

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001

## HOW GRACE LEADS TO REPENTANCE

Genesis 43:15-44:17

by

Steven J. Cole

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Genesis Lesson 72

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Years ago, a leading pastor's journal ran an article by an anonymous pastor who described his losing battle against lust and his "addiction" to pornography. I did not read the article because Marla read it first and told me that it was too gross for me to read. But based on her comments, I wrote a letter to the journal in which I expressed my concern that the man's approach for dealing with his problem was not in line with Scripture, and I outlined a more biblical approach.

Five years after the article appeared, the same anonymous pastor gave an update on his struggle. As Marla read the update, she said, "Hey, he quotes you!" Sure enough, he quoted from my letter, saying that I could not identify with his struggle and that I was offering him "stern advice, mostly consisting of admonishments from the Bible." The implication was that to tell him what the Bible said was not compassionate and not much help in coping with this terrible "addiction."

On other occasions I have been accused of not understanding or not preaching grace because I often preach against sin and call people to holy living. The current common evangelical notion is that grace means having a hang-loose attitude, and, above all, not coming down too hard on sin.

The grace of God is a crucial theological concept to understand. Grace is at the heart of salvation, for we are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Grace is essential for holy living, because Paul says that sin shall not have dominion over us, because we are not under law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14). Grace is the motivation for serving God, because Paul says that by God's grace, he labored even more than the other apostles; then he adds, "yet not I, but the grace of God with me" (1 Cor. 15:10).

So in light of the prevailing idea that grace implies being easy on sin, and because of the pervasive influence which God's grace has on the Christian life, it is crucial for you to think clearly about grace. Properly understood, grace does not lead to tolerance of sin, but to the fear of God and to turning away from sin (Ps. 130:3-4; Titus 2:11-14). This is illustrated in our text, the story of Joseph's second meeting with his brothers, which portrays the truth of Romans 2:4, that "the kindness of God leads [us] to repentance."

Joseph's brothers have finally convinced their father, Jacob, that he must part with Benjamin if they want to buy more grain from the harsh man in Egypt, who is holding their brother, Simeon, in prison. So the brothers took the present Jacob prepared, plus their original money which had been mysteriously returned to them, plus enough to buy more grain, and Benjamin, and returned to Egypt.

Quaking in their sandals, they stood before Joseph, who didn't speak to them, but said something to his steward. The next thing they knew they were taken to Joseph's house. The brothers feared that he was going to enslave them on account of the money that had somehow been put back in their sacks on their first visit. So they explained matters to the steward, who told them, "Relax! Your God and the God of your fathers has given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money." Then he brought out Simeon. The next thing the brothers knew, they were treated to a lavish feast. When they were seated according to their precise birth order, they got an eerie feeling--what did this man know? And it seemed strange that Benjamin was given five times more food than anyone else.

But the next morning they were sent on their way; everything was fine. As they left the city and headed out for Canaan, they were giving each other "high fives." Simeon was freed; Benjamin wasn't taken hostage; they had enjoyed a great meal; and, they had their sacks stuffed with more grain. They could hardly wait to get home and tell their father the good news. They were relieved to be through dealing with this powerful, mysterious Egyptian. They hoped the famine would be over before they had to come back

again.

Suddenly their happy chatter came to a halt as they were overtaken by Joseph's steward, who accused them of stealing Joseph's silver drinking cup. They protested their innocence. After all, they had been honest enough to bring back their money from the first trip, as well as their younger brother. How could he accuse them of such a thing? But a search discovered the cup in Benjamin's sack, where the steward had planted it as Joseph had directed. The shocked brothers returned to Joseph, where Judah spoke for all by saying, "What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants" (44:16). He goes on to plead that he may become a slave in Benjamin's place, which leads Joseph finally to reveal his identity to his brothers.

In all of this, Joseph has been testing his brothers, to lead them to repentance for their sin of selling him into slavery 22 years before. He is finding out their attitude toward their father, toward Benjamin, and toward God. When he sees that they are truly repentant, he reveals his identity. His actions toward his brothers parallel God's action in leading us to repentance. The story shows how ...

God's grace leads us to repentance by  
revealing His great love and our great sin.

Joseph's love for his brothers motivates all that he does, even the things which seem to be harsh. His actions show how ...

1. God's grace leads to repentance by revealing His great love.

This isn't the first time that the brothers have encountered Joseph's love for them. When they returned home from their first trip and each discovered his money returned, it was because of Joseph's love. I doubt if he intended for them to panic.

A similar thing happens on this second journey. The brothers arrive and Joseph tells his steward to take them to his house for lunch. His intention is simply to treat them to a good meal and to find out any news from home, as well as to discern where their hearts are at. But the brothers panic and think that he is going to take them as slaves. Shakespeare wrote, "Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind" ("Henry VI"). Here, the brothers' longstanding guilt is still haunting them. When Joseph had put them in the dungeon on the first trip, even though it had been over 20 years since their crime, and there had been no mention of it, they said, "Truly we are guilty because of our brother ...; therefore this distress has come upon us" (42:21). Now their guilt makes them suspicious of Joseph's love.

A. Guilt causes us to fear God's love.

As John Newton wrote in "Amazing Grace": "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear." When you know you're guilty, God's undeserved favor makes you feel uneasy. What's the catch? It sounds too good to be true.

So, what do you do? You try to pay your own way. That makes you feel better about the arrangement. So when the brothers get to Joseph's house, they spend their time waiting for him to come by arranging the gift that they've brought to placate him (43:25). After all, their attempt to return their money hadn't made the impression they had hoped for. So everything was riding on this gift. "Reuben, do you think the almonds should be given first?" "No, I think we should save the almonds for last. Let's give him the pistachio nuts first." They were counting on this gift as their hope for acceptance.

That's typical of sinful man's attempt to approach God with his own efforts. A man is nervous about his sin when he approaches a holy God, so he says, "Maybe if I give some money at church, God will accept me. Maybe

I'll add some other good deeds, too." So we bring our pistachio nuts and almonds to placate our guilty consciences and hopefully be accepted by God. But God's response is the same as Joseph's: He completely ignores our gifts! Joseph doesn't even comment on their elaborate present.

There is a good reason, of course, for us to be afraid of approaching God: *We are* guilty; He is absolutely holy. He has the power to do to us whatever He wants, just as Joseph could have sold his brothers into slavery if he had chosen to do so. If that were all we knew of God, we would never dare to approach Him. But there is another side, God's kindness and grace, which encourages us to relax a bit and join Him at His table.

B. God's grace relieves our fears--*almost!*

"'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." Joseph's kind treatment of his brothers allowed them to enjoy this sumptuous meal (43:34). But they still have not dealt with that nagging, deep-down guilt, so their fears are not totally relieved at this point. You sense that they really relax only after they head for home.

Note the many signs of Joseph's love for his brothers. First, there is the steward's great reply when the brothers express their concern about the money in their sacks (43:23). Coming from an Egyptian steward, it must have stunned these men. "Be at ease" is literally, "Shalom!" "Peace to you, don't be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money." He's saying, "I received your money, but somehow your God returned it to you. Take it as a gift from Him." It shows that Joseph had been talking to his steward about the true God. Returning their money was a sign of Joseph's love for his brothers.

Next, Simeon was returned. They didn't know but what he was long gone, on some chain gang building the pyramids. My guess is that he had put on a little weight during his stay in prison. His healthy return to his brothers was another sign of Joseph's love. Then, the steward brought out water to wash their feet and provided fodder for their donkeys (43:24). They weren't being treated roughly, as prisoners, but with the respect given to honored guests.

When Joseph arrived home, he asked them (still using an interpreter) about their welfare, and especially about their father. Then Joseph saw Benjamin. He had seen him from a distance earlier in the day (43:16), but now he could see him better. Joseph was 16 years older than Benjamin, his only full brother. Benjamin had been only a year old the last time Joseph had seen him. As he gazed upon Benjamin, thoughts of his family and his mother, who died giving birth to this child, flooded over him. He managed to say, "May God be gracious to you, my son" before he was overcome with emotion and left the room to weep.

Then, he treats them to this great feast. Joseph, being the master, sat at a table by himself. His Egyptian servants sat at another table, not wanting to defile themselves by eating with these Hebrews. They must have wondered why in the world Joseph would invite these hicks from the sticks to eat in his home. Then, even more puzzling, why did he keep giving them portions from his table, a sign of special honor? Benjamin got five times as much, again due to Joseph's special love for his own full brother. Some think he was testing the other brothers, to see if they would be jealous.

The final expression of Joseph's love is seen when he tells his steward to fill each man's sack with as much

food as they can carry and to return each man's money again to his sack. He didn't want them to have to pay for their food, but wanted to supply it freely because he loved them.

To this point the story is a marvelous illustration of what theologians call "common grace," which is God's undeserved kindness shown to every person. Like Joseph's brothers, who had sinned terribly against him, every person has sinned against God. If He gave us what we deserve, we would all go straight to hell. But as Jesus said, "He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:35). He grants us the many blessings of life when we deserve His judgment, so that we will turn from our sin.

Romans 2:4, asks: "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" If you have not turned from your sin to faith Christ, you are shrugging off the kindness of God. The next verse warns, "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." In other words, now is the time when God has graciously shown you His kindness so that you may turn to Him. But if you shrug it off, the day of judgment lies ahead.

I said that God's grace relieves our fears--*almost!* What I mean is, at this point in the story, before the brothers have acknowledged their sin, the kind treatment they have received from their brother whom they have wronged has almost taken away the fear caused by their guilt--almost, but not quite. When they sit down to this meal, to their astonishment they are seated in the exact order of their birth. And, contrary to custom, the youngest is given the most. This made these brothers a

bit nervous. They had the feeling that this man had some uncanny power to know things which they had not revealed.

As you begin to warm up to God's love, your fears due to your guilt are almost relieved. Almost, because you begin to sense that this One with whom you have to do is able to discern the thoughts and intentions of your heart, that all things are laid bare before Him. It's a bit disturbing! And you begin to see that He doesn't deal with you as the world does, with the privileges going to the strong. Rather, the weak are the objects of His grace. He doesn't let you keep drawing near to Him based on your strength, while you cover up past sins. His grace peels back layer after layer, until you stand naked and defenseless before Him.

Even so, Joseph wouldn't let his brothers skate away without getting to the bottom of their sin, which they must bring to the light. So he planted his special drinking cup in Benjamin's sack and sent them away, only to bring them back ready to admit their guilt and sin.

2. God's grace leads to repentance by revealing our great sin.

Joseph's final test, of placing his drinking cup in Benjamin's sack, revealed whether or not his brothers were truly repentant over what they did to him years before, because it gave them the chance to treat Benjamin just as they had treated Joseph. They could have left Benjamin in slavery in Egypt, told their father what happened to his favorite son, and moved on with their own lives. But there had been a change in their hearts. They would not abandon Benjamin, even if it meant their own slavery, and they would not return to their father without him.

There are different views of Joseph's "divination" cup. I think

it was part of his continuing disguise. He identifies it to his steward as "my cup, the silver cup," but then instructs him to tell his brothers that it is the cup his master uses for divination (44:2, 5). The steward wouldn't have thought of it this way, because Joseph didn't practice divination. But he tells his brothers (44:15), "Don't you know that such a man as I can indeed practice divination?" because he wanted them to think that he was an Egyptian with the power to know their secrets until they confess their sin. But their tendency, like ours, was to cover it.

A. Our inclination is to extol our innocence.

When the steward overtakes the brothers and accuses them of stealing Joseph's cup, they protest their innocence. Of course, they were innocent of this charge. But it's kind of like nailing a mafia guy on a sting operation where he's innocent of this crime, but he's done the same thing and worse many other times. The steward, knowing exactly where the cup is, begins with the oldest and works down the line. As each sack comes up empty, the brothers self-confidently nod their heads, saying, "See, there's no cup. You're wasting your time." But then he comes to Benjamin's sack, pulls out the cup, and the brothers are in big trouble.

God used this to strip these brothers of their self-confidence and cast them upon Joseph's mercy. He has to bring us all to the place where we give up trusting our own integrity and our gifts that we bring to gain acceptance, so that we fall before Him and seek His undeserved favor. F. B. Meyer writes (*Joseph* [CLC], p. 86.),

There is a stolen cup in your sack, my respectable, reputable, moral friend. You are probably unconscious of it. You pride yourself upon your blameless life. You suppose that Christ Himself has no

controversy with you. But if only you knew, you would see that you are robbing Him of His own. You use for yourself time and money and talents which He bought with His own precious blood, ...

B. God's intent is to expose our iniquity.

Even though the brothers knew they were innocent of taking this cup, they also knew they were guilty of a whole lot more. Judah speaks for them all in saying, "God has found out the iniquity of your servants" (44:16). True repentance doesn't make up a defense for the small area where you're innocent, but rather admits the larger sphere where you're guilty.

Joseph twists the knife when he says, "I'll keep as my slave the one who took the cup; the rest of you, go in peace to your father" (44:17). How could they go in peace to their father if they left Benjamin as a slave? When they stick with Benjamin, Joseph knows that they have fully repented of their sins. That leads him to reveal his identity to them.

#### CONCLUSION

God's grace should lead us to expose our sin, not to cover it. God's grace doesn't paper over guilt. His grace means that Christ bore our guilt so that we could go free. That should lead us to repentance.

During the Korean War, a South Korean Christian man was arrested by the Communists and ordered shot. But when the young Communist leader learned that the man was in charge of an orphanage, he decided to spare him and kill his son instead. So they took this man's 19 year-old son and shot him as the man watched in horror.

Later, the same young Communist leader was captured by the UN

forces, was tried and condemned to death. But before the sentence could be carried out, the Christian whose son this man had killed came and pled for the life of the killer. He argued that this Communist was young, that he really did not know what he was doing. The Christian said, "Give him to me and I will train him." They granted the request, so this father took the murderer of his son into his own home and cared for him. Today, that man who was shown such unusual kindness is a Christian pastor. Grace led him to repentance.

Like Joseph with his brothers, the Lord already knows about your sins, but He wants you to confess and forsake them, so that He can reveal Himself to you. The Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died to rescue us from the penalty of our sins. When we see His great love and our own great sin, the only proper response is to turn from our sin to His loving arms.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are grace and obedience opposing concepts? How do they fit together?
2. Do we emphasize God's love: a) too much? b) not enough? c) about right? What about His wrath and judgment?
3. How do repentance and faith fit together? Is repentance necessary for salvation or is faith alone sufficient?
4. Discuss: A false concept of grace in our day has led many Christians to be too sloppy about sin and too "chummy" with God.

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