

Genesis 42-43
Joseph and his hungry family
Christ Church Liverpool

Leopards don't change their spots. Whether it's the businessman with a string of failed enterprises behind him, the multiple divorcee, the footballer who lashes out when he's tackled or the compulsive alcoholic, the perceived wisdom of the world is that there isn't really any chance of major transformation in someone's character.

When you start to think about it this advice, which is really a counsel of despair, is all around us. You see it in the commonplace assertion that all politicians are the same, in the tabloid's insistence that all murderers and rapists will always be a danger to other people and in the teaching of Alcoholics Anonymous that the compulsive drinker will never be able to be anything more than an abstaining addict.

"Leopards don't change their spots" is a mantra that shapes our relationships at work and in our home lives. Which is ironic because most of us spend quite a lot of time and effort trying to change ourselves – improving our knowledge, our skills, our fitness, our appearance and our attitudes.

The idea that people don't change also affects whole nations; think how many people in the UK are basically distrustful of "the Germans" or "the Japanese" even 65 years, three whole generations, after the end of the war we fought against them.

Now, of course, like most popular aphorisms, "leopards don't change their spots" has a significant element of truth in it. When you get to know someone you can, generally, be reasonably confident that the introvert won't suddenly become an extrovert by the next week. That the miserable, grumpy person won't suddenly become a fountain of joy.

But, for all that this is partly true, we must not allow the trite sayings of the world to govern the way that we think about people. Because the teaching of the Bible, in many places, and, very spectacularly, here in Genesis 42 and 43 is that people can change very greatly indeed.

The story of Joseph has, so far, been marked by a large degree of consistency in people's characters. Joseph speaks frankly of God's control of people's lives. The Egyptians treat Joseph shabbily. Jacob shows foolish favouritism. And Joseph's brothers are envious, self-centred, unprincipled, money grabbing scumbags.

But in these chapters we see, in just a few short months, the beginning of the total transformation of this family from dysfunctional rivalry to a profound unity that brings glory to God and, eventually, blessing to the whole world.

In these chapters we see three fundamental elements of the kind of profound character change that our world teaches is impossible. The kind of change in people's attitudes and behaviour that can really only be described as miraculous. This morning we will look at the roots of deep change, the requirement of deep change and the result of deep change.

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1 Roots: change happens because God is in control

Looked at from Jacob's point of view life seems pretty much like a disaster. He has a sneaking suspicion that the brothers had something to do with Joseph's disappearance – notice how he says to them they have deprived him of his children in 42:36.

Now famine sweeps the land threatening to kill not just one brother but the whole family. The precious promises of God to bring blessing to the world through this family have been carried from generation to generation – from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob.

But what if he is the one who fails? What if the family dies on Jacob's watch? What a disaster that would be. It's no wonder he says, in 42:36, "everything is against me."

Not only that but the brothers are completely useless in this crisis. Clearly rumours are spreading that there is food to be had in only one place; Egypt. Jacob knows this and so must the brothers. But instead of decisively forming a plan and carrying it out, something we know from experience they are capable of doing when they want to, the brothers are just sitting around looking at each other.

We don't know why exactly. Though the most likely reason seems to be that the very thought of Egypt is a reminder of the worst moment of their lives. They had sold their brother into slavery in Egypt, hoping to rid the family of Jacob's favourite so they could share his blessings. Instead they lost a brother, aroused their father's suspicion and only succeeded

in getting Benjamin promoted to favoured son status.

But, bitter fool that he is, Jacob is still the head of the household and the sons, apart from Benjamin, head off to Egypt. Where things get even worse...

The young ruler of Egypt picks them out of the crowd of foreign buyers, interrogates them severely, accuses them of spying and has them thrown into prison. It all looks like a disaster.

But it isn't. Because in these very severe circumstances God is working to bring about exactly what he wants to happen.

It is God who has arranged for there to be a severe famine which will bring the brothers down to Egypt. And it is God who has arranged for Joseph to be the Prime Minister of Egypt so that when they come he is the one who greets them.

One of the big themes of this chapter is superior knowledge. Joseph, 42:7, knows who they are; the brothers don't know who Joseph is. He doesn't speak to them in Hebrew, he is 20 years older than when they last saw him, 37 instead of 17, and he would have been clean shaven, dressed differently and, of course, the last person they would expect to be the Prime Minister of the most powerful nation in the world.

Joseph uses his superior knowledge. He gets them to give him all the information he wants about Benjamin and about Jacob. He gets out of them the wonderfully ironic claim that they are "honest" men and the great statement, 42:11, "we are all sons of one man," which, of course, they all are - including Joseph!

Now at first sight we can't be sure why Joseph is doing this. Is he harsh to them because he is vengeful and bitter? Does he have them thrown into prison to give them a taste of their own medicine? Well Joseph is a weak human being like you and me and I am certain there was at least an element of enjoyment in seeing them suffer when he knew that he was going to let them out again shortly.

But the main reason Joseph does what he does in this chapter is not vengeance but testing. He says that himself in 42:15 - this is how you will be *tested*. Joseph wants to know if they have changed. And the only way he can be sure of that is to put the brothers in a situation like the one they were in before and see what they will do.

Joseph here, is acting for God. He is God's agent to bring about the change in the brothers that God desires. Now when you think about it this is a pretty

harsh way to bring about change. The whole known world has to starve for 7 years in order to accomplish this plan. Jacob has to send his precious son Benjamin in the care of those he doesn't really trust in order to get Simeon back. Joseph himself suffers great distress and, three times in these chapters and the ones that follow, weeps as he deals with the emotional distress of seeing his brothers and not revealing his identity.

We shouldn't imagine, of course, that the only reason God sent the famine on the middle east at that time was to bring about this one family reunion. Just because this is the single most important of God's purposes doesn't mean that everybody else who got caught up in it was collateral damage. God was aware of the circumstances of every one of the millions affected and was as in control of their situations as he was of Joseph and his families.

But still this is a dark providence isn't it? Terrible things have to happen in order to bring about the purposes God intends, in order to transform the brothers' hearts. Joseph spends years in prison, they wander, aching with hunger across the deserts. They are locked up. Indeed they describe the whole process as, v21, distressing. It brought them pain.

But that is exactly the point. Because the consistent teaching of the Bible, and the particular teaching of these chapters, is that God's purpose for transforming people is usually accomplished not in the sunny uplands of happy times but in the dark valleys of distress.

The circumstances that shape people's characters are not normally the ones where we find ourselves lying on a beach without a care in the world but the ones where we are perplexed, in physical or emotional pain, dispirited, in situations where we would not choose to be. And those circumstances happen to you and me because God brings them about. He is the sovereign Lord who puts us in distressing places in order to bring about change.

As C S Lewis memorably put it: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Suffering is never fun. It wasn't good that Joseph's brothers had to go through all that they did. But it was infinitely better than that they should have been left by God in ease and prosperity and never had the chance to change. That would not only have meant God's plan for the world was not brought about but would have deprived them, individually, of great blessing, as they became very different people.

All sorts of things might bring about change in your life. But if you desire to become more like Jesus Christ, if you want to be more empathetic with those who suffer, or more patient with those who are difficult, or more considerate of those who are spiritually lost without knowing Christ as their saviour... Well don't be surprised if it is in dark providences, in your own suffering and distress that God moulds those things in you. It's what happened to Joseph's brothers, it's what has happened to millions of Christians over the centuries, it has been my experience and that of many others in our church family.

The root of change is that change is possible because God is in control. Next we see the requirement of change.

2 Requirement: change means facing up to your sin

The key turning point in the story is in 42:21. For the first time they admit together that what they did to Joseph was wrong. We weren't told this at the time but now the brothers recall how distressed Joseph was all those years ago when they sold him to a bunch of strangers.

And they recognise that, even years later, God can bring about judgment on them because of what they have done.

But it's one thing to acknowledge your sin and quite another to do something about it. They could see that this has come about because of Joseph, which it has, and in a much more direct way than they realise at the moment, and become bitter.

They could rage against God for subjecting them to this now when the things they did wrong happened so many years ago. But the author of Genesis very brilliantly shows us that's not what happened. Instead this moment of dawning spiritual understanding leads the brothers to a profound change in the way they treat one another and their father, Jacob.

It starts out haltingly enough. When Jacob is fearful about sending Benjamin back to Egypt with them to retrieve Simeon, Reuben steps in. It's not the most sophisticated or intelligent offer in the world, v37, to allow Jacob to kill his sons (Jacob's own grandsons!) if he fails to protect Benjamin. He hasn't considered that it wouldn't do any good or that it wouldn't make Jacob any happier. But it does at least show that he is taking seriously his responsibilities as a brother.

But their understanding grows. When the first lot of

had Joseph sold as a slave, offers to become a slave himself if he does not protect Benjamin on the journey to Egypt. He says that he is willing to, 43:9, be held personally responsible for what happens.

Most strikingly of all the brothers, who sold Joseph for 20 silver pieces, are willing to give up an absolute fortune in silver, the coins that Joseph had put back in their sacks, to rescue Simeon. They go back to Egypt fearing they may be arrested, this time not as spies but as thieves. But, for their brother, they do go back.

Even Joseph, whose sin has been his abject failure to recognise that all 12 sons are his children, is moved to a greater degree of faith when, having prayed to God for mercy, he acknowledges that God can be trusted even in matters of life and death, 43:14: "if I am bereaved, I am bereaved."

Finally they overcome the greatest barrier of all. Remember the cause of all the problems that led to them selling Joseph into slavery in the first place? It was their inability to deal with their father's favouritism. The fact that the brothers could not cope with Jacob's preference for Joseph and God's marking him out as their ruler. It was their jealousy, their envy, that had led to rage, attempted murder and kidnapping.

So when they come back with Benjamin, Joseph sets them up. He puts them in order of age. He emphasises by his table arrangement that Benjamin is the least significant brother. And then bestows on him the kind of honour normally reserved for the firstborn. He piles mountains of food in front of him. Not because Benjamin was a trougher and eat people out of house and home. But because providing more food than someone could eat was a sign of esteem and favour.

And then, no doubt, he watched. Watched and listened intently (because the brothers still didn't know he could understand them), for signs of jealousy. For little barbed comments about Rachel's children always getting special preference. For then shuffling down the table away from Benjamin.

But there wasn't any of that. They feasted and drank freely together with Joseph. Whereas the last time we were told about the brothers feasting together they had thrown Rachel's favoured son into a pit and sat munching at the top while he wept and called for mercy now they include the favoured son of Rachel in their banter and share as brothers.

They have changed; because they have faced up to their sin.

Very often we start all sorts of little projects we hope will make us better people; the classic New Year's resolutions, but never really change because we never really admit that we are at fault.

We try and determine to get on better with our non-Christian friends in the office without ever confessing to God that our problem is that we don't really love those people.

We try and resolve to have a more intimate and satisfying relationship with our wife or husband but don't face up to the fact that the sin that stops us achieving that is that we are always seeking our own good in the marriage not theirs.

Leaders want the church to be more effective in evangelism, training and discipleship but don't own up to our own lack of praying for, giving to and loving of the church family.

You see the Bible's consistent teaching is that the problems of the world are not primarily out there in structures, systems, methods and organisations. They are in here, on our hearts. And that means that change; personal change, change of churches, offices and cultures, can only happen when we face up to the perversity, the sin, of our hearts.

Now of course that's a two way street. In a relationship there is usually more than one person in the wrong! And so the kind of change we hope for can only be brought about where all the parties involved acknowledge their sin. But quite often the fault is so much on one side that your facing up to your sin, repenting, turning around, can have the most amazing effects. And God has so ordered our universe that very often where one person repents and forgives their changed attitude melts the hard hearts of others so that they too, in time, come to a place of repentance.

Change requires facing up to your sin. I wonder, this morning, what things you can think of in your life that you don't want to be like they are, but which you know, deep down, require repentance as the first step. What circumstances is God bringing together in your life to make it clear to you that you must turn from your sin in order to become more like Christ.

Now I don't want you to go away from this thinking this is merely some humanistic teaching. It was God who brought the brothers to repentance, using the circumstances that he had arranged to move their hard hearts to see their sin. But they still had to repent. God brought them to it. He sovereignly controlled it. But they could not change until they faced their sin. And neither can we.

And you would be a fool not to want this kind of change, however costly it may be, however painful it may look. Because the result of deep change is that it brings you from a famine to a feast...

3 Results: deep change takes you from a famine to a feast

These chapters start out with hunger. The brothers are sitting round an empty table looking at each other. Their relationships with their father are a mess. Their relationships with each other are a mess. Their relationship with the Lord is marred by the sin they have not repented of.

These men are suffering from a famine. And the physical famine, the constant hunger in their bellies, is just a picture, for the author of Genesis, of the relational and spiritual famine that is going on in their hearts.

By the end of these chapters that has begun to change. They end this part of the story sitting around a banqueting table filled with more food than they can eat. They are still estranged from Joseph and they have not yet brought their father Jacob into the blessings of their now restored relationships; you'll have to come back next week for more about that.

But we can tell that something has changed. These men are now able to sit round and share with one another without the envy and jealousy that characterised the before.

Judah is leading the way in showing what it means to be a man who is willing to give himself up for his father rather than in trying to manipulate and take from his father.

They are on the way to becoming what God created them to be; a family through whom he would bring blessing to all the people's of the earth. In order for them to be that they have to fulfil the destiny God has for them. Near the beginning of our passage the 10 brothers come and bow before Joseph and he remembers his dreams. But it's not until Benjamin returns with them and all 11 bow before him that the dream of the sheaves of wheat acknowledging the rule of Joseph is fulfilled.

That might not seem to tell us anything other than reminding us, as so much in this story does, that God is in total control. But actually this part of the story teaches us more than that.

It reminds us that God's sovereignty is a kind, good, gracious rule that bring blessing and abundance. That brings a feast for these men where previously there was a famine.

The kind of change that God brings about through orchestrating our circumstances, often by putting us in positions of real distress, is change for the better. The kind of change in your life that comes about when you face up to and repent of your sin, is change for the better.

In this story, as we'll see in the remaining chapters of Genesis, the reconciliation of the family enables the formation of a nation; the people of Israel. And it is from this nation that the great king, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will rule the world forever with justice and righteousness, is born. This family's reuniting eventually leads to the salvation of the world.

The deep changes that are needed in your life and mine will not so directly affect the salvation of millions of people. But don't be fooled into thinking that they don't matter. Because the pattern of these chapters is true for us too; change takes you from a famine to a feast.

That's true in your personal relationships. If there is someone of whom you are envious, someone you despise, repenting of your sin and seeking the restoration of that relationship will bring you blessing. Perhaps, if it's a work colleague, it will create opportunities for gospel conversations and open for them the door to eternal life. Perhaps, if it's a family member, you will see the reconciliation of other people in your family to more functional relationships with one another. And even if those things don't happen you will still have turned from the spiritual famine that comes when you ignore God's commands.

It's true in our church relationships. Perhaps some here have things you are holding against your brothers and sisters here in the church family or, if you are visiting today, in your own church family. Well can I tell you this morning that sorting out those problems, repenting of your sin, will enable your church to more effectively do what it is meant to do. And what your church is meant to do is exactly the same as what Jacob's family were meant to do: bring blessing to the world. Britain is full of towns and cities where the people are spiritually starving. And one of the main reasons for that is that in thousands of churches envy and strife between the brothers is preventing them working together to bring blessing to the world.

Perhaps, in reading these parts of the book of Genesis we like to read ourselves into the part of Joseph, the wise man who brings about God's purposes. But the brutal truth is that we are much more like the brothers. Joseph is God's saviour, the Messiah, the anointed king. We are the brothers Joseph has to bring from squabbling, envious siblings

to those who are able to bring blessing to the world as we become more like him.

So can I urge you, this morning, to look at these brothers, to see the amazing and miraculous change that God brings about in them, and to believe that leopards can change their spots.

Please, this morning, do not leave without reflecting on whether the circumstances in which you find yourself in some aspect of your life and God's megaphone, shouting to you that there is an issue that needs to be dealt with.

Please, this morning, don't go away without repenting of the jealousy and envy you have against others.

Most of all though, please don't leave this morning without knowing that turning from your sin, repenting and seeking to follow Christ, will bring great blessing not only to you but also to the world; to all those with whom you come into contact.

Deep change is possible because God is sovereign. It can happen wherever there is repentance for our sin. And it moves us from spiritual famine to a feast.

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