

## **Give Better Than You Got: Genesis 42:1-24**

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I remember the first time I left home and moved into a dorm with a room-mate. I discovered that the way that we did things at home were not the only way to do things. I was used to doing things the right way – from room temperature to music selections, to what hours to keep. He had different ideas, which were obviously wrong. Of course, now we were stuck together, living in the same 100 square feet for the school year. How were we to do this, when we had different ideas about how to live life at home?

Opportunities for conflict are everywhere, yes, even in the church! From politics to families, to sports rivalries to friendships, in business and in church, conflict happens. The question that I want us to wrestle with today from the story of Joseph is, “How do I “live Christian” with people that I disagree with?”

So often, when we read the stories of the Old Testament, we read them to look for role models to copy. This is how I grew up reading the Old Testament.

Look at Abraham’s willingness to move out in faith!

Noah built an ark and endured ridicule rather than be unfaithful!

Moses was the greatest leader and prophet ever!

David was the friend of God and the model for godly government.

Yet Noah got drunk and naked in his tent, causing the first family schism after the flood

Abraham allowed his wife to be remarried twice!

Moses was a murderer. So was David.

The one thing that we see from reading Genesis is that the bible does not shy away from the weaknesses, pride, and faults of heroes. Rather, it seems to revel in highlighting them.

Today we look at the latest story from Joseph, the dreamer, prophet, interpreter, and saviour of people during incredible famine.

Joseph has some great character traits that are worth copying, as Bruce reminded us last week. Don’t get me wrong. But he also has the same character flaws as you and I.

Many of us are familiar with Joseph’s story, or at least the generalities of it. He was the favourite of his father among twelve brothers, and that favouritism brought arrogance, as well as jealousy and resentment. Brought to the breaking point of their forbearance, Joseph’s

brothers threw him down a dry well, sold him into slavery, and covered up their crimes by telling Joseph's father, Jacob, that he'd been killed by a wild animal.

Throughout the next twenty years, Joseph finds himself a slave, a prisoner, forgotten, and discarded. He also has an incredible rise to power through miraculous blessing until he finds himself as the second authority over all of Egypt, married into Pharaoh's royal court, and the hero of a seven-year famine.

It is during this famine that Joseph's own brothers come to purchase food for their starving families, and they find themselves bowing to Joseph, who is unrecognizable in his Egyptian power and finery from the naked slave they sold years ago.

And so begins Joseph's "testing" of his brothers.

Imagine how many times this moment has played out in Joseph's dreams and fantasies over the years. Do you think that Joseph imagined that he would confront his brothers with grace and mercy, regally forgiving them for the lost years of his abandonment, his lost family, his enslavement and imprisonment? Not if he was anything like me, he wouldn't. Instead, I imagine each response, each idea, each reprisal and act of revenge planned, massaged, and honed to perfection. What would he say? What would he do? How would he make sure that they suffered as he had?

I think that the details of this story support my theory, but that will come in a moment. For now, imagine what the result of his brothers' actions would have been on Joseph? Talk about trust issues! Imagine being confronted by them, the ones responsible for all that he had lost? No wonder he had to leave the room to get control of himself at one point.

I've always heard that Joseph was testing his brothers to see if they had repented of their sin against him. And there is probably be a lot of truth to that. After all, if someone has broken trust with you in relatively minor ways, let alone such catastrophically disastrous ways as this story, then it is natural to feel unsafe around them. We want to know if we will get hurt or betrayed again. So, we avoid, and when we can't, we test and probe, to see who these people are.

There is another layer to Joseph's tests, though. Let's look at them.

Look at Genesis 37:2, "Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers. . . and he brought their father a bad report about them." And later in verse 14 Jacob sends Joseph out, saying, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me."

His brothers thought that Joseph was spying on them for his father. So, Joseph accuses his brothers of spying in 42:9.

In 39:20 we read, "Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were kept." Joseph also imprisons all of them for three days in 42:17, and keeps Simeon in prison indefinitely in verse 19.

Joseph was sold into slavery in 37:28. "So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt." Then, in 44:6-10, Joseph threatens Benjamin with slavery.

What does all of this tell us? It means that Joseph, in every regard, is giving as good as he got. Now that he has the power, he is taking full advantage of it. It is a natural reaction when one is betrayed, abandoned, and broken. The results are just as predictable.

Now, his brothers are falsely accused, bullied by a powerful authority, refused the charity that they need for their families, imprisoned, threatened with slavery. They've been forced to abandon yet another brother, and heard their father give Simeon up for dead to protect his new favourite son. We also see that their decision, in anger two decades ago, has held them imprisoned and enslaved as surely as Joseph's more literal chains. No matter where they turn, they are confronted with their failure and guilt.

So when Joseph says in 45:24 that they should not become afraid and agitated on their trip home (Many translations use the word 'quarrel' yet there is no context for what Joseph count mean for them to argue over. Instead, many translators believe that Joseph was asking his brothers to trust him, that despite his power he will not send an army after them to destroy them.), there is no chance that they trust him enough to take him at his word. His actions, his manipulations, his dishonesty, have made them doubt Joseph's character and intent.

This pattern of deceit and broken trust is basically a family heirloom at this point in Genesis. Cain, Abraham, Jacob, now Joseph. And the results are always impending disaster. God consistently has to step in and rescue them.

And I think that this is what this passage is actually about. I get it. Joseph's motivations are actually unknown in the story. But remember the great summary verse in Genesis 50 that Bruce reminded us of last week. "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

This is not a story about Joseph's moral greatness compared to his brothers' moral failure. Remember, each of these brothers establishes an entire tribe of Israel. Instead, I think it is about God's ability to shape people of character out of flawed, broken, deceitful people.

And God only knows why that is such an important main message for us in churches today, in 2020 Lethbridge. While not to the same extremes, we have had plenty of opportunity to be divided as people. We've been divided over transitional housing. The Safe Consumption Site. Politics. Face masks. Virtual church or in person church? One congregation does things one way, and another congregation does things another way.

Two statements I've heard in the last week alone: "I can't believe that *church A* isn't meeting in person yet. Where is their faith? Why are they so afraid?" And "I can't believe that *church B* is meeting in person. It's not possible for them to be doing it safely. Now I have to explain to my friends why Christians are so entitled and disrespectful of public health."

Such statements follow in the pattern of Joseph, testing, probing, to see if the person we are talking to is on our team, or if they are part of the delusional "other."

God, however, points us to a better way. God uses hard experiences, chaos, and challenges, to mold us into Godly Characters. We have to be able to be together, worshiping the one true God, despite thinking differently. After all, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:4-6). Instead of giving as good as we get, Christians need to be known as the people who give better than they get.

How do we do this?

First, seek to understand before you seek to be understood. Assume positive intent – most people do not set out to burn the world down around them. They are doing their best with what they have. Ask questions out of genuine curiosity.

Do a gut check. Remember, you are not responsible to change someone else's mind – but you are responsible for the attitude of your own heart. Judge yourself according to Philippians 2:4 which says, "do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." Am I considering how I am making others feel or act with my decisions? Sometimes, we are the older brothers, acting with dishonesty, malice, or manipulation. Why are we acting that way? Do I feel threatened, unsafe, or angry? We need to know our own hearts, so that we can do as Jesus command us and remove the wood from our own eye before correcting someone else.

Calm connection. Don't pull away. Engage. Proverbs 15:1 says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

Let's face it, brutal honesty feels good in a fight. I find that it is often heavy on the brutality, and light on the honesty part. Likewise, it can feel good to outmaneuver, outwit, shame or blame to get our way. But these are not Godly character. Calm words, genuine questions, and actual grace diffuse the explosiveness of conflict.

Finally, remember humility. The story of Joseph is not actually about Joseph, his brilliance and wisdom, his shrewdness and cunning, or his saving of people during a famine. God did all of those things through him. Likewise, it is not our job to point out other's errors, shame them for their stupidity or mistakes, or for having ideas that are different from ours. Our job is to be the compelling, amazing, community of Godly characters who give back better than what we are

given. People are not compelled to know Jesus because of us. They are compelled when God acts through us.

We are just starting to come to grips with this pandemic thing. We could become arrogant and judgemental towards those who do not meet our PPE standards. We could also become smugly arrogant, believing that this was not a real threat, looking to prove our boldness by disrespecting the boundaries others have enacted to make people feel safe and comfortable.

Friends, both of these responses are sinful, and have no place in the Christian life. Instead, church is a place of ongoing meetings of the characters of God, who seek first to understand before they are understood. Who speak calmly and gracefully, rather than forcefully or manipulatively, and who are humble in their approach to other people's ideas and beliefs. Who believe that there is one God, one church, and we are all part of the same family.

We worship a God who sees the chaos, the evil, the brokenness around us, and works relentlessly to rebuild creation towards his glorious end. Let's do our part, when we worship, when we shop, and in every interaction we have.