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## APPROACHING GOD

Genesis 44:18-34

by

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Genesis Lesson 73

APPROACHING GOD  
Genesis 44:18-34

Have you ever thought about the fact that our American form of democratic government hinders us from understanding how to relate to God? Don't misunderstand: I love our country and its form of government. But a system where we can vote our own minds gives us a lousy model of how to relate to a supreme authority, such as a king. And God is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the supreme, absolute, sole authority in the universe that He created. We cannot relate properly to Him unless we learn to submit to an absolute Sovereign. And our form of government leads us astray on that matter.

Americans cherish their individual right to challenge authority. If we don't like a leader, we'll vote the turkey out of office. The American spirit is summed up in the Revolutionary flag with a snake on it with the motto, "Don't tread on me." Nobody's gonna push us around!

If we're not careful, as American Christians we tend to bring that same defiant spirit into our relationship with God. This was pictured in a "Frank & Ernest" cartoon, where the two bunglers are approaching the Pearly Gates. A frowning Saint Peter is looking at Ernie, who is wearing a T-shirt that says, "Question Authority." Frank whispers, "If I were you I'd change my shirt, Ernie." If God's Word says something that we don't like, our attitude is, "I don't have to obey that!" If a pastor teaches something we don't like--never mind if it's in the Bible--we'll find another church more in line with our tastes. The concept of being in submission to church leaders sounds cultish to us. "If those church leaders don't do what I want, I'll either vote them out of office or take my money to another church!"

You may be wondering, "What does all this have to do with the

story of Joseph and his brothers?" As we've seen, Joseph's actions in dealing with his brothers parallel God's actions in dealing with us to bring us to repentance. When his brothers stood before him, seeking to buy grain, and did not recognize him, Joseph immediately could have said, "I'm Joseph, you're forgiven, and everything is wonderful!" But everything would not have been wonderful, because these brothers needed to repent of their terrible sin of selling Joseph into slavery before they could be restored. So Joseph put them through a series of tests to bring them to repentance, culminating in the incident of accusing Benjamin of stealing Joseph's silver cup (44:1-17).

Now the brothers have returned to face Joseph, falling before him (44:14). Judah, speaking for them all, reflects their repentant, broken spirit, when he cries, "What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants" (44:16). He then tells Joseph that they all would become his slaves. But Joseph gives them a final test, an opportunity to take advantage of Benjamin by saving themselves, when he says, "I'll only keep as my slave the one in whose sack the cup was found; the rest of you can return to your father in peace."

In reply, Judah gives this eloquent, impassioned speech, called by some the most moving speech in the Bible, in which he pleads with Joseph on behalf of Benjamin. Luther called this speech a perfect model of prayer. I suggest that Judah's broken, contrite approach to this powerful monarch is a model for how we as sinners are to approach our God, the King of kings.

Sinners approach God by submitting to His authority,  
owning up to their sin, and appealing to His compassion.

There are three elements in Judah's appeal: 1) An *attitude*, namely, *submission* to Joseph's authority; 2) An *action*, namely, *repentance*, a change in Judah's behavior in which he is willing to offer himself as a slave in Benjamin's place; 3) An *affection*, or emotion, seen in the *heartfelt appeal* to Joseph's compassion, where Judah sets forth

the devastating effect which Benjamin's slavery would have on his aged father, Jacob. These three elements show us, as sinners, how to approach our omnipotent, holy, sovereign God.

1. Sinners approach God by submitting to His authority.

When the brothers return after being caught with Joseph's cup, even though they are innocent of this particular crime, they fall down before him (44:14). Never once do they question Joseph's absolute right to do to them whatever he chooses. Judah begins and continues with total submissiveness: "Oh my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are equal to Pharaoh" (44:18). Even though he is dealing with what probably seemed to him an injustice, Judah puts himself completely at Joseph's mercy and doesn't presume that he even has a right to speak to him. From verse 16 to verse 34, Judah refers to himself or to Jacob as "your servant" 14 times, and 9 times he refers to Joseph as "my lord." This illustrates two things about God's authority over us:

A. God's authority is a rightful authority.

God can do whatever He pleases, because He alone is God. He is the only self-existent Being. All others, including Satan and all the angelic beings, are created and finite. God alone is uncreated and infinite. He spoke into being all that exists in the universe. All things serve His purposes. If He chooses to afflict a righteous man like Job as a demonstration of His glory to Satan, God doesn't have to give an account or explanation to anybody (see Job 38-42).

Can you imagine where Judah would have gotten if he had swaggered up to Joseph and said, "You can't pull this kind of trick on us! We've got our rights! I'll call my congressman!" And yet that's how some people

approach God, challenging His rightful authority over them.

B. God's authority is an awesome authority.

Joseph was equal to Pharaoh. If he had given the word, he could have shipped these guys off to work on the pyramids or thrown them in a dungeon where they'd never see daylight again. He could have lopped off their heads. He could have refused to sell them grain and they would have gone home to watch their families slowly starve to death. Joseph had awesome power!

God has even greater authority over His creation. And just as Joseph's brothers had sinned against him, so every person has sinned against God. None of us has a leg to stand on if we dare to challenge God's awesome authority to do to us what He righteously could do. That's why Jesus said, "My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!" (Luke 12:4-5). Since God's authority is a rightful and awesome authority,

C. Our submission must be a complete submission.

So often we're like the little boy whose mother disciplined him by making him sit in a chair and he said, "I'm sitting on the outside, but I'm standing on the inside." His submission wasn't complete, because he had a defiant attitude. But it's not enough to submit on the outside while you're seething with resistance on the inside.

Judah could have approached Joseph with anger and self-justification. After all, Joseph had framed them by planting his cup in Benjamin's sack. Judah could have

said, "This isn't fair! We didn't steal this lousy cup and we didn't put the money back in our sacks. We don't want your help or your money. We just want fair treatment and then we'll be on our way."

That's how a lot of people approach God. They take pride in their righteous conduct: "God doesn't have a right to treat me this way! I haven't stolen any cup. All I ask for is fair treatment." They're defiant, challenging God's rightful authority over them. They've never come to the place of brokenness before God, where they have yielded completely to Him and said, "Lord, You alone are righteous and wise! You alone are the Creator and Sovereign of the universe! I am a guilty sinner, who has rebelled against You, and I yield to Your right to do to me as You please."

Have you come to that place of total submission to God? I don't mean that you deny your feelings. We've all had times when we've been angry at the Lord, and we shouldn't pretend that we are not angry when we are. But at the same time, there is a right and wrong way to express anger to the Sovereign Lord! If one of my kids is angry at me, I don't mind if they express their feelings as long as they are not defiant. But even if they have good cause to be angry at me, I won't allow them to have a defiant spirit. So, check your attitude. You approach God in submission to His rightful, awesome authority over every area of your life.

## 2. Sinners approach God by owning up to their sin.

Judah doesn't protest his or his brothers' innocence or try to justify them in any way. He doesn't offer any excuses or extenuating circumstances. Rather, he freely admits their guilt before God when he says, "God has found out the iniquity of your servants." God always does, by the way.

Judah's confession wasn't just cheap talk. It's easy to say, "I'm sorry," but then to go on living just as you were. But there is an *action* on Judah's part, a turning from past sin. Not only did he own up to it, he demonstrates throughout this appeal a change of heart, a willingness to live differently than he had before, even at great personal cost. That's true repentance, when we not only confess our sin, but when we feel deeply enough about it that it results in a change in our attitudes, feelings, and behavior.

To appreciate what's happening here you must remember where Judah is coming from. He probably had joined Simeon and Levi in slaughtering the Shechemites after Dinah's rape. He's the one who suggested selling Joseph rather than killing him. But he didn't say that to spare Joseph's life as much as he did to spare their consciences from murdering their own brother and to make a few bucks while getting rid of him. Judah stood there fingering his silver, unaffected as Joseph cried for help as the slave traders carried him off. Then Judah joined his brothers in deceiving their father into thinking that Joseph was dead and then in pretending to comfort him. Judah also took a pagan wife and had two sons who were so evil that the Lord killed them. Then he went in to his daughter-in-law, thinking she was a prostitute, as readily as we might pull into McDonald's for a hamburger.

But now he's a different man. The cocky man of Genesis 38 now humbles himself. The greedy man is willing to become a slave so that his brother can go free. The man who lived a sensual, pleasure-oriented, self-centered life now offers to deny himself any pleasure, any rights, any personal freedom, in exchange for his brother's freedom. The man who had closed up his heart against his brother's anguish and against his father's grief says here that he cannot bear to see the pain that his father would go through if Benjamin did not return with them.

There are two ways you can tell that repentance is genuine:

First, there will be the *absence of any blame*, except toward yourself. Judah could have blamed his father for this whole mess. Jacob still loved Benjamin more than Judah. If he didn't, it wouldn't matter so much that the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. Jacob would have been sad, but it wouldn't have been the catastrophe that losing Benjamin was. Judah could have bitterly blamed his father for the favoritism which now meant that he would have to become a slave. But there's no blame here.

He could have blamed Joseph. In verse 31, Judah could have told this stern governor, "If Benjamin doesn't return with us, *you* will bring the gray hair of our father down to the grave in sorrow. It will be your fault!" But instead, he admits that it will be his and his brothers' fault. He could have blamed Benjamin: "You idiot, why did you have the cup in your sack? You're crazy if you think that I'm going to pay for your crime." But there's no accusation of Benjamin. Judah could have blamed God: "Why are You letting this happen to us? We don't deserve this!" But there's no blame. That's the first mark of genuine repentance, when a person says, "I have sinned. I take full responsibility for what I have done."

The second mark of genuine repentance is that it *always affects your relationships*, both with God and with others. Judah here sees that God is behind all these circumstances: God put the money in his sack; God has found out his iniquity. This change in Judah's relationship with God resulted in a change in his relationship with others. The bitterness toward his father and his father's favorite sons is gone. Instead of hardness, there is tenderness and sensitivity as he thinks about how his father will feel if Benjamin doesn't return home. If you have repented of your sin toward God, it will show in a change of heart toward those who have wronged you. Instead of bitterness, there will be a concern for their feelings and an absence of concern for your own feelings. Judah never complains about what will happen to him as a slave, because his focus is on what would happen to his father if Benjamin

becomes a slave.

Judah's appeal is encouraging because it shows us that change is possible when we are willing to own up to our sin with genuine repentance. Judah the hardened sinner becomes Judah the compassionate son and brother, willing to sacrifice the rest of his life, as far as he knew, on behalf of his father and brother. The key element in this change is Judah's submission to God and his accepting full responsibility for his sin.

Do you want to change? Be careful before you quickly answer yes! There's a high price tag, as you can see. Are you willing to give up the rest of your life to become a slave? Remember, Judah didn't know the rest of the story yet. He didn't know that his repentance would lead to great blessing, not to enslavement. If you want to change, then submit yourself to God and own up to your responsibility for your sin. Quit blaming others, even if they're still sinning against you (Jacob still was sinning against Judah). Make sure that your repentance affects your relationships, so that you begin to deal with others with regard for *their* feelings, no matter what that means with regard to your own feelings. True repentance is the key to being a changed person.

There's a third element in Judah's appeal to Joseph which shows us how to approach God:

3. Sinners approach God by appealing to His compassion.

The first element is an *attitude*, submission to God's authority; the second is an *action*, owning up to one's sin; the third is an *affection*, or emotion, a heartfelt appeal to God's compassionate nature. We miss the flavor of Judah's appeal if we fail to see the deep feelings being expressed. It was logical, but it was also an impassioned plea. It shows us how we should approach God.

We should approach God *with all our hearts*. Judah's whole address is shot through with feeling. He threw himself into it with a passion that left no doubt about his sincerity. He wanted Joseph to grant his appeal. He didn't say, "You wouldn't want to free my brother and take me as your slave, would you? ... No, I didn't think so. Sorry, Benjamin."

Jim Elliot, one of the five missionaries martyred while attempting to take the gospel to the fierce Auca Indians in Ecuador, wrote in his journal at age 19 that he lacked the fervency, vitality, *life* in prayer which he longed for. He observed, "Cold prayers, like cold suitors, are seldom effective in their aims." (*Shadow of the Almighty* [Zondervan], p. 44.)

When we approach God, our hearts need to be in it. If, like me, you are often ho-hum about your prayers, you need to shake off the lethargy and ask God to remind you that eternal matters are at stake. God is sovereign, and yet, though I don't totally understand it, He is pleased to respond to the heartfelt appeals of His children. As Jesus applied the parable of the woman who kept bugging the unjust judge, "Shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you, He will bring about justice for them speedily" (Luke 18:7, 8).

Second, we should approach God *with all our minds*. Judah didn't cast reason to the wind. While he was fervent, he was also logical. He had caught glimpses of this man's compassion. The man had given the brothers many hints that he was just and reasonable. On their first trip, he had sent the nine home and only kept one in custody because he cared about them taking grain for their families. He had treated them kindly at the meal and had stuffed their sacks with grain and returned their money twice. Knowing this, Judah appeals to his heart by telling him what Benjamin's slavery would mean to his aged father. And he bases his appeal on Joseph's word that one of them would be his slave. Judah offers

himself instead of Benjamin.

That's how to approach God in prayer. Appeal to Him as a lawyer carefully sets forth his case. Argue your requests based on what you know of the character of God and His promises, as revealed in His Word. You know Him to be compassionate toward His children, promising not to withhold any good thing from them. You know that you can come to Him based on the merits of His Son. So come and present your case, casting yourself completely upon His grace.

#### CONCLUSION

A little boy had a sister who had the same disease that he had recovered from two years earlier. She needed a blood transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease, and since both the boy and his sister had a rare blood type, he was the logical choice for donating his blood. The doctor asked the boy, "Would you give your blood to Mary?"

Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, "Sure, for my sister."

Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room--Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when their eyes met, Johnny grinned. But as the nurse inserted the needle in Johnny's arm, his smile faded. He watched the blood flow through the tube. With the ordeal almost over, his voice, slightly shaky, broke the silence. "Doctor, when do I die?"

Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated, why his lip had trembled when he'd agreed to donate his blood. He had thought that giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. He was willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice so that she could live. (*Leadership*, winter, 1984, from Robert Coleman's *Written in Blood*.)

Judah's offer to become a slave in place of Benjamin was also a noble thing. But even so, Judah was guilty of great sin, so he could

never say that he was getting something he didn't deserve. But there is One who did something far greater than Judah on your behalf. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was without sin, and yet He offered Himself to take the penalty you and I deserve for our sin. He bore God's wrath so that we who are sinners could go free. Have you accepted His loving offer on your behalf? It is the only way to approach God, because Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). The only way we can approach God is by submitting to His authority over us, by owning up to our sin, and by appealing to His great compassion as demonstrated in the sacrifice of His own Son on the cross. If we approach Him on that basis, He will never turn us away.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can a person who has been deeply hurt cultivate an attitude of submission to God? How can we root out bitterness?
2. Are we ever justified to blame others for problems we face? Is it ever emotionally or spiritually healthy to blame? Why/why not?
3. How can we repent if we don't feel deep sorrow over our sin? Is sorrow necessary? How do we get it?
4. How can a lukewarm Christian become fervent about spiritual things? How can we shake off spiritual lethargy?

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