

The Evidence of Mercy Genesis 43:1-34

Written in 1844, one of the popular novels of Alexandre Dumas is The Count of Monte Cristo that has also been made into a feature film. The author weaves throughout this story of adventure the themes of hope, justice, vengeance, mercy and forgiveness. The main character, Edmond Dante' is falsely accused of treason, arrested and imprisoned in the infamous Chateau d' If where political prisoners are kept. After six years of prison he is on the verge of taking his life when the unexpected happened. Another prisoner digging an escape tunnel inadvertently ends up in Edmond's cell. They become friends and over the next eight years while continuing to dig their way out, Edmond is educated by his new companion. During that time he also plans his revenge. With failing health, the other prisoner tells him of the location of a vast fortune in hidden treasure. The friend soon dies and Edmond is able to escape not through the tunnel, but in the burial bag of his now deceased friend. They toss the body into the ocean where Edmond swims to a nearby island and begins to unfold his plan of revenge after finding the hidden treasure. Rich beyond his wildest imagination he is able to hide his true identity taking on the role of the Count of Monte Cristo, the island on which he found the treasure. It is with precision that his act of revenge is carried out on those who caused the 14 years of hardship in prison. His wealthy position now affords him the ability to get even.

If anyone had the means and motive to exact revenge for mistreatment, false accusations, and wrongful imprisonment, it was Joseph. He was now in a position to do anything he wanted to whomever he wanted for as long as he wanted. He had the power. So before we go any further by looking at today's passage let's recall some of the character traits that we have discovered about Joseph that have made him the man he is in these chapters. I also want to suggest that these traits were evident in his life before he was sold into slavery and ended up in Egypt. But I also want to quickly add that it was in the pit of his time as a slave and as a prisoner that

these character traits are polished and developed.

James 1:2-4 sums it up nicely for us. **“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete (whole), not lacking anything.”**

Everything that happened to Joseph tested his faith. God used the sandpaper of trials to not only prepare Joseph for the position he would hold, a position he would have to save a small group of people, his family, but also to develop godly character. Let's not forget that God uses trials in our life not just to further His plan, but also for our personal growth.

In **Genesis 41**, we saw five attributes in Joseph's life as a man of God, that we would do well to also develop in our lives if we would be people of God.

- A man of God must be honest
- A man of God must be honorable
- A man of God must be humble
- A man of God must be hopeful
- A man of God must be holy

Two weeks ago we were challenged by two additional traits in his life found in **Genesis 41**.

- The man of God must be a servant
- The man of God must be salty

An additional character trait surfaces in **Genesis 43** that is evident throughout the chapter in the life of Joseph and one that God demonstrates with us every day and that is mercy, one we would do well to practice with others. So let's jump in and pick up the story as we witness the evidence of mercy.

Seven years of tremendous prosperity were followed by a severe famine that decimated the known world forcing people from surrounding nations to venture to the nation of Egypt for food. Under the leadership of Zaphenath-Paneah, food was distributed to those in need. Commanded by their father, 10 brothers were escorted into the presence of the ruler responsible for the distribution of food to the out of towners. Through questioning

he would determine whether those standing before him were spies. They were harshly treated and given an order that any future request for food would only be granted if they returned with their missing brother as proof they were not spies. Simeon was imprisoned until such time as they should return. On their trip home it was discovered that their money had been stuffed in the sacks of grain. Jacob was beside himself still grieving the loss of Jacob some 13 years earlier, now Simeon was all but lost and the possibility of also losing Benjamin left him in deep sorrow.

That's where we pick up today's chapter. Time has passed, the famine is still severe and the food they had returned with is now all consumed. It's in **verses 1-14** that we see an awful predicament.

I. AN AWFUL PREDICAMENT – vs. 1-14

There's a parody of the nursery rhyme Old Mother Hubbard. You know the one.

Old mother Hubbard
Went to the cupboard,
To get her poor dog a bone;
But when she came there
The cupboard was bare,
And so the poor dog had none.

The lesser known version goes like this:

Old Mother Hubbard
Went to the cupboard,
To get her poor self a bite.
But when she got there,
The cupboard was bare,
The kids had a snack last night.

Verses 1-2 reveals a pressing urgency.

A. A Pressing Urgency – vs. 1-2

We already mentioned the severity of the famine. It was lasting longer than anyone expected. We'll see in **chapter 45** that there are still five years remaining as prophesied by Joseph from Pharaoh's two dreams. He will tell them in that chapter that if they don't return to Egypt as a family to live, they will become destitute.

Everything they had brought back from their first trip was now gone. Jacob told his 10 sons to return to Egypt to buy a more food because the cupboards were bare. But that's when we see in **verses 3-5** a perilous understanding.

B. A Perilous Understanding – vs. 3-5

However it happened, Judah has now surfaced as the primary spokesman for the rest of the brothers. He reminds their father that **“the man warned us solemnly, ‘You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you.’”**

No brother, no food – period. Now, I'm just thinking out loud here, but if this were any old Joe seated as second in command of all Egypt, how would he know for sure when the person they returned with was really their brother? They could have pulled anyone off the street and coaxed him with a little vacation trip down to Egypt to see the pyramids. And besides that, the man saw so many people every day, how would he remember them and his edict to them?

If it was anyone other than their brother Joseph, they could have possibly pulled off the ruse. But they didn't know it was Joseph who gave them the mandate and they weren't going to take the chance that he had forgotten them and his order. Better safe than sorry.

Judah wasn't banking on any of that because he remembered what the man said. Bring him or else, but it wasn't just the refusal of food, they wouldn't even see him and they all knew something they hadn't told Jacob. If he wasn't with them when they returned they would be executed as spies. Without him, they would refuse to make the trip. More was at stake than just going hungry. They all knew their very lives depended on returning with Benjamin. Judah is respectful but insistent with his father. Jacob then expresses his disapproval in **verses 6-7**. There is a perturbed unhappiness.

C. A Perturbed Unhappiness – vs. 6-7

This is the same man who committed himself years early to follow the God who revealed Himself in

that vision of the ladder with angels ascending and descending from heaven with God at the top. This is the same man who through the years had a faith that waxed and waned, ebbed and flowed depending on the circumstances of the day.

How much like Jacob are we? When life is good, faith is strong, but when we hit a little speed bump on the road of life it derails our faith. Faith that seemed strong is fleeting. We see in that moment Jacob reverting back to his old self, bent on self-preservation lacking in faith, fearful in the “what might be” why is all this against me. Everyone of us has been there. Or maybe you’re still there. I want to come back to this in a bit, but let me just say that when our faith isn’t strong, our natural default is to fear. That’s our nature. All Jacob could think in the moment was why me, why now, why this? He was tuning up to sing a solo – “Me, me, me, me, me.”

Their response was plainly stated that they had no way of knowing where the line of questioning by the man was going. He asked and they answered and were taken off guard by his demand to have their brother brought with them the next time.

Jacob was not a happy camper. He was perturbed with his sons and he was left in a pickle. In their current condition they had no food. If they went down to Egypt without Benjamin, they would still have no food. Either way, there was no food. That’s when Judah issued a personal ultimatum.

D. A Personal Ultimatum – vs. 8-10

Judah spoke and reminded his father of something his father had already indicated back in **chapter 42:1**. If they didn’t go get food they would all die. He not only reminded Jacob of their plight and his own words but also stated that he would be held personally responsible for Benjamin should anything happen to him. Unlike Reuben’s previous attempt, Judah took the burden himself and would bare the consequences for the rest of his life. We are seeing a step of maturity in Judah. He would be personally accountable for his wellbeing. He also shows a change of heart and personal concern for Jacob’s happiness that nothing happen to Benjamin.

From the sound of the conversation, it sounds like this is not the first time this discussion has come up. Food was running low and they wanted to go back but dad nixed the idea for the sake of Benjamin. Now the situation was more dire. **Verse 1** says they had eaten all the grain. Judah appears to snap Jacob out of his denial and delay. Do nothing and we’ll die of starvation. Don’t do as ordered by the man and we will get nothing and still die of starvation, adding that they could have gone there and back twice. We’re not sure if that was an exaggeration, but it seemed to tug at Jacob’s heart string so that in **verses 11-14** we see a painful undertone.

E. A Painful Undertone – vs. 11-14

Jacob doesn’t like it, but he has no other recourse. Since there is no alternative, they were to take a little gift with them. From all Jacob had heard about this man down in Egypt, he assumed he was a cruel and cold task master, bent on strict rule. To appeal to him or perhaps to appease the man, he sent some gifts with his sons. They were to take **“a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds.”** The honey could have been that which is made by bees or it could have been a thick paste made from grapes. It, along with the nuts were not products found in Egypt. Maybe getting something not readily available on the shelves of the local market would soften him up.

There is a bit of irony though in the gift he sent that I’m sure wasn’t missed by the 10 sons, that Jacob knew nothing about. It’s in **Genesis 37:25-26**.

In addition to the gifts they took with them they were to take back the original payment along with money to purchase more food. Here’s another point of irony. The original amount taken was 10 bags of silver. Now they had an additional 10 bags or 20 bags total or 2 bags per person. How much was Joseph sold for? 20 pieces of silver. We can only wonder if it raised a few eyebrows on the brothers.

At this point in the conversation, there is a momentary glimpse of faith by Jacob. **“May God Almighty grant you mercy.”**

In the Hebrew it's El Shaddai – God, the Provider. May the Provider God grant you mercy. The Old Testament word is equivalent to the New Testament term grace.

Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve.

Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve.

Not a one of us deserves eternal life, but the Bible tells us that it is the gift of God received by faith and doesn't come by any merit of our own.

We don't deserve His mercy. We have all sinned and deserve the penalty for our acts of disobedience to His holy standard. But He withholds that penalty to all who will by faith receive His grace, Him giving to us what we don't deserve.

We deserve hell but in His mercy by His grace through our faith He has given us heaven.

If you have never received the mercy and grace of God, today you can by putting your trust in Christ, admitting and repenting of your sin and receiving Christ as your Savior and you will receive eternal life. There is no other way to receive eternal life than by the grace of God.

They didn't deserve the mercy of God but Jacob requested that the mercy of El Shaddai, God Almighty, be extended to them through the ruler so that they could return with both Simeon and Benjamin as gifts of his mercy. But if not, Jacob had resigned himself to accept the possible outcome and be bereaved of two more sons. It's with a sigh that he says this – what ever will be, will be.

Where is the man who had at one time trusted in the God who would make him into a great nation?

They were in an awful predicament and what follows is an awakened panic. It's in **verses 15-22**.

II. AN AWAKENED PANIC – vs. 15-22

In **verses 15-18** there is a profound alarm.

A. A Profound Alarm – vs. 15-18

It's possible that the closer they came to Egypt, the slower their pace and the quicker their heartrate. For all they knew, they were wanted men. They couldn't legitimately explain how their money had been returned. For all they knew, their pictures were

plastered on all the post-office walls and telephone poles in every major city. For all they knew, border patrol had been placed on notice to look out for 10 men entering the country.

Panic set in when they stood before the man and were suddenly whisked away to the man's private estate. They reasoned that it was about the money and became fearful that once there, the man would overpower them with his guards and take them as slaves. An overwhelming sense of fear like that is generally caused by an overwhelming sense of guilt.

I wonder if they now understood more clearly the anguish of Joseph when they sold him into slavery?

Maybe you know about that kind of panic. You get a notice that your boss wants to see you after work and immediately you start wondering what you did that warrants a summons by the boss. Your mind races back to that time when you (you fill in the blank) and you start to worry.

Your parents want to talk with you after dinner and well, you start to wonder if they found out about (and you fill in the blank) and you start to worry.

Because they couldn't speak Egyptian, they didn't know the man told his steward to take them to his home for dinner. They concluded that they were in big trouble. That's the result of guilt. That's when we see a pleading appeal in **verses 19-22**.

B. A Pleading Appeal – vs. 19-22

If they made a run for it, they would appear to be guilty of something and would surely get caught. So they tried to reason with the steward. "Hey, if it's about the money we can explain. We're not sure what happened. It was probably a mistake. We came with money to buy food and somehow our money wound up in the sacks of grain. We didn't steal it. As a matter of fact, we brought it back with additional money to buy more food."

Unresolved guilt can cause us to say or do the most bizarre things. **I read a story about a man who wrote a letter to the IRS. It read "Dear Sir, I haven't been able to sleep because last year when I filled out my income tax report I deliberately misrepresented my**

income. I am enclosing a check for \$150. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

In his masterful way, a line in Shakespeare's King Henry VI give us the truth of it: "Suspicion always haunts the guilty."

Just imagine what must have been swirling around their heads. How were they going to get out of this mess? What could they say to appeal to his good graces? They probably didn't even have a receipt to show they had legitimately paid for the grain. When they met the man again, there was an awakened panic as to what might happen to them. But during their conversation with the steward there is an astonishing proclamation.

III. AN ASTONISHING PROCLAMATION – v. 23

The most surprising answer came from an unexpected source. It was the steward who spoke, and who gave them a calming reply. It's in the first part of **verse 23**.

A. A Calming Response – v. 23a

Perhaps he could sense their fear in how they acted. A concerned look. An uneasiness in their walk. Nervous hands. Agitated discussion as they whispered among themselves. His words were calming, reassuring. **"Don't be afraid."** Or Shalom – peace to you. It was the traditional Hebrew greeting when receiving guests. In other words – no worries, don't trouble your minds.

Fear can grip us and trouble us beyond description. There's fear when the doctor asks us to return his call following a recent visit.

There's fear when we must meet someone about something when we don't know why they want to meet with us.

There's the fear of failure so we would rather not try.

There's fear when given responsibility. It overlaps the fear of failure.

There's fear about finances.

There's fear of losing one's job.

There's fear of life itself where we're afraid to step out and try something.

There's fear of illness.

There's fear in relationships.

There's fear about cultural issues and civil unrest.

As I said earlier, whenever we lack faith, we naturally default to fear.

The word for fear appears in Scripture 354 times. We are prone to fear. But where fear is mentioned that many times, we are told more times in Scripture not to be afraid.

We are to fear no evil, because God is with us.

We are not to be dismayed or disheartened because God is with us.

Whenever we are afraid, we are to trust in God.

We are to commit our way to God and trust in Him.

Instead of being anxious about anything, we are to pray with thanksgiving about everything and God will surround our heart and mind with His peace.

The steward gave them a calming response and told them not to be afraid. But if that wasn't enough, the steward then gave them a curious reply.

B. A Curious Reply – v. 23b

Perhaps what he said next wasn't just curious, it was shocking, something they didn't expect to hear from a pagan idolater way down in Egypt. **"Your God, the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks."**

How would he know about their God? I'd like to think that Joseph had a lot to do with that. After all, as we noted a couple weeks ago, Joseph was salty, unashamed to talk about His God.

And to answer their uncertainty about how the money got in their bags, the steward said he was the one who had done so.

Even though what the steward said was a bit curious, those three responses provided a calming affect on the brothers allowing them to be more at ease as they entered the man's home. It is in that setting that we see an amazing paradox.

IV. AN AMAZING PARADOX – vs. 24-34

You know what a paradox is, don't you? It's two doctors who don't agree. What we read in the previous chapter and what we see here seems to be contradictory. Even their conversation moments ago with the steward could not prepare them for what they were about to experience as they meet once again with the governor of the land. First, we see their preparation. That's in **verses 24-25**.

A. Their Preparation – vs. 24-25

Once inside the home, the steward gave them water to wash their feet and food for their animals. The trip had been long and hard. The roads were dusty and a foot washing was refreshing.

After working in the garden all day and Robyn has had a shower to wash away all the sweat and grime, she'll say "It's nice to be clean." We all know how that feels. It's refreshing and soothing.

A foot bath was most welcome after weeks of traveling. They were made to feel as guests. Even their animals were cared for.

While waiting for Zaphenath-Paneah to arrive, they also prepared their gifts. It's in **verse 26** that we see their presentation.

B. Their Presentation – v. 26

Remember that from their first encounter with the man, they came away with the impression that he was a harsh man, someone who appeared to them to be cruel, unpleasant, mean-spirited, rough, demanding, and even tyrannical.

So it was out of respect and perhaps still out of fear for what might be possible, they bowed in his presence. After all, he was the second most powerful man in Egypt, he could do anything he wanted to them. As they bowed before him in a manner that symbolically stated they were his servants, they also presented their gifts as a form of peace offering to this powerful man.

Joseph's first teenaged dream has now come true. Eleven sheaves of standing grain all bowed down before his sheaf of standing grain.

Then begins the questioning. Here we see their pleasantries.

C. Their Pleasantries – vs. 27-31

Joseph asked about the well-being of their aged father and if the 11th person standing with them was the brother whom they had spoken of on their first meeting. Once again they bowed and our text tells us that they did so to honor him. They responded graciously and respectfully to his questions and indicated that, yes, their father was still well and this was the brother they had referred to earlier. It had been 15 years since the last time he saw his brother Benjamin. It must have taken all he had to restrain himself from blurting out his identity, but there was still much more to learn about them before he was ready to reveal himself.

The only thing he could say to Benjamin was to give him a greeting of God's grace. It's the same given in **Numbers 6:24-26** "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace."

It's a way of asking God's favor to rest on the person and for God's peace to be expressed on the person in its fullest sense. It's what he offered Benjamin.

Overcome with emotion, all Joseph could do at this point was leave their presence before he completely lost his composure and we read that he wept.

The demeanor of the man was paradoxically different than their first visit. He was kind instead of cruel, pleasant instead of prying. It was certainly a paradox in character and that leads to their perplexity.

D. Their Perplexity – vs. 32-33

Because of his position, Joseph sat by himself. He ate alone. Not even the other Egyptian officials who had been invited as his guests were allowed to sit with him. It didn't matter what high-ranking position they may have held. That's just the way it was in Egypt. They sat at two separate tables.

And off by themselves were the 11 brothers. We read that it was detestable to eat with Hebrews. Now these are probably the first Hebrews to be in their land since Isaac and Abraham, so they didn't really know any other Hebrews other than these 11 brothers. Probably what made them loathsome was that they ate food that Egyptians considered to be sacred animals.

That they all ate at separate tables wasn't perplexing to the brothers. What piqued their curiosity was that each brother was seated according to age. Henry Morris has calculated that there are 39,917,000 different ways to seat 11 people. The odds are 40 million to one of getting it right. It was perplexing to them on how they were seated exactly by age.

The brothers didn't arrange themselves in this way around the table, that's how the steward was directed to seat them. Reuben was first on down to Benjamin last. It was a head scratcher for sure to these brothers that left them with perplexity.

The final point of this amazing paradox was their portions.

E. Their Portions – v. 34

The first thing we notice is that portions were given to them directly from Joseph's table. That was an honor.

The second thing we notice is that Benjamin received five times the amount of food the other 10 brothers received. The man seemed to take a liking to Benjamin. We read it and might initially conclude that it was because they were flesh and blood, born of the same father and mother, where the others were only half-brothers. We might also conclude that he liked Benjamin more than the rest because of what they had done to him. But I don't think that was the primary reason for honoring Benjamin with so much. I think there was a more underlying motivation behind Joseph's gesture. Years earlier the 10 brothers were filled with jealousy toward Joseph for being favored by their father. Their jealousy fueled their hatred and they sold him into slavery. Benjamin was now the

favored son. Had they treated him the same way as they had treated Joseph? This simple test would reveal a lot to Joseph. Favoring Benjamin in this way would reveal if they still harbored jealousy for someone being favored over them. The last sentence of the chapter is telling. **“So they feasted and drank freely with him.”** Put another check mark next to an indication of hearts that had changed. They showed no appearance of jealousy toward Benjamin. They all seemed to get along. There was no complaining about him getting more, no ugly glares toward Benjamin, no appearance of disdain. Had they really changed? One more test would provide the evidence Joseph needed to determine their heart. It wasn't a test to exact revenge for their earlier cruelty against him, but a test that would bring what he sought from them – repentance and reconciliation, but that will be for another day.

I mentioned in the beginning that this chapter is filled with mercy and grace. I hope you have seen that. It's another character trait of a godly person. Instead of being given what they deserved, they were shown mercy. Instead of being given what they didn't deserve, they were shown grace. Joseph shows us an attribute personified.

V. AN ATTRIBUTE PERSONIFIED

Let me leave you with just four verses in closing.

II Corinthians 9:8

II Corinthians 12:9-10

Psalms 86:15

Lamentations 3:22-23

Throughout all Joseph's trials, he had experienced the abundant mercy and grace of God to see him through his trials. Because of that, he could extend the same mercy and grace to his brothers and do good to them. We aren't given what we deserve because God's mercy (love) is great. His faithfulness toward us assures us that His compassion will never fail. In our quest to be godly, adding the attribute of mercy is essential.

As you consider your relationships today, is there someone to whom you need to extend God's mercy and grace? That's the mark of a person of God.