

An Errand of Mercy **Genesis 43:1-34**

Now the famine was severe in the land. And when they had eaten the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go again, buy us a little food." But Judah said to him, "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. 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.' " Israel said, "Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?" They replied, "The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Do you have another brother?' What we told him was in answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down?'" And Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be a pledge of his safety. 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. If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice."

Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds. Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks. Perhaps it was an oversight. Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man. May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."

So the men took this present, and they took double the money with them, and Benjamin. They arose and went down to Egypt and stood before Joseph.

When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon." The man did as Joseph told him and brought the men to Joseph's house. And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph's house, and they said, "It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may assault

us and fall upon us to make us servants and seize our donkeys." So they went up to the steward of Joseph's house and spoke with him at the door of the house, and said, "Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food. And when we came to the lodging place we opened our sacks, and there was each man's money in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight. So we have brought it again with us, and we have brought other money down with us to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks." He replied, "Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money." Then he brought Simeon out to them. And when the man had brought the men into Joseph's house and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and when he had given their donkeys fodder, they prepared the present for Joseph's coming at noon, for they heard that they should eat bread there.

When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present that they had with them and bowed down to him to the ground. And he inquired about their welfare and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" They said, "Your servant our father is well; he is still alive." And they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. And he lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!" Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there. Then he washed his face and came out. And controlling himself he said, "Serve the food." They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth. And the men looked at one another in amazement. Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. And they drank and were merry with him.

Introduction — At this point in Genesis, things are not looking good for the covenant-bearing family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the family chosen by God to eventually produce the Redeemer of mankind. At the center of the problem was a spirit of envy which gripped the hearts of most of the male members of that family.

We tend to be a bit hazy in our definition of envy, often confusing it with somewhat lesser sins, such as covetousness. But Christian philosopher Cornelius Plantinga helps to clear things up:

“Envy is nastier than mere covetousness. What an envier wants is not, first of all, what another has; what an envier wants is for another not to have it.... To envy is to resent somebody else’s good so much that one is tempted to destroy it. The coveter has empty hands and wants to fill them with somebody else’s good. The envier has empty hands, and therefore wants to empty the hands of the envied. Envy, moreover, carries overtones of personal resentment: an envier resents not only somebody else’s blessing but also the one who has been blessed.”

Envy was what drove Joseph’s brothers cruelty. For example, they didn't care about having his lovely robe for themselves. In fact, they tore it in pieces. What the brothers resented was Joseph *having* the coat, which represented the favor of their father. The brothers resented his person even more than anything he had been given. That is why they stripped, beat him, and tossed him into a pit to die.

The wreckage of envy litters the biblical landscape—from Cain who envied Abel to Saul who envied David—and, indeed, our own landscape as well. But at this crucial point in the development of God’s people, it was essential that this deadly sin be dealt with. Thus Joseph had some very important and personal questions that needed to be answered. Were his brothers the same envy-obsessed rascals they had been years earlier? If conditions were “right” would they again contemplate homicide or actually murder someone? How do they regard Benjamin, who is now Jacob's favored son? If it benefitted them, would they sacrifice him? All these questions had to be answered when Joseph’s brothers returned to Egypt with Benjamin.

I. Back to Egypt — The great famine continued and was just as severe in Canaan as in Egypt. But, thanks to Joseph, that nation had become a grain-rich breadbasket. So when their supplies again ran out, there was only one thing to do: Jacob ordered his sons: “Go again, buy us a little food” (**v. 2**). The sons responded by restating an uncomfortable truth; that a second trip to Egypt was useless unless they took Benjamin with them” (**vs. 3-7**).

It was then that Judah, the emerging leader of the brothers, spoke up:

“Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be a pledge of his safety. 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. If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice” (**vs. 8-10**).

Swayed by this appeal, Jacob gave explicit orders about the trip to Egypt:

“Then their father Israel said to them, ‘If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds. Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks. Perhaps it was an oversight. Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man’” (**vs. 11-13**).

Then Jacob offers a heartfelt prayer: “May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved” (**v. 14**). The opening phrase—“May God Almighty grant you mercy”—is not just rhetoric. That’s because *mercy* is the key to this entire episode; and both the opposite of and antidote to envy.

Looking ahead, what will happen the day of the brothers’ arrival in Egypt will be a clear demonstration of God’s mercy. In addition, near the end of this section, in **verse 30**, when Joseph sees Benjamin, it says, “Then Joseph hurried out, for his *compassion* grew warm.” This is the same Hebrew word translated “mercy” in **verse 14**. Therefore, mercy is at the very heart of this account and is displayed in it from beginning to end.

Jacob’s prayer invokes mercy in the very name of “God Almighty” (*El Shaddai*) which, in Genesis, is always associated with the blessing, promise, and revelation of the Lord himself. And so, “May God grant you mercy before the man” is not just a formality. With that benediction Jacob gives his sons something to equip them for the confrontation that lies ahead: the assurance of God’s presence *if* they accept and follow it.

The old man’s closing words—“and as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved”—evoke a sense of deep resignation. Jacob has now reconciled himself to the will of God whatever happens.

II. Southern Hospitality — We have no idea how long it took for the brothers' journey down to Egypt. What we do know is that when they arrived they "stood before Joseph." This probably means that they encountered Joseph's representatives, since at that point there are no actual words exchanged between the ten and the prime minister himself. Though we are told that Joseph saw that Benjamin was with them, all his communication was through his steward. And what was communicated terrified the brothers, because he invited them into his house for a noon meal (**vs. 16-18**).

The brothers must have wondered why, with the multitude of other foreigners visitors, they would be singled-out for special attention— unless the prime minister had evil in mind. After all, everyone knew that high Egyptian officials kept private dungeons in their homes. Was that where were headed?

"And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph's house, and they said, 'It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may assault us and fall upon us to make us servants and seize our donkeys.' So they went up to the steward of Joseph's house and spoke with him at the door of the house, and said, 'Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food. And when we came to the lodging place we opened our sacks, and there was each man's money in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight. So we have brought it again with us, and we have brought other money down with us to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks'" (**vs. 18-22**).

Clearly, Joseph's brothers expected the worst. But, as their fears mounted, out of the blue came a second shock. "[The steward] replied, 'Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money'" (**v. 23**).

This was more than astonishing! The Egyptian-speaking steward actually declared "Peace to you," the traditional Hebrew greeting for receiving guests. The brothers were, therefore, being welcomed in terms of peace and security. And even crazier, the steward was saying that God was somehow behind the return of their money. Finally, Simeon was trotted out, a hostage no more (**v. 23**). All of this was an example of mercy in action, as well as an answer to Jacob's prayer.

And so, into Joseph's palatial home went his eleven brothers, still wondering what this was all about and unaware of their host's actual identity.

At noon the prime minister entered the room, and the brothers then presented their gift and bowed before him. Joseph's greeting to them is one of the most beautiful scenes in the entire story. Its central theme is *shalom* ("peace, completeness, wellness"), for Joseph uses the word three times.

"And he inquired about their welfare [*shalom*] and said, 'Is your father well [have *shalom*], the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?' They said, 'Your servant our father is well [has *shalom*]; he is still alive.' And they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves" (**vs. 27-28**).

The beauty of the occasion is elevated further as Joseph engaged Benjamin. "And he lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, 'Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!'" (**v. 29**). Here is an expression of tender, paternal affection and a special call for God's grace.

"Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion [lit. "mercy"] grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there" (**v. 30**). Mercy abounds in this encounter. But there's even more to come.

After regaining his composure and washing his face, Joseph issues commands:

"'Serve the food.' They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth. And the men looked at one another in amazement" (**vs. 31-33**).

The dined separately: Joseph alone as a social superior, the Egyptians by themselves because of religious scruples, and the Hebrew brothers alone by elimination. There is, of course, great irony here. Joseph is hosting a meal for his brothers who, years earlier, had dined while from a pit he pleaded with them for his life.

The strange accuracy of their seating, from oldest to youngest, astonished the brothers. How could their host have figured that out? But, there was an even deeper meaning. Joseph was subtly welcoming the brothers into his own familial existence. And it wouldn't be long before his father and scores of nieces and nephews would join him in Egypt—and Israel would begin its growth and development as an eventual nation, God's nation.

The feast was elaborate with much to eat and drink. As it progressed, "Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. And they drank and were merry [Heb. "intoxicated"] with him" (**v. 34**). Joseph was, indeed, generous to all his brothers—but five times more so to young Benjamin. It appears that Joseph wanted to see how the ten would respond to such favoritism. Would the old animosities and envies resurface? Happily, they did not. Clearly, a corner is being turned and it is wrapped and grounded in mercy.

III. Mercy Described — Having looked at the passage itself, let's now consider mercy, it's central theme, more closely. First, a definition. We tend to be quite imprecise when thinking and speaking of this trait, often equating it with kindness and/or compassion. But mercy is more specific. It is: "Compassion or forgiveness *shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to rightly punish or harm.*"

That God is merciful there can be no doubt, whose mercy was supremely expressed by Jesus' sacrificial Good Friday death on our behalf (**Eph. 2:4; Heb. 4:16; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:3**). But, if we have received God's mercy, it only follows that he calls us to be merciful as well. Hence, Jesus declares: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (**Lk. 6:36**) and "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy" (**Matt. 5:7**).

But mercy is not just a Christian attribute which is to be practiced without much thought or consideration. Instead, there are a number of factors which need to be recognized and heeded if our mercy is to be genuine and truly helpful. Let's consider some of these factors:

*Granting someone mercy is *not* about you either looking good or feeling good about yourself. It concerns the welfare of the object of that mercy and is motivated by love for them.

*Mercy is not indulgence. It offers people not necessarily what they want, but what they truly need. In fact, what a person wants may be totally at odds with what he or she needs.

*Mercy does not enable someone's misbehavior. For example, in **2 Thessalonians 3:10**, Paul says this regarding the church's practice of feeding the needy: "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat."

*At the same time, mercy sets realistic standards and does not arbitrarily expect or demand perfection.

*Mercy is discerning and asks appropriate questions of its object. It seeks to discover the truth of the situation before taking appropriate actions.

*Mercy sets appropriate boundaries between the recipient and the giver, who avoids being "bled dry" or burned-out by excessive demands or over-commitment. We see this with Jesus, for example, who at certain points in his ministry separated himself from the multitude, despite their demands, and privately rested (**Lk. 4:42**).

*Mercy offers valid choices and does not browbeat or coerce people into doing the right thing. Another example from Christ is his refusal to chase after the rich young ruler (**Mk. 10:22-23; Matt. 19:22**). This, actually, shows respect for the other person.

*Mercy must be patient and allow time for positive steps to be taken. Joseph's interaction with his brothers is a prime example of this, as well as the other principles just mentioned.

And so, with mercy, we can err in two directions. We can either be cold and unmerciful to those who have somehow harmed, offended, or disappointed us—like the unmerciful servant in Jesus' parable (**Matt. 18:21-35**). Or we can practice "sloppy grace," trying to please people without wisdom, boundaries, or restraint. These are *not* valid options, and will never solve anything. The biblical answer is for each of us to be wisely and warmly merciful, just as Joseph was with his brothers and God has been with us.