

A Revenge Story?

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, and let us now continue looking at Genesis. We're going to be looking at chapters 42 all the way through to halfway through 45 this morning, which is one long story of Joseph, a very important story.
- Well, we're going to start this morning by doing a little quiz. I'm going to ask you and see how good you are at knowing something about stories and literature and movies.
- So, the question is, what do all these stories have in common? You probably don't know all of them, but I'm sure you know some of them. What do they have in common? These are them.
- Iliad by Homer, Hamlet by Shakespeare, True Grit, a classic Western, The Count of Monte Cristo, Braveheart, Munich, Gladiator, and Payback.
- What do all those stories have in common? Do you know? Well, I think the last one may have given it away. They are all stories about revenge. They're all also some of the most popular stories in our culture, because I think we all like stories of revenge deep down inside.
- [1 : 1 2] You know, we've got this dark desire to see justice done on those who deserve it, and to see the bad guys get what's coming to them. We like stories of revenge, even if we don't admit it.
- And I think the reason is because we've all been wronged by someone, in some way, somewhere along the line, who hasn't really paid for that wrong.
- And so, if we can't get our own revenge, well, then we make do with Mel Gibson's or Russell Crowe's. But it seems, as we now turn to Genesis 42, it seems that we're in for another epic story of revenge.
- And it's set to be one of the most satisfying yet, as Joseph now has the opportunity, after years of waiting, to finally get vengeance on his brothers.
- Remember the brothers who wickedly sold him into slavery decades before? Because what happens now is that they rock up in Egypt. They don't know what's happened to Joseph.
- [2 : 1 1] We do, because we've read of his story in Egypt last week. But they don't know that Joseph is now in charge of the whole country, and they come looking for food, because there's a famine all over the region.
- And so, really, this is a perfect opportunity for Joseph to get back at his brothers, to get some sweet revenge for what they did to him. And it certainly seems, as we read chapter 42, that the story is headed that way.
- But as we read on, in chapter 43 and 44, we discover that the story ends up taking a diversion from the classic revenge story that we expect.
- And it ends up at a completely different and rather unexpected outcome. But it's an outcome which is critical for this covenant family, this family of Abraham's descendants, to become who God has always planned for them to be, a blessing to this world.

They have to go through this and come to this point for them to be that family effectively. And I'm hoping that as we read it this morning, we'll see how a similar outcome is necessary in our lives and our relationships, especially towards people who may have wronged us, if we are going to become the people that God wants us to be.

[3 : 31] And so let's see how this story plays out. You can have a look and follow along in your Bibles in chapter 42 of Genesis. The brothers end up in Joseph's court, not knowing who he really is.

But of course, he knows who they are. But he doesn't let on his identity. We read in verse 7, As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them.

That's understandable, right? Given their history, he's been trying to forget his past. In fact, we know that at the end of the last chapter, we realized that he named his son Manasseh, which means to forget, saying in verse 51 of 41, God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household.

He wants nothing more than just to forget his past and to forget his father's household. He's got a great new life here in Egypt. He just wants to live that. But now, all of a sudden, all those old memories come flooding back to him when his brothers come.

And so, we go on to see this real emotional conflict that builds in Joseph in the course of this story. He wants to hurt these guys.

[4 : 45] He wants to get revenge. In fact, he throws them in prison. He accuses them of being spies on false pretenses and then throws them into prison.

But then, not long afterwards, he backtracks. And he lets them all out, but one, Simeon, and says, Guys, I'm going to give you food. You can go back to your home. But I want you to bring your youngest brother, Benjamin, back here.

And then I'll release Simeon. Because he actually, more than his desire for revenge, it seems he wants to see his only full brother, Benjamin, the son of Rachel.

And he's desperate to see him. So, he causes the situation to go that way. And off they go. He even secretly puts the money they paid back in their packs. They don't know until halfway through the journey.

And they think that they forgot to pay it. And they're quite worried about that. But off they go back to Canaan. They tell Jacob what happened. But he says, Guys, you can't take Benjamin. Listen, Joseph's died.

[5 : 43] I love Benjamin. I'm not going to let him go. Obviously, Benjamin has become Jacob's new favorite. He's not going to risk sending him to Egypt, even if it's to free Simeon.

It's obvious who he loves more. And Reuben, the oldest brother, then tries to persuade his dad to let them take Benjamin. But to no avail. And they're quickly running out of options.

They're running out of food. Simeon's in Egypt, in jail. And so, Judah then steps in. He's the fourth oldest brother. And he successfully persuades his father.

We pick it up from chapter 43, verse 8. Then Judah said to Israel, his father, send the boy along with me and we will go at once so that we and you and our children may live and not die.

I myself will guarantee his safety. You can hold me personally responsible for him. And so, Judah is taking a big step here to tie his fate to the fate of Benjamin, this youngest spoiled brother of his.

[6 : 49] Which already shows that there's a bit of progression in Judah from the years before when he was the one who actually decided to sell Joseph into slavery.

But more on that later. Anyway, they go back. They take Benjamin. They arrive back in Egypt. And they're expecting some trouble given that they didn't pay for the food the last time.

You know, sometimes in spa or pick and pay on the notice boards, you see this grainy security footage picture of a suspected shoplifter with kind of the words, watch out, don't serve this person, telling the security arrest on site.

Well, I reckon these brothers arriving back in Egypt thinking, well, they're on a lot of notice boards right now and they're in for a lot of trouble. And so you can imagine their surprise when they arrive.

And not only does the steward say to them, no, no, no, food was paid for last time. But also Joseph invites them to join him in a lavish banquet. Because Joseph, of course, is secretly delighted that Benjamin has arrived and he gets to see him.

[7 : 53] And he ends up treating him best of all at this banquet. He gives him five times as much food as the other brothers. And then after lunch, he fills their sacks with grain and sends them back home.

And we think, whoa, OK, great. The story has been resolved. All is forgiven. Except it's not. Because of what happens next. Just before they leave, Joseph sneaks a valuable silver goblet into Benjamin's bag.

And so he can frame his brothers for theft. And right after they've left, he sends his steward after them to catch them in mid-journey and to find them out.

Now, he does that. He chases them. He catches them on Joseph's orders. And he says, how can you do this? How can you steal such a valuable thing? We've been so nice to you. And they say, we didn't steal it.

Check our bags. You know what? We're so confident we didn't steal it. You can kill whoever has it. And the rest of us will become your slaves. That's a pretty bad deal for them, it turns out, in the end.

[8 : 54] Because they do search the bags. And they found it in Benjamin's bag. And so they're dragged back to Joseph. And so it really looks like Joseph has outsmarted them.

And he's got his revenge. And made a way to take Benjamin away from them. So he can stay with Joseph in Egypt. It's very appropriate revenge for them having sent him to Egypt all those years ago.

But it's then, at that point, that the story has a very unexpected twist. And it's all because of something that Judah does.

Remember Judah was the one who pledged his life to watch over Benjamin? Well now Judah steps up. And he does two very important things.

That change the outcome of the story. And change the fate of the covenant family. We see them from chapter 44 verse 16. The first thing he does is that he doesn't try to defend himself.

[9 : 55] Notice that. Verse 16. What can we say to my Lord? Judah replied, what can we say? How can we give proof of our innocence? God has uncovered your servant's guilt. We are now my Lord's slaves.

We ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup. So even though he knows that they've been falsely accused. That they've been framed. He doesn't appeal to justice anymore.

He knows that that's not going to help them. And it's probably because, as we've seen in the story so far, his brothers and him have realized that all these difficult situations is probably, they said, it's God punishing us for what we did.

They realized that they were guilty of a much worse crime in the past anyway. And so they know that justice is not on their side. And so they finally accept that. And instead of appealing to justice, what Judah decides to do is appeal to Joseph's mercy.

Knowing that their fate now lies completely in his hands. Look at verse 18. Pardon your servant, my Lord. Let me speak a word to my Lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself.

[11 : 02] That's the first thing he does. He just appeals to Joseph's mercy. The second thing he does is that he offers himself sacrificially in the place of Benjamin.

Look at verse 33. Now then, please let your servant remain here as my Lord's slave in place of the boy and let the boy return with his brothers. And it's at that point that Joseph breaks down.

Have a look from verse 1 of chapter 45. Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants. And he cried out, Have everyone leave my presence!

So that there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

So here at this point, you've got years and years of holding this bitter grudge against his brothers. Finally, he breaks and that bitterness comes out in a flood of tears.

[12 : 09] And the brothers finally reconcile. Look how it goes on from verse 14. Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept. And Benjamin embraced him weeping.

And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterwards, his brothers talked with him. It's a beautiful scene. A very unexpected scene. But we've got to ask, What caused him to change?

What caused the sudden reconciliation? What was it that caused Joseph to break like that? Well, we see it was Judah's repentance.

That's really the best word for it. His realization that he and the brothers were guilty. That justice wasn't on their side. That they had sinned in multiple ways, if not stealing the cup.

And then he confesses. But not only does he confess. He actually, by this point in the story, has come full circle from who he used to be.

[13 : 10] All those years before, when he sold his younger brother into slavery out of jealousy. Now, he's actually doing the opposite. The younger brother who he has every reason to be jealous of, he now gives himself to save.

He offers himself to save that younger brother. And so this is really, it's a story on many levels. Firstly, it's a story of Judah's journey to repentance from what he was all those years before.

Not such a savory character. And yet, Judah and the tribe of Judah, we know, becomes a very important tribe later. It's the tribe from which Jesus comes. And so this story, the transformation of Judah, bit by bit, is very important.

But also, this is a story of Joseph's transformation to forgiveness. From his desire for revenge to a desire to forgive and reconcile.

But even more than both of those, this is a story of how God fixes his covenant family when they're broken. It's like if you have a phone that has a broken screen.

[14 : 17] You know, it's cracked and you can't actually, the touch screen doesn't work anymore. If you've got a touch screen phone, most people do these days. And it's just not fulfilling its purpose. And so you have to send it in to be fixed.

You can't keep using it. Well, in the same way, this covenant family was never going to fulfill its purpose unless these broken relationships were fixed. And until there was real love in this family.

Because love is actually what makes God's covenant people work. In fact, that is so important in the rest of scripture and in the rest of the story of the covenant people.

That they needed to love each other. They needed to be unified and reconciled if they were going to work as a covenant family. So important that God enshrined that in his law later under Moses.

Because five of the ten commandments, half of the ten commandments were all about how to love and respect each other. And as Israel's story goes on in the Bible, we discover the reason for their eventual downfall and God's judgment on them and them going into exile was as much their failure to love each other as it was their failure to love God.

[15 : 31] You read the prophets and you see what the prophets who are essentially the prosecution attorneys for just before the exile. When God judges Israel, he sends these prophets to tell them why he's doing what he's doing.

And as much as they cite idolatry against God, they also cite exploitation and injustice to one another as the reasons God has had enough of them.

Because the reason he had to react to that is because if God's covenant people don't love each other, they're never going to work. And that's, I think, why this reconciliation in the story is so vital at this point in the Bible.

And the key to a community of love we see in the story is repentance and true forgiveness. I mean, that's really a key we know in any relationships being restored when they've been hurt or when there's been wrongs done or a family that's split up.

The key to reconciling is repentance, admission of what was wrong and true forgiveness. And you know what? Those things are still the key today for God's people to be effective on earth.

[16 : 42] God's people, the church. Although one thing we realize as we read Israel's history in the Old Testament, one of the reasons why we need it is to show us that we can't in and of ourselves be the people we should be and forgive and repent and be a loving family.

And that's why we needed Jesus to be sent to us so that he, by giving of himself, could save us, not just save us from our sins, but to fix the covenant family by enabling us to love one another.

That's what the cross was meant to achieve, not just reconciliation between us and God, but reconciliation with one another, the means by which we truly have love for one another and therefore be the people that God wants us to be.

You know, it's why Jesus said to his disciples, one of his great commandments, a new command I give to you to love one another as I have loved you. This is how the world will know that you are my disciples.

Because that is who God has called us and saved us to be, a community that truly loves. Not to be Lone Ranger Christians who sit at home holding grudges against those who we disagree with or those who have wronged us wanting payback, but people who have learned through the cross how to really love, how to really say sorry and how to really forgive as we have been forgiven.

[18 : 14] Jesus died and rose again to make us people who can really love. In fact, that's something that Paul and Peter both clearly understand and recognize in their letters.

When Paul writes, for example, to Timothy, telling him to defend and teach solid doctrine, he adds, you know, because that is often one of the passages we go to, to say we've got to fight for good doctrine above all other things.

And of course, we have to uphold and defend good doctrine, but we mustn't forget the reason why the outcome of that good doctrine should be, he says in 1 Timothy 1.5, Now the goal of our instruction is love.

Peter says a similar thing. In 1 Peter 1 from verse 22, Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply from the heart.

And so what is the purpose of obeying the truth? What is the outcome? So that we can love each other. Because, you see, that is God's end game.

[19 : 27] For this whole thing. For this whole plan of salvation. He didn't save us and go through all this to make a people through which he was going to send the Messiah to die for our sins and save us so we can have eternal life in the new creation, just to populate that new creation with people who hold grudges and don't really want to be with each other.

No, that's not God's end game. God's end game is to give us salvation and his word and the gospel and all of this and teach us these truths Sunday after Sunday, not to grow our heads in knowledge, but to grow our hearts in love.

That is what he wants us to be. Those are the kind of people that he saved us to be. That is his goal. That is his end game for us and for this world, a community of people who truly love one another.

But, of course, we've got to want to do that. God gives us through the gospel and through the Holy Spirit and through the resurrection power of Jesus, he gives us the power to love in a new way.

That's why Jesus called it a new commandment. Because it's a new way that we can do it through his death on the cross. But we've also got to want to do that. And we've got to take hold of that power and exercise it.

[20 : 39] We've got to realize that God's whole purpose for us is to love and so make that our goal in our interactions with one another. We've got to do what Paul tells us to do in Romans.

It's amazing. After writing 11 whole chapters of really probably some of the deepest theology in scripture, Romans chapter 1 to 11, and explaining to us the depths of the cross and what Jesus did in giving himself and how that reconciles us with God.

But then, after that, he describes the kind of life that all that deep theology should result in. From verse 10 of chapter 12, this is the result, the intended result of all that theology.

Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice.

Mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

[21 : 48] Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. And finally, he says, do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath.

For it is written, it is mine to avenge. I will repay, says the Lord. Because you see, revenge, this desire that we all have to get back at those who have wronged us.

Satisfying as it might feel, can never bring life and healing. But now, because we know that God will ultimately do justice on this earth, and because we know Jesus could have justly punished us, but instead took our punishment for us.

Because we, Christians, are now uniquely enabled to rise above those desires for revenge. And instead to forgive and to love sincerely in our personal relationships, in our families, and in our churches.

And so, to become the people God has destined us to be. Shall we pray for his help as we do that? Lord, we thank you for the story of Joseph and his brothers and the unexpected reconciliation that came through repentance and forgiveness.

[23 : 08] Lord, we thank you that you have sent Jesus to enable us, to give us true, real resurrection power and your spirit to enable us to become people of love.

The people that you've always intended your covenant family to be. We pray, Lord, that you would help us to want that. Help us to seek after relationships of true love and forgiveness.

So that we will, as Jesus commands us to do, love one another as he has loved us. So that all the world will know that we are his disciples.

Lord Jesus, we pray that you would lead us to become those people. And to be effective in this world. To proclaim your name and to show people your self-giving love that you made available on the cross.

And the salvation through that. Make us effective, Lord. Help us to overcome whatever difficulties we have. I pray for those people who might have grudges that they're holding against others.

[24 : 06] That you would help them to look to the cross. And realize how much they've been forgiven. And enable them and empower them to forgive others. And so we pray this for your glory and in Jesus' name.

Amen.