

## Genesis 43 The goodness of God

### Introduction

We are all very familiar with Paul's words in Romans 8:28: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to his purpose.* This assurance of God's sovereignty does not require us to believe with some form of mental gymnastics that there is some good in every situation or scenario that happens; rather that God is at work in His world so that even out of the darkest situations human beings experience God can bring some good for the benefit of His people. It is most decidedly not teaching that 'all ends happily ever after' no matter what you and I may go through individually or collectively in this life. All of us are aware of personal tragedies individuals go through and international disasters like the agonizing scenes being played out in Syria just now. These can in themselves be situations where evil appears to be rampant with no hope in sight. However, this promise from God teaches us that God loves us so much that His hand will be on our lives throughout all our days. He will work in and through the range of experiences that we face in order that in time in preparation for our eternal future we may become more like Jesus. God's people have our struggles. We can have extremely difficult days when our hopes appear to be extinguished. Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73, admitted to his very real battle to keep hold of his faith and trust in the goodness of God. He wrote these words: *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.* <sup>2</sup> *But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.* <sup>3</sup> *For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... They say, 'How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?'* <sup>12</sup> *This is what the wicked are like – always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.* <sup>13</sup> *Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.* <sup>14</sup> *All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.* <sup>15</sup> *If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children.* <sup>16</sup> *When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply* <sup>17</sup> *till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny... When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered,* <sup>22</sup> *I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.* <sup>23</sup> *Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.* <sup>24</sup> *You guide me with your counsel and afterwards you will take me into glory.* <sup>25</sup> *Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.* <sup>26</sup> *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever* (Psalm 73:1-3, 11-17, 21-26). All of us have had our disappointments and our tears; our heartaches and our questions, but God invites us to trust Him to reveal His goodness to us over time so that we may catch glimpses of His mighty purposes being fulfilled in our community and our land.

### 1. The end of our resources (Genesis 43:1-14)

(a) The persistence of God (Genesis 43:1) *Now the famine was still severe in the land.* God used means to kick start the process of reconciliation. (i) Famine The process of transformation of these brothers by God would take some time. It had begun in this chapter of their lives by the start of the famine in the region so that they had to go to Egypt to buy grain. The very mention of that name awakened their consciences to recall their ill-treatment of their younger brother Joseph. They were completely unaware that they had met Joseph. The chances of meeting him by accident were ridiculously small, even if he was still alive, but odds don't matter when God is at work. When they were going through this heartache of food shortages and the long journey to Egypt they were more in the centre of God's will than when they lived at ease in Canaan over these last number of years. When you and I face trials it does not necessarily mean we are outside God's will for our lives. Things may be temporarily harder

because we are seeking to be obedient to God and live as He wishes us to do. Our example is Jesus. When we remember how He lived and the cost of His obedience it is salutary for us to remember that trials may have been provoked by the evil one to try and divert us from going God's way. Sadly the devil even uses Christians to divert other believers from doing God's will. What is important to note is that if Christians are not wanting to do something significant for God the evil one will not bother us! (ii) Harsh treatment In Egypt the official accused them of being spies and put them in prison. From their point of view it was unfair, but it was God's means of persuading them to reflect on how they had treated Joseph (Genesis 42:21). The official (Joseph) had not mentioned what they did to Joseph, but God used the harsh treatment to prompt them to re-examine their consciences and past conduct. Now for the first time they genuinely asked the question: *Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, 'What is this that God has done to us?'* (Genesis 42:28). It is a solemn reminder to us to ask this question: if I am not listening to God, what will He have to do to get my full attention? Their experiences had been painful, but it brought them closer to God. The famine had not gone away. The official and his extraordinary questions would need to be met again when they returned to Egypt. However, behind it all was the persistence of God.

(b) The problems that had to be faced (Genesis 43:2-14) (i) No alternative plan (Genesis 43:2) <sup>2</sup>*So when they had eaten all the grain they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, 'Go back and buy us a little more food.'* Presumably there were some other foodstuffs left to keep them alive, but the staple food supplies were running out. Sometimes God's people don't want to do His will. They want a 'Plan B' when God desires obedience. Has He been speaking to you about something personal that you need to obey? What about us as a church with our vision for the way forward. Has God directed us about the future work of mission and ministry? If He has then we must obey His will and not delay. These family members were divided. What needed to happen was obvious, but that did not stop Jacob and possibly some others from refusing to accept what was the only way forward. It took a lot of patient reasoning for an agreement to be reached to proceed in line with the wishes of the Egyptian official (and God!). Sometimes God does give us genuine alternatives as choices, but on other occasions He only allows one option to be on the table with a view to testing whether we will walk through the door he has opened for us. (ii) The specific demands of the Official (Genesis 43:3-5) <sup>3</sup>*But Judah said to him, 'The man warned us solemnly, "You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you."* <sup>4</sup>*If you will send our brother along with us, we will go down and buy food for you.* <sup>5</sup>*But if you will not send him, we will not go down, because the man said to us, "You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you."* Jacob was here exhibiting the tendency of the school of thought that says if we bury our heads in the sand for a while our problems will go away and when we resurface all will be fine! It was not because the reality was that future food purchases were dependent on Benjamin accompanying his older step brothers on the trip. Previously Reuben as the eldest spoke for the brothers, but now Judah rose to the fore and will keep that place of responsibility. He had seemed an unlikely person to take this position after the way he had lived his life over a number of years. However, God was at work in his life. If Genesis chapter 38 showed the negative aspects of the Judah story, now from chapter 43 onwards we see grace and redemption at work in the same person. He was not beyond hope. He was being transformed because God's grace was making even a person like Judah into a man who honoured God. This is an encouragement to us over people in our own family circle or friends who have either not come to faith yet or who have wandered from God's path for their lives, and who have shown little signs of change for some years. Remember Judah - he was changed by God eventually; this gives hope for the people you are praying for as well. (iii) The pressure of the circumstances (Genesis 43:6-7) <sup>6</sup>*Israel asked,*

*'Why did you bring this trouble on me by telling the man you had another brother?'* <sup>7</sup> *They replied, 'The man questioned us closely about ourselves and our family. "Is your father still living?" he asked us. "Do you have another brother?" We simply answered his questions. How were we to know he would say, "Bring your brother down here"?' Actually there was only a 'Plan A' on the table. Endless discussions 'around the houses' about non-existent alternatives was a waste of time. Jacob's objection to what his sons had revealed about their family to the Egyptian official was unfair. He might not have viewed it that way but this is the truth. In life there are circumstances we would prefer were different, but we have to deal with the situation before us and ask what is God saying to me or to us in this situation –not what would I wish God to say to me if I could call the shots! Our sinful nature can cause us to fail to see what is staring us in the face. God allowed the pressure of the circumstances this family experienced due to the famine to guide them to make the right choice.*

(c) **The people that needed to be changed** (Genesis 43:8-10) <sup>8</sup> *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. <sup>9</sup> I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life. <sup>10</sup> As it is, if we had not delayed, we could have gone and returned twice.'* The situation has changed; in an earlier conversation with their elderly Father, Reuben made this offer, recorded in Genesis 42:37: *Then Reuben said to his father, 'You may put both of my sons to death if I do not bring him back to you. Entrust him to my care, and I will bring him back.'* Granddad, in effect if I'm wrong, you can kill my two sons, your grandsons to death! How foolish could he be in making such an offer; the only mitigating fact might have been that they were beginning to run out of food and the sons could find any way to persuade their dad to allow them to take Benjamin with them to Egypt. Here in Genesis 43:9 Judah said something quite different. In effect he said dad if this all goes wrong hold me accountable for life and probably cut me out of your will so that I miss out on whatever I was due to inherit when you had passed on. Reuben's offer had been dismissed some days or weeks earlier, but Judah's touched his father's heart and eventually resulted in an agreement. In Genesis 38 Judah was revealed as a man who supremely looked out for himself, but now he is willing to put himself out for others in his family. His hard heart was softening. He will later make an even greater offer (in Genesis 44), but in this step we see God at work, quietly and without a fuss; all the people in the story were works in progress. God was touching each of their lives, but it would take some years for the plan to come to fruition.

(d) **The prayer that needed to be offered** (Genesis 43:11-14) <sup>11</sup> *Then their father Israel said to them, 'If it must be, then do this: put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as a gift – a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds. <sup>12</sup> Take double the amount of silver with you, for you must return the silver that was put back into the mouths of your sacks. Perhaps it was a mistake. <sup>13</sup> Take your brother also and go back to the man at once. <sup>14</sup> And may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man so that he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved'* (Genesis 43:1-14). What does it take for us to pray? We could so easily miss the significant point here caught up in the curious details of the presents Jacob planned to offer the mysterious Egyptian official. This family claimed to be followers of the God of Israel, but God was on the periphery of their thinking and decision-making. Praise God for the breakthrough with Jacob's prayer here. What does it take for you and me to be serious about praying for God to work in our lives and situation? We can be followers of Jesus of many years standing but when things are going well we can so easily drift into saying prayers but not praying. The difference between the two is a gulf –a Grand Canyon of difference! Jacob was invoking God's name. May we continue to do that and not just when we have difficulties and crises in

our lives. There may be an element of fatalism here too. However, it was progress in their faith journey.

## 2. The releasing of our plans (Genesis 43:15-23)

(a) The power of undeserved love (Genesis 43:15-18) <sup>15</sup>So the men took the gifts and double the amount of silver, and Benjamin also. They hurried down to Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph. <sup>16</sup> When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, 'Take these men to my house, slaughter an animal and prepare a meal; they are to eat with me at noon.' <sup>17</sup> The man did as Joseph told him and took the men to Joseph's house. <sup>18</sup> **Now the men were frightened when they were taken to his house.** They thought, 'We were brought here because of the silver that was put back into our sacks the first time. He wants to attack us and overpower us and seize us as slaves and take our donkeys.' Now that they had agreed to do what they ought to have done weeks earlier, the brothers returned to the same place in Egypt where they had previously met the mysterious official. Joseph's plans for his brothers were based on their best interests, though they were not aware of it at this stage. How true that may be of us with respect to our heavenly Father's purposes for us. There are many occasions when we cannot see how He could be at work in what is happening to us. Here the fear of the brothers was magnified by the official's great love for them. They knew they had done nothing to deserve it. Therefore, they were convinced that there can be no such thing as a 'free lunch'. It must be a trap of some kind. In other words we wouldn't be so generous to a stranger; therefore, for someone else to be like that is decidedly odd! How sad that the generosity of the Prime Minister could be viewed in this way. It raises a challenge, though, have there been times when I might have misunderstood God's loving acts towards me? I was so set on a particular pathway that I was too blinkered to see God at work. An outside independent observer might have marvelled at the incredible generosity of the host to these foreign visitors to Egypt and been correct in doing so. Yet the brothers could not see what was going on before their eyes. They, if interviewed at the time would have been adamant about the malevolent intentions of their Egyptian host. The facts before them were the same, and both interpretations of them could not be correct. They were in stark contradiction to one another. The generosity of the offer before them was real and they had to accept it, but sadly the joy of the blessing was absent because they would not allow themselves to see what God was doing in and for them. At various times most if not all God's people have cause to reflect on events happening in their lives with a need to wrestle through what God might be saying to them so that they might discover His will for them.

(b) The puzzle of undeserved kindness (Genesis 43:19-23) <sup>19</sup> So they went up to Joseph's steward and spoke to him at the entrance to the house. <sup>20</sup> 'We beg your pardon, our lord,' they said, 'we came down here the first time to buy food. <sup>21</sup> But at the place where we stopped for the night we opened our sacks and each of us found his silver – the exact weight – in the mouth of his sack. So we have brought it back with us. <sup>22</sup> We have also brought additional silver with us to buy food. We don't know who put our silver in our sacks.' <sup>23</sup> 'It's all right,' he said. 'Don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver.' Then he brought Simeon out to them. Years earlier there was no chance these men would have entertained the thought of admitting their 'change' for the grain purchases was too much. Now we can notice the progress as they openly and honestly admit what was going on to Joseph's steward. This man appears to be in on what Joseph is doing here, but he graciously plays his part and assures the brothers that their payment had been received in full on the previous visit and that somehow God was responsible for the extra money in their grain sacks. While they are struggling to comprehend how this could be the case, their brother Simeon was returned to them unharmed. Simeon had not been sold off as a slave and been lost to the family for ever;

neither had he been ill-treated in prison during their unexpectedly long absence. The length of their delay is stated by Judah in Genesis 43:10: *As it is, if we had not delayed, we could have gone and returned twice.* What must Simeon have thought as the weeks became months? He must have become concerned that he too had been abandoned by his brothers to save themselves at his expense. I'm sure that was a conversation to be had at some point but not then, as more pressing issues were at hand. Genesis 43: 23 states: *'It's all right,' he said. 'Don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver.* Would they accept that the signs of God at work were genuine? Sometimes we need to ask ourselves: what would it take for me to see God at work here? The truth was staring them in the face, but these brothers struggled to grasp it. How open am I to see the goodness of God at work in my life, or other people's lives? God had a plan for them. The problem was convincing all the participants to join Him in bringing about its fulfilment!

### 3. **The recognition of God's goodness** (Genesis 43:24-34)

#### (a) **The treatment of the brothers as honoured guests** (Genesis 43:24-29)

<sup>24</sup> *The steward took the men into Joseph's house, gave them water to wash their feet and provided fodder for their donkeys.* <sup>25</sup> *They prepared their gifts for Joseph's arrival at noon, because they had heard that they were to eat there.* <sup>26</sup> *When Joseph came home, they presented to him the gifts they had brought into the house, and they bowed down before him to the ground.* <sup>27</sup> *He asked them how they were, and then he said, 'How is your aged father you told me about? Is he still living?'* <sup>28</sup> *They replied, 'Your servant our father is still alive and well.'* *And they bowed down, prostrating themselves before him.* <sup>29</sup> *As he looked about and saw his brother Benjamin, his own mother's son, he asked, 'Is this your youngest brother, the one you told me about?'* *And he said, 'God be gracious to you, my son.'* Ancient Middle-Eastern hospitality was in evidence here as provision was made for the brothers to wash and their animals to be cared for prior to the meal provided for them. Abraham's servant (Genesis 24) made the provision of appropriate hospitality the sign he was looking for in his search for a wife for Isaac, his master's son. When these signs were given by Rebekah in the town where she lived, Eleazar the servant uttered these words of praise to God: *Then the man bowed down and worshipped the Lord,* <sup>27</sup> *saying, 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the journey to the house of my master's relatives'* (Genesis 24:27). It is about perspective. Abraham's servant was trusting and expecting God to work in the situation and he had no doubt that he had seen God at work. In a very similar situation the brothers had no genuine expectation of God working in that way and couldn't see how God could be in that situation for their good. This is a salutary lesson for us. Could I miss out on God's best plans for my life because I have not been open to see it? Then the attention to detail of their host who appeared so interested in their family, while they had not the slightest interest in his- for the moment! The mix of emotions in that room that day was incredible! God was at work for good, for His people, but further time that day had to elapse before the whole truth could be revealed.

#### (b) **The treatment of the brothers as if they were family members** (Genesis 43:30-34)

<sup>30</sup> *Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there.* <sup>31</sup> *After he had washed his face, he came out and, controlling himself, said, 'Serve the food.'* <sup>32</sup> *They served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians.* <sup>33</sup> *The men had been seated before him in the order of their ages, from the firstborn to the youngest; and they looked at each other in astonishment.* <sup>34</sup> *When portions were served to them from Joseph's table, Benjamin's portion was five times as much as anyone else's. So they feasted and drank freely with him.* One further chapter of the story was written before the brothers headed back home with the much-needed grain. Still they hadn't got a clue about

what was really going on. Yet still despite their spiritual blindness they were recipients of the goodness of God. The same can be said of Christians in each generation who are blessed quite often in greater ways than we deserve. Joseph is seriously struggling with maintaining the pretence of his perceived identity. However, he has to keep it up because it is necessary to ensure that the brothers learn their lesson from their ill-treatment of Joseph and don't ever think of behaving so badly again. One final blessing that astonishes them is that they have been seated in age order around the table –in line with their customs. How did the official know the order in which they should have been seated? Why did Benjamin get such a huge portion of food compared to the other brothers? It was not because he could possibly eat so much- this was truly impossible and would have put many of us off eating our dinner. In the same way that Joseph had been blessed with a special coat which provoked his brothers to envy, would this favouritism of Benjamin lead them to be jealous of the last of Rachel's sons? The brothers were being set up for the test that would follow, recorded in Genesis 44. The test was not to trick them but to see if they would do the right thing and honour God by honouring Benjamin. God through Joseph blessed these men beyond anything they could have expected, but the test would come: would they go God's way? Or would they not? The same question is left with me and with you, for the glory of His name's sake, Amen.