogether like ourselves. We project on to Him our own little perspectives and our finite wisdom and our short-term strategies. We really think he should act as if we humans were the centre of the world and the purpose of the universe. This is our basic sin of course. We make ourselves in a thousand ways the centre of the world. Humanity is turned in on itself. In fact, it's the most wonderful relief to be knocked off our little throne and yield to the sovereignty of the One who has the right to rule.

I want you to comfort yourself with the doctrine of God's sovereignty today. I want you to find peace in the fact that He can overturn your bad decisions; that He can cover your faults; that He can blot out your transgressions; and that He can retrieve good out of evil. Do you believe this?

Now it would be true that Joseph's brothers had been shown great mercy by Joseph, even before they knew who he was. He had provided for them and given them all they needed. Both his severity and kindness had led them to repentance; that is, to a change of mind and heart. Now the process of reconciliation moves a stage further. Joseph sets the tone by urging them to come close to him:

*“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.”* (Gen 45:3)

It is important to deal with this theme this way round. It was Joseph's theology applied to his own circumstances that made it possible for him to forgive. God's truth released 'the will for construction effort and the emotions for healing affection'. It is when we are ignorant of God's ways with us that we are most likely to nurture hatred and nurse grievances. It is accepting the sovereignty of God that releases us to forgive.

### ***The medicine of forgiveness***

*“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!’”* (Gen 45:4)

Do you see the grace and tenderness of God acting towards these men through Joseph? Those words, 'come close to me,' speak of great tenderness, a warm welcome, and acceptance. Conviction of sin is a terrible wound, but God does not want to destroy us by it, rather he wants to draw us close to Himself and heal the rift between Him and us. He wounds us to heal us.

We can well understand the profusion of emotions experienced by Joseph's brothers at this point. Chrysostom, one of the early preachers of the church, wrote:

*“I am surprised at the way they could stand there and gape without their soul parting company with their body, without their going out of their mind or hiding themselves in the ground.”*

So it was an uncomfortable moment for them. Coming to terms with our sin often is. It is when we realise that we have sinned against God, who has done us so much good, that we also face up to the depths of sin in our hearts.

*'To return evil for good is devilish. To return good for good is human. To return good for evil is divine.'*

How do I demonstrate the fact that I have been forgiven by God? I forgive other people! Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it like this:

*"It means that the proof that you and I are forgiven is that we forgive others. If we think that our sins are forgiven by God and we refuse to forgive somebody else, we are making a mistake; we have never been forgiven. The man who knows he has been forgiven, only in and through the shed blood of Christ, is a man who must forgive others. He cannot help himself. If we really know Christ as our Saviour our hearts are broken and cannot be hard, and we cannot refuse forgiveness. If you are refusing forgiveness to anybody I suggest that you have never been forgiven . . . I say to the glory of God and in utter humility, that whenever I see myself before God and realise something of what my blessed Lord has done for me, I am ready to forgive anybody anything. I cannot withhold it; I do not even want to withhold it."*