

## Repentance

One of my favourite books is Robinson Crusoe. I used to think it was primarily a book about shipwreck and survival on an island. In truth, the book is really about repentance – about how the hard-hearted, callous and indifferent, can be brought, sometimes through severe chastening to repentance. In the book, the character Crusoe says this about how contradictory mankind is: “I have since often observed, how incongruous and irrational the common temper of mankind is, especially of youth ... that they are not ashamed to sin, and yet are ashamed to repent; not ashamed of the action for which they ought justly to be esteemed fools, but are ashamed of the returning, which only can make them be esteemed wise men.”

How odd that mankind is not ashamed to sin, but ashamed to turn from sin, not embarrassed in the act of sin, but embarrassed by confessing it, doesn't feel foolish when doing the foolishness of sin, but feels foolish when repenting, which is wise.

I am glad that there is such a word as repentance, and that standing behind the word repentance is the idea of repentance. The idea that in God's world, you can be going in the wrong direction, you can be rebelling, offending God, destroying your life, but you can stop. You can do a U-turn, and head back towards God, towards pleasing Him, towards loving Him. If there were no chance of doing that, we would be a miserable race of people, and the road to Hell would be a one-way street. But as the psalmist puts it: “ 4 *But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared. (Psa 130:4)*

Some of the most convicting and encouraging accounts in Scripture are those describing deep repentance: the prodigal son, David in Psalm 51, Job before the glory of God. And here in Genesis 43 and 44, we are going to see the deep and profound repentance of some very hard men – Joseph's brothers.

We already saw their consciences being awoken and afflicted in chapter 42. But now the Holy Spirit is going to draw it together into a deep and profound repentance.

*Genesis 43:1 Now the famine was severe in the land. 2 And it came to pass, when they had eaten up the grain which they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, "Go back, buy us a little food." 3 But Judah spoke to him, saying, "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.'" 4 "If you send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. 5 "But if you will not send him, we will not go down; for the man said to us, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.'" 6 And Israel said, "Why did you deal so wrongfully with me as to tell the man whether you had still another brother?" 7 But they said, "The man asked us pointedly about ourselves and our family, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' And we told him according to these words. Could we possibly have known that he would say, 'Bring your brother down '?"*

After just about vowing that the brothers would not go back to Egypt with Benjamin, Jacob succumbs to hunger pangs, and to the distress of seeing his family, which now numbers close to seventy, struggling under the famine. Perhaps he was wishfully hoping that his sons would go without mentioning the Benjamin issue. But Judah reminds Jacob of the reality he wants to avoid. Either he lets them go down with Benjamin, and embraces the risk, or he lets them all starve together and loses Benjamin anyway. Jacob is now looking for someone to blame. “Why did you mention Benjamin to the man?” And this is quite unfair, as they point out. “He asked us about our family. How were we to know he'd make the youngest brother part of the terms of sale?”

But now watch Judah, who is truly the hero of these two chapters. Judah knows the deep need of food for the families. He knows of Jacob's love for his youngest son. He knows of the severity of that Egyptian governor. So look at how he is willing to be the substitute.

*8 Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. 9 "I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. 10 "For if we had not lingered, surely by now we would have returned this second time." 11 And their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: Take some of the best fruits of the land in your vessels and carry down a present for the man-- a little balm and a little honey, spices and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds. 12 "Take double money in your hand, and take back in your hand the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks; perhaps it was an oversight. 13 "Take your brother also, and arise, go back to the man. 14 "And may God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may release your other brother and Benjamin. If I am bereaved, I am bereaved!"*

Take note of what Judah is doing. He is willing to become guilty, and bear the punishment, if Benjamin is taken from Jacob. And now, think back to that day, when Joseph was in the pit. Who was the mastermind behind selling him to the Ishmaelites? Who no doubt masterminded Joseph's robe covered with blood? Judah. Twenty years later, this is a different Judah.

We can't help but look on with pity, as we picture Jacob's age-worn face, still filled with grief, with his trembling hands, packing spices, honey, nuts, double money onto the donkeys. Remember, Jacob is around 130 years old at this time. I picture him almost talking to himself, telling himself that this might make a harsh man a little more kind. And Scripture spares us the painful scene of Jacob embracing Benjamin as they leave, a man acquainted with grief, surrendering to what might be the grief that breaks him completely. He invokes the name of El-Shaddai to be merciful, and resigns himself to God's sovereignty.

It's hard to date Benjamin's age exactly, but it's likely he was about ten when Joseph was sold into slavery, so Benjamin is about 32 right now. He is called a lad, partly because he is unmarried, and I think partly because that's what families call the youngest, regardless of actual age.

And off they go again, tracing the route to Egypt, seeing slaves being taken to Egypt, their consciences again awakening, as they see what they sold Joseph into. And now with Benjamin with them, their consciences are probably even more aflame, particularly if Benjamin looks and sounds like his older brother.

*15 So the men took that present and Benjamin, and they took double money in their hand, and arose and went down to Egypt; and they stood before Joseph. 16 When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Take these men to my home, and slaughter an animal and make ready; for these men will dine with me at noon." 17 Then the man did as Joseph ordered, and the man brought the men into Joseph's house.*

*18 Now the men were afraid because they were brought into Joseph's house; and they said, "It is because of the money, which was returned in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may make a case against us and fall upon us, to take us as slaves with our donkeys." 19 When they drew near to the steward of Joseph's house, they talked with him at the door of the house, 20 and said, "O sir, we indeed came down the first time to buy food; 21 "but it happened, when we came to the encampment, that we opened our sacks, and there, each man's money was in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight; so we have brought it back in our hand. 22 "And we have brought down other money in our hands to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks." 23 But he said, "Peace be with you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money." Then he brought Simeon out to them.*

Joseph spots the brothers, sees that there are eleven of them, and so knows they did what he told them to do. He tells his steward to bring them into Joseph's personal residence. And now the guilty consciences are afraid. This was unusual. They are common shepherds, come to by food from a world empire. You don't get invited to the estate of the grand vizier unless you are a dignitary, or unless you have done something wrong. They assume the second, and are falling over each other to assure the steward that they did not steal the money, and here it is, and here is double. But the steward kindly tells them to be calm – he had what they paid, so God must have blessed them. And

we then wonder how perplexed they looked. Their guilty consciences had assumed this governor was going to enslave them on a criminal charge, and do to them what they had done to Joseph. But now they have no understanding of what happens next.

*24 So the man brought the men into Joseph's house and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their donkeys feed. 25 Then they made the present ready for Joseph's coming at noon, for they heard that they would eat bread there. 26 And when Joseph came home, they brought him the present which was in their hand into the house, and bowed down before him to the earth.*

*27 Then he asked them about their well-being, and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" 28 And they answered, "Your servant our father is in good health; he is still alive." And they bowed their heads down and prostrated themselves.*

*29 Then he lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your younger brother of whom you spoke to me?" And he said, "God be gracious to you, my son."*

When Joseph comes back from business, he sees the brothers, and all eleven bow down before him. Here is Joseph's first dream coming true in all its fullness. Eleven stalks bowing down to Joseph's. Joseph asks them if Jacob is still alive. Why would he do this? Well, this is during a famine. Whom do famines claim as their first victims? The elderly and the young. Joseph knows Jacob is over 130. Survival would be month to month.

As Joseph looks up through the bowing brothers, probably at the back, he spots a stranger, he didn't see the last time. We imagine him straining, recognising the 10 year-old boy he left behind, now before him as a bearded 32 year-old. And he then says something he had never said to the others: "God be gracious to you, my son" Joseph is still playing the role of elder statesman of Egypt. He is still speaking to them through a translator. And he is about to put into play his final test to see if the brothers are repentant. But before, he can do that, his emotions get the better of him.

*30 Now his heart yearned for his brother; so Joseph made haste and sought somewhere to weep. And he went into his chamber and wept there. 31 Then he washed his face and came out; and he restrained himself, and said, "Serve the bread." 32 So they set him a place by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; because the Egyptians could not eat food with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.*

*33 And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth; and the men looked in astonishment at one another. 34 Then he took servings to them from before him, but Benjamin's serving was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him.*

You picture what the relationship was between those boys, with about seven years between them. I imagine that Benjamin had nearly idolised older brother Joseph, followed him everywhere, tried to do everything his brother had done. Joseph would have had a tonne of memories flooding back to him of the times he spent with his little brother. And then the thought that twenty years had been stolen away from them, and here he was, a grown man of 32.

Not only does Joseph not want them to see he is crying, but remember all the eye and face cosmetics that they Egyptians wore, which would have been part of his disguise. Tears would wash that away, so Joseph needs to get out before that happens. Once Joseph has cleaned himself up and fixed his appearance, he orders the meal to begin. Now you might remember from Potiphar that the Egyptians had very particular religious scruples about who they ate with. Egyptians did not sit at the same table with Hebrews. So Joseph is by himself, as the ruler, the other Egyptian officials at another table, and then the brothers at a third.

And now two strange things happen. First, they are seated according to their ages. The brothers were bewildered, because how would any Egyptian have known the exact ages of eleven brothers. Second, they notice that Benjamin is given five times as much as anyone else.

Why is this? Does Benjamin have an extremely hearty appetite? No – Joseph is applying the test. He wants to see how these brothers are going to treat the youngest when he is shown favouritism.

How did these brothers treat Joseph twenty years earlier when they saw their father lavish such love on him? Yes, it was wrong for Jacob to show such partiality, but then it was equally wrong for the brothers to sin in response. So how will they treat Benjamin when he, for no apparent justifiable reason, is given a special greeting by the ruler, and receives five times as much food, during this famine?

Apparently, they don't mind a bit. They are merry with this ruler, thankful for what they have, glad for what Benjamin gets. It seems the envy and jealousy of twenty years earlier is no longer with them.

But now Joseph is going to put their hearts to the ultimate test.

*Genesis 44:1 And he commanded the steward of his house, saying, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack. 2 "Also put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his grain money." So he did according to the word that Joseph had spoken.*

*3 As soon as the morning dawned, the men were sent away, they and their donkeys. 4 When they had gone out of the city, and were not yet far off, Joseph said to his steward, "Get up, follow the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid evil for good? 5 'Is not this the one from which my lord drinks, and with which he indeed practices divination? You have done evil in so doing.'" 6 So he overtook them, and he spoke to them these same words.*

Joseph tells his steward to return the money, and then to take a silver cup and put it into Benjamin's sack. Now this would have been a prominent cup that would have been on the table or somewhere where the brothers were. It is not as if the brothers were wandering around the house, so this would have been somewhere where one of the brothers could plausibly have stuffed it under the fold of his robe. Now it is safe to say that Joseph did not practice divination himself, but it was common in the culture and religion of Egypt for high officials to do so. Usually, some oil would be placed in water, and as it separated, the movements of the oil and the water would be read for their meaning. So the steward is to chase after them, and accuse them of theft.

Now look at the vigorous response by these men. Men accustomed to lying are especially defensive when they have been honest.

*7 And they said to him, "Why does my lord say these words? Far be it from us that your servants should do such a thing. 8 "Look, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan the money which we found in the mouth of our sacks. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord's house? 9 "With whomever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord's slaves." 10 And he said, "Now also let it be according to your words; he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and you shall be blameless."*

So certain are they of their honesty, they are willing to offer the execution of the guilty, and sell themselves into slavery. With those words, they have played directly into Joseph's hand.

*11 Then each man speedily let down his sack to the ground, and each opened his sack. 12 So he searched. He began with the oldest and left off with the youngest; and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. 13 Then they tore their clothes, and each man loaded his donkey and returned to the city.*

Now try to picture for a moment the reactions on their faces, when the cup is produced from Benjamin's sack. The looks of absolute horror, hands on heads, moans and groans, with poor Benjamin spluttering and protesting that he had not taken it. But notice, the brothers do not leave Benjamin, they return with him to the city.

*14 So Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, and he was still there; and they fell before him on the ground. 15 And Joseph said to them, "What deed is this you have done? Did you not know that such a man as I can certainly practice divination?" 16 Then Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall*

*we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; here we are, my lord's slaves, both we and he also with whom the cup was found." 17 But he said, "Far be it from me that I should do so; the man in whose hand the cup was found, he shall be my slave. And as for you, go up in peace to your father."*

These men have no heart to protest their innocence. They throw themselves at the feet of Joseph. Joseph keeps up the ruse, by pretending that he knew what they had done through divination. Of course, there's a hole in his little stage-play here: if the silver cup was his means of doing divination, and the silver cup was stolen, then surely he'd have no way of doing divination to find out where the cup went. But even so, Judah speaks up. And notice, there is no protestation, no angry defence. Indeed, for once the tables are turned, and they are being falsely accused. In spite of that, so broken are these men, so laden down with guilt, he simply says, "We have nothing to say. We have been caught by God, and we are ready to face punishment."

But Joseph is not finished. He gives them the ultimate test. He says, "I am not going to punish all of you. I am only going to punish the guilty. Benjamin is guilty. He will stay and become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace."

Now think of what Joseph is offering them here. He is replaying exactly what happened twenty years ago. Here is the youngest brother, with the same ten. The youngest is still the favourite, and unfairly prized by his father, and seemingly by complete strangers. And now he has been caught red-handed, committing a crime in Egypt. They can get rid of him, too, and guilt-free. They need not cover a robe with animal blood and tell Jacob that an animal got him. They have a bona fide excuse for letting Benjamin become a slave in Egypt. It's Benjamin's fault, not theirs. They can go back to Jacob, donkeys laden down with food, happily rid of the last of Rachel's sons, and say to Jacob, "Hey Dad, about Benjamin. I know you liked him, but he was actually a scoundrel. We turned our heads for a second and his sticky fingers were clawing at Egyptian silver. We were lucky to get back ourselves. So, sorry about Benjamin, and I know you were fond of the kid, but he really messed up."

These men have a chance to abandon the youngest, save their own skins. They have a chance to rid themselves of the favourite, and this time, it won't even be through their deceitful plotting. What would these men have done twenty years ago? They would have thanked the governor and hurriedly got on their donkeys.

But somewhere in those twenty years, the Holy Spirit had worked on these men. At some point, perhaps even within the space of time when all this began, they had yielded to God. Because what Judah says and does next is one of the most eloquent and moving statements of repentance in all of Scripture.

Judah first paints the history of the case, explaining the age of their father, and his affection for the youngest. He does not know that Joseph knows all this, so he feels it is necessary to explain how his demand to see the youngest was such a trial for Jacob.

*18 Then Judah came near to him and said: "O my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's hearing, and do not let your anger burn against your servant; for you are even like Pharaoh. 19 "My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?' 20 "And we said to my lord, 'We have a father, an old man, and a child of his old age, who is young; his brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.' 21 "Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.' 22 "And we said to my lord, 'The lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.' 23 "But you said to your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall see my face no more.' 24 "So it was, when we went up to your servant my father, that we told him the words of my lord. 25 "And our father said, 'Go back and buy us a little food.' 26 "But we said, 'We cannot*

*go down; if our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down; for we may not see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' 27 "Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons; 28 `and the one went out from me, and I said, "Surely he is torn to pieces"; and I have not seen him since. 29 `But if you take this one also from me, and calamity befalls him, you shall bring down my gray hair with sorrow to the grave.'*

Judah explains that his aged father's frail life is now bonded to Benjamin.

*30 "Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad's life, 31 "it will happen, when he sees that the lad is not with us, that he will die. So your servants will bring down the gray hair of your servant our father with sorrow to the grave.*

Twenty years ago, they were so indifferent to their father, they were willing to sell the youngest brother, and lie to their father that he had died. They were willing to let him grieve, and apparently never told him the truth. But now, Judah expresses their deep concern that losing Benjamin will kill their father.

So what is he going to do? Is he going to protest that Benjamin is innocent? Is he going to ask this Egyptian governor to just give them a second chance, be nice to them and let them off? Is he going to ask if Benjamin could perhaps be beaten instead of imprisoned?

Look at what Judah says.

*32 "For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father forever.' 33 "Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. 34 "For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me, lest perhaps I see the evil that would come upon my father?"*

Judah says, I became surety for the lad. It is as if Benjamin is a debt that must be paid back to Jacob, and Judah was willing to be a co-signer on this debt, being willing to pay it himself if needs be. And now it needs be. Regardless of how the cup ended up in Benjamin's sack, Benjamin now faces a life of slavery in Egypt. Judah says, for the sake of my father, I will be Benjamin's substitute. I will take his place, give up my freedom, my wife and children, my family, I will give up my life, so that Benjamin's can be saved.

Who is Judah picturing for us here? One day, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, for the sake of His Father, would come and be the substitute, bear the punishment and the guilt of the guilty, so that the guilty could return to His Father.

Think of who this is. This is the man who arranged Joseph's slavery. This is the man who profited in twenty silver coins, from Joseph's slavery. This is the man who years ago had done his utmost to get rid of the favourite. And now, he is willing to be punished on behalf of the youngest, so that he can return.

This is repentance. It does not simply acknowledge that you are guilty. Repentance feels that God is just for declaring you guilty. It begins to sense not only that the consequences of sin are horrible, but that sin itself is horrible. It understands that sin must be punished, that it is a good thing for sin to be punished.

I can still remember as a thirteen-year old boy, the day it all came home to me. It was not just that Jesus died for me on the cross. It was that I should have been on that cross.

Have you ever come to the place of conviction where you stop saying to God, "Okay, if you say so, I am guilty, and thank you for cleaning up that whole mess" and you start saying, "I deserve to be

punished. Hell is what I should get.” There comes a point in true repentance where you stop fighting against the consequences of your sin or the punishment of your sin, and in a sense, you accept them. You don't want them, but you accept them. That's what Judah was doing here. For his selling of Joseph twenty years ago, he deserved a lifetime of slavery. Judah did not know if Joseph was still alive, but in this act, he is not only calling the slavery of the youngest a terrible thing, but he is willing to make restitution with the rest of his life. This is as conscious a repentance of how he treated Joseph as he could make, and with it, a compassion on his father and Benjamin. Let the punishment of slavery fall on me and not the youngest, for I am guilty of mistreating the youngest.

And what is Joseph's response to this admission? *Then Joseph could not restrain himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Make everyone go out from me!" So no one stood with him while Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept aloud, and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard it. 3 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph; does my father still live?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed in his presence. 4 And Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come near to me (Gen 45:1-4)*

If there was ever a picture of the heart of God to those who repent, this is it. Joseph is deeply moved, moved beyond words, for here is the repentance and reunion he had wished for beyond hope. Jesus tells us of the joy in heaven over one repentant sinner. God unveils himself to the returning sinner. And verse 4 is what God says to the trembling sinner; “Please come near to me.”

In Robinson Crusoe, the character of Crusoe comes to understand how God can turn our evil for good, if we will repent.

“...in the course of our lives, the evil which in itself we seek most to shun, and which, when we are fallen into, is the most dreadful to us, is oftentimes the very means or door of our deliverance, by which alone we can be raised again from the affliction we are fallen into...” We meant it for evil, but God can mean it and turn it for good, if we will admit it is sin, own it, accept its punishment, and then approach God for forgiveness.