

PARASHAH FORTY

Genesis 42:18–43:23; Isaiah 50:10-52:11; Revelation 21:9–27

Notes by Tim Hegg

“I Fear God”

Our *parashah* takes up the story after Joseph’s brother’s have been in prison for several days. On the third day, Joseph approaches his brothers in prison and states, “Do this and live, for I fear God.” Perhaps Joseph could not bring himself to require the full three days that he had originally promised—his compassion for his brothers and his family who awaited their return with food took precedence.

What did his brother’s understand from this statement of Joseph, that he “feared *Elohim*”? Has Joseph given away his identity by confessing that he “fears God” (יִרְאֵהוּ, *Elohim*)? Since Joseph’s brothers still do not recognize him, they presume that he is an Egyptian who trusted in “other gods.” Here we find a phrase that can carry a double meaning. In the Ancient Near East, the phrase “to fear *Elohim*” could be used to mean that one would act morally and ethically in any given situation. Thus, for instance, when Abraham makes the statement that, as far as he was concerned, there was no “fear of *Elohim*” in the court of Abimelech (Gen 20:11), he is not suggesting that he thought any foreign people would have a genuine fear of the one, true God. Rather, he is expressing his doubts that Abimelech and his people would act morally and ethically toward him.

Yet the phrase “fear of *Elohim*” could also mean a genuine obedience to the God of Israel. The children of Israel are indicted by the prophets because they “feared other gods” rather than fearing the One true God (2Kings 17:7, 35, 37-38). Thus, from Joseph’s perspective, when he stated that he “feared *Elohim*,” he meant that he feared the God of Jacob. Yet in the ears of his brothers, his words meant simply that they could trust him to be faithful to his word. Perhaps if his brothers had been more attuned to spiritual things, they might have caught in Joseph’s words a hint of his true identity.

Yet Joseph’s brothers are laboring under a guilty conscience. They still carried the guilt of their sin against Joseph, as well as their sin against their father for maintaining the lie that Joseph “was no more.” A guilty conscience survives in the world of secrecy. When a child of God hides his sin, the guilt which it brings rules as an unmerciful tyrant. One is always expecting God’s chastening hand, and thus life’s events are inevitably interpreted through the lens of guilt. This is demonstrated in the reaction of Joseph’s brothers when he requires that one of them remain in Egypt while the rest return to fetch Benjamin and bring him to Joseph. They reasoned: “Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us” (42:21). Then again, when they discover the money in their sacks, they say, “What is this that God has done to us?” (42:28). And when they finally return to Egypt, and are ushered into the house of Joseph, they reason, “It is because of the money that was returned in our sacks the first time that we are being brought in, that he may seek occasion against us and fall upon us, and take us for slaves with our donkeys” (43:18). Every distress that comes in life is viewed as a punishment! And how else could it be viewed? When one is governed by a guilty conscience, they are always expecting the worse. Thus, a guilty conscience prohibits one from growing in a genuine relationship with God as the compassionate, covenant keeping Savior of His people.

The remedy, of course, for a guilty conscience is confession and true repentance. As long as sin remains hidden, it wields a powerful control. But when sin is exposed through confession and repentance, it loses its power. Since God has promised to forgive our sins as we confess them

(1John 1:9), the repentant sinner may once again look to God as his savior rather than as his judge. In this way, the troubles one encounters in life are not constantly interpreted as God's judgment for hidden sin, but as tribulation which brings patience, endurance, and maturity, and which therefore produces hope (cf. Rom 5:3–5). This lesson is an important one for each of us. Don't let sin remain—keep short accounts with God. Confess your sin, turn from it, and return to the joy and liberty that God's forgiveness brings.

There is another despot that seeks to control the soul: it is the tyrant of bitterness. Even as repentance and confession are the antidote to hidden sin, so forgiveness is the counter to bitterness. The lie which our flesh tends to foster is that there are situations which offer a right to be bitter. When others sin against us, and do all manner of injustice to us, we feel justified in harboring bitterness. But bitterness is a sin, because bitterness is sustained by the false notion that the one has the right and even the duty to punish the offender. Yet the Torah teaches us: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" (Deut 32:35), and Paul admonishes us (quoting this same text from Deut): "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord (Rom 12:19). Bitterness, which moves one to punish the offender by "getting even" attempts to usurp the place of God. For it is His place to avenge the wrong doer, not ours. This He may do through the established courts, or through His own chastening hand in the events of one's life, or He may postpone judgment for the final day. But regardless, it is God's place to avenge, not ours. We are not allowed to act as a one-person court.

Joseph is a perfect example of forgiveness overcoming bitterness. When he hears his brothers admit their guilt and sin against him, he turns away to weep (42:23). He couldn't openly display his emotions at this point, for it would have telegraphed the reality that he did not need an interpreter, but that he understood the Hebrew they were speaking. So he leaves to cry privately. Yet his tears were not those of bitterness and anger, but of love and compassion. How could that be possible? Had not his whole life been turned upside down by the hatred of his brothers toward him? Was it not their sin and injustice that deserved to be punished now? If ever there were a time when bitterness might have seemed justified, it is here. But Joseph had not allowed bitterness to take root in his soul. In resigning himself to the all-controlling hand of the Almighty, he had been freed from the taskmaster of bitterness to serve his faithful Master. He was able to forgive his brothers because he believed God was in control, and therefore it was not his duty to bring revenge—that was God's responsibility. Such a perspective freed Joseph from carrying the burden of revenge, and allowed him to forgive those who had so deeply hurt him.

Here is a second most important lesson we should learn: harboring bitterness is like fostering a cancer in the soul. Entrusting even the most dire of situations to God and confessing that in His all-controlling providence even the evil done against us has a divine purpose, allows us to forgive and to unburden ourselves from the strangle-hold of revenge. Moreover, bitterness in the heart gives way to the enemy (Eph 4:26–27). The lesson is clear: don't allow bitterness any lodging in your soul. Treat it for what it is—an enemy that desires to destroy from the inside out.

As the story continues, Joseph binds Simeon in the sight of all his brothers. Why Simeon? Perhaps Joseph had heard Reuben describe his own attempts at dissuading his brothers from the evil deed, and so he retains the second oldest brother, Simeon (so Ibn Ezra).

Then Joseph supplies the requested grain, gives additional provision for the journey, instructs his servants to put the payment back into the sack of each man, and sends them off on their homeward trek. It is at the first lodging place that one of them finds his money in his sack and they all recognize that they have been trapped. Even if they proved themselves not to be spies, one of them would be indicted as a thief, and yet another of the sons would be incarcerated in the Egyptian prison. Once again, their guilty conscience did not allow them to think logically through the scenario. How could his money have found its way back into his sack? They could only reason that God was bringing judgment upon them!

Arriving home, they relate their experiences in Egypt to Jacob. They speak of “the man, the lord of the land” who dealt harshly with them, charging that they were spies and retaining Simeon (though they do not mention that he had been imprisoned). They further related that “the man, the lord of the land,” required the appearance of Benjamin in order to verify their story and prove they were not spies. Only after arriving home did they realize that the fate of the one was shared by all: the money of each had been returned to their sacks! Thus dismay fell upon them all, including Jacob.

Of course, Jacob was incensed that they had disclosed Benjamin’s existence in the first place (43:6), yet the brothers explained that the questions presented to them were very specific: “Is your father alive? Do you have another brother?” Once again, had they been able to reason from a clear conscience, they might have profitably considered why such questions would have been asked in the first place! But they could not—their guilty conscience left them vulnerable to imagine only the worst.

The dilemma they faced was clear: if they returned to Egypt, they would be accused of thievery, a charge they could not hope to overcome. Yet if they did not return, they would doubtlessly die from lack of food. Moreover, even if they did decide to return, taking Benjamin along seemed impossible—Jacob would never bend to such a request. Eventually, however, (and we do not know how long they remained in Canaan), the inevitable presented itself: they would have to return.

How would they persuade Jacob to release Benjamin into their care? Reuben offers the insane scenario that Jacob could put to death his two sons if Benjamin were not returned safely! A father, bereaved of his sons, would be consoled by murdering his grandsons?! The midrash offers Jacob’s inner thoughts regarding Reuben’s offer: “He is a fool, this eldest son of mine. He suggests that I should kill his sons. Are not his sons also my sons?” Judah is next to approach Jacob, and he simply offers himself as surety for Benjamin. The Sages suggest that Judah’s offer was accepted because Judah had lost two sons himself (Gen 38:7, 10). As a father, he understood the grief of losing sons, and thus when he offered himself as surety for Benjamin, Jacob was more inclined to trust him.

We should note an interesting phenomenon that has occurred at this point in our story: suddenly Jacob is referred to by his covenant name, Israel (43:6, 8, 11). This corresponds to the use of the name “Israel” in 42:5, where Joseph’s brothers are called the “sons of Israel” (rather than the “sons of Jacob”), and thus the use of Israel rather than Jacob acts as “book ends” for this pericope. Moreover, Jacob evokes the name “El Shaddai” (43:14) as he seeks a blessing for his sons upon their return to Egypt: “Take your brother also, and arise, return to the man; and may God Almighty (אל שׁדַּי, *El Shaddai*) grant you compassion in the sight of the man, so that he will release to you your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved” (Gen 43:13–14). *El Shaddai* is the name of God often connected with the giving of children (Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3; 49:25), and thus appropriate in this case, where Jacob seeks the welfare of his own sons, and resigns himself to the possibility of being “bereaved” of children. Yet the use of *El Shaddai* in connection with the covenant name “Israel” combines to emphasize the covenant faithfulness of God. Had He not promised Abraham a son to whom the blessing of the covenant would be passed? And had not this covenant likewise been renewed to Jacob? Thus subtly, our text brings this important fact to bear upon the impending struggle to be faced by Jacob and his sons. In using the name “Israel” rather than “Jacob,” God’s covenant faithfulness to honor His promise is emphasized. The destiny of Jacob’s sons was safe in the hands of the Almighty.

Our *parashah* ends with the return of Joseph’s brothers to Egypt, carrying with them the previous money found in their sacks, double the money to buy grain, along with the choicest of gifts for “the man,” as well as Benjamin. Upon seeing them, Joseph immediately moves the venue to his own quarters—the beginning of his self disclosure was too precious a thing to be a public event. With fear that the change of venue was a portend of evil against them, the brothers plead their in-

nocence before Joseph’s steward (43:19f). His words to them, however, were words of shalom: “Be at ease, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money” (43:23). “Be at ease” is actually שְׁלוֹם לָכֶם, “peace to you,” by which he meant, “you’re not in trouble—everything is okay.” This is followed by the characteristic “do not fear” (אַל-תִּירָאוּ, ‘*al tira ’u*). Moreover, the steward admits that their previous payment for grain had been received (“it came to me”), but that “your God and the God of your father” supplied the return of their money in their sacks. The steward is also using veiled language to hide the identity of Joseph.

Once again, if we are permitted to find in the Joseph story a foreshadowing of the suffering Messiah, an interesting picture emerges. The identity of the true Messiah remains hidden to Israel as a whole, yet the consolation is still given: “peace to you—do not fear.” The intention of the Master is to bring ultimate and lasting peace to His brothers, though His method for bringing this peace involves, for the present, a hiding of His identity. “. . . a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, and so all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:25–26). God’s ways are not our ways. He brings about His desired plan through methods we could never imagine.

Our *haftarah* in Isaiah is matched with this *parashah* primarily by 52:4–6:

For thus says the Lord God, “My people went down at the first into Egypt to reside there; then the Assyrian oppressed them without cause. Now therefore, what do I have here,” declares the Lord, “seeing that My people have been taken away without cause?” Again the Lord declares, “Those who rule over them howl, and My name is continually blasphemed all day long. Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, ‘Here I am.’”

The prophet has shown that the captivity of Israel will be overcome by the disclosure of God Himself to His people. “Therefore My people shall know My name.” Even as Joseph’s brothers labored under their possible demise at the hand of “the man, the lord of Egypt,” so Israel languishes under their blindness to the identity of the true Messiah. But one day our Master will disclose Himself to His brothers, and say, “Here I am!”

The Apostolic portion was chosen with this same picture of restoration in mind. Jerusalem, the Holy City, is seen by John as completely restored, with gates for each of the tribes. Like the Most Holy Place, it is a perfect cube, its length, width, and height being equal, having dimensions equally divisible by 12. Moreover, the wall that surrounds the city was 144 cubits high, again divisible by 12. The apocalyptic picture is that everything in the city, and indeed, the city itself, is completely measured to correspond to the restored 12 tribes of Israel in God’s final and ultimate salvation of His people.

And thus the connection to our story: Joseph, the “savior of the world,” is hidden to his own brothers, but will, in the end, fully disclose Himself, and will bring them all to be with him where their lives will be preserved from the famine. In this way, the Joseph narrative is an interesting foreshadow of the whole plan of redemption, through which both the descendants of Jacob as well as those from the nations are gathered together into the one redeemed people of God.