
The Testing of their Fidelity

Genesis 44

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Fidelity and loyalty...

These two words convey concepts that are deeply embedded in the human heart. They are almost synonyms with loyalty being the word we are most familiar with. We use it often to refer to loyalty to a country, to a set of ideas, to a favorite sports team, to our spouse and to our family.

Sometimes the concept is clear in our minds until we are asked to define it, to describe it, to give a counter example of its opposite. What does loyalty mean when the object is no longer what first earned our favor, our support? How does loyalty work out to support, defend and uphold someone or something?

What do you think of this statement, "Loyalty is my honor." Sounds commendable doesn't it? Except that was the answer Heinrich Himmler gave when asked, "What was his highest value?" Most have recognized that some kinds of loyalty are wrong and even evil when given to an evil object.

It has been said, "The strength of a family, like the strength of an army, is in its loyalty to each other. Blood makes you related, loyalty makes you family." This is what had gone wrong in Jacob's family, in the sons of Israel. Bob Sorge said, "Loyalty is from above, betrayal is from below." Jealousy had ridden the hearts of these men into selling their brother. Along with that had been a deep loss of loyalty and fidelity.

The brothers of Joseph failed to fear God. They disregarded their responsibility to their family and hard heartedly dishonored and wounded their father. Will they, given the right circumstances, do so again?

Joseph builds upon the testing device he has already used. The brothers had been jealous of Joseph so he has tested them to see if they will be jealous of Benjamin, who is now the youngest. Now he is going to test their loyalty to Benjamin. Unlike what they did to Joseph, will they defend him and come to his aid?

By the Accusation against the Brothers (v.1-17)

Benjamin will be the instrument of Joseph's testing the repentance and transformation of his brothers.

The Framing of Benjamin (v.1-2)

44 Then he commanded the steward of his house, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack, ²and put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph told him.

Joseph tells his steward to prepare the brother's sacks of grain, loading them down with as much as they can possibly carry. Then he is to return their money bags, one in each sack of grain. In Benjamin's sack, he is to put his prized personal serving cup.

The Confrontation by the Steward (v.3-13)

As the morning dawns, the brothers all load up and begin to head out.

³As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. ⁴They had gone only a short distance from the city. Now Joseph said to his steward, "Up, follow after the men, and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid evil for

good? ⁵Is it not from this that my lord drinks, and by this that he practices divination? You have done evil in doing this.' ”

⁶When he overtook them, he spoke to them these words. ⁷They said to him, “Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing! ⁸Behold, the money that we found in the mouths of our sacks we brought back to you from the land of Canaan. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord’s house? ⁹Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die, and we also will be my lord’s servants.” ¹⁰He said, “Let it be as you say: he who is found with it shall be my servant, and the rest of you shall be innocent.” ¹¹Then each man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. ¹²And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. ¹³Then they tore their clothes, and every man loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city.

You can well imagine their joy at being reunited and their wonder at the dinner. All of them together are headed home to father. But they had not ridden far out of town when chasing hard behind them, up gallops the Egyptian lord’s steward.

Standing there he feigns anger. Trembling, he charges them with returning the Egyptian lord’s good favor with the evil of stealing his prized and personal silver cup. This cup is said to be how he practices divination. He is now giving the brothers a pagan explanation for how he knew their birth order and the favored status of Benjamin. He is not only accusing them of theft of a valuable silver cup, but also of religious apostasy in that they are taking his magic talisman.

Ah, they are shocked. Listen, the shifting winds of Egypt are buffeting them terribly. First accused as spies, imprisoned, a hostage taken and then sent home with a dire warning for their return. Then, when they return, ready to make full amends, with Benjamin in tow they are treated to a special dinner where the Egyptian seems to know more than he should. Now, they are accused of what would be unthinkable. Why would they steal a single gold or silver trinket when they had come, not only with money and spices to buy what they needed now, but also to reimburse what had somehow found its way into their bags on the last trip?

Then, with their usual foolish overstatement (and aren’t we, under the same sort of duress, prone to the same sort of response) they say that this is so impossible and so unthinkable that the steward can search all their belongings. If he finds the cup in anyone’s belongings, then that one can be put to death and all the rest will return to be slaves.

The steward responds with better reasoned justice. If it is found, then that one will be accused, bound, and brought to servitude and the rest will be innocent. What an evocative sentence. They cannot help but remember a day long ago when one of them, innocent of any wrong, was bound and sent to Egypt. So, the search begins. You can almost feel the drama rising. The steward is no fool. He knows exactly where it is and that it will be found. To help his master press home the test, he starts with the eldest and works his way down. Sack after sack is opened with the “what”! The bag of money is in the sacks as before. Now, instead of growing relief there has to be growing consternation until Benjamin’s sack is opened and behold, there is the cup.

Every one of them is grieved. They tear their clothes. They load their donkeys. They do not abandon Benjamin to his fate. They all head back to the city. That, I am sure, was a long and silent and dreadful ride.

The Accusation by Joseph (v.14-17)

Joseph is awaiting them in his house.

¹⁴ When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell before him to the ground. ¹⁵ Joseph said to them, "What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?" ¹⁶ And Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found." ¹⁷ But he said, "Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant. But as for you, go up in peace to your father."

They come in before him and throw themselves at his feet. They cannot understand what is happening. They have no way to clear themselves. But this is not Joseph's supposed divination, this is God exposing the guilt of the brothers. They understand that. Further, they are willing to submit, all of them to that.

But no, Joseph will have none of that. He is going to release all but Benjamin. What will they do? Will they look to their own escape and leave a brother behind to be enslaved just as long ago they sent a brother into slavery? Will they forsake their word, their obligation, their family loyalty, and heavenly fidelity? Will they be willing to wound their father once again?

In other words, are these brothers truly repentant? Are they jealous of Benjamin – here is a convenient way to be rid of him. Are they loyal to God – here is a convenient way out of their dilemma. Or are they committed in their hearts to obedience to God in such a way that they will stand up for Benjamin and seek a way to return him home and not wound their father again?

In the Appeal from Judah (v.18-34)

Ah, Judah has given his word to his father. Now he will make his appeal to the Egyptian lord. In a stunning reversal of heroes, Judah now stands to become the center of the story.

The Love for His Father (v.18-29)

These two paragraphs are a rehearsal of what has happened. They are the events of these two chapters through Judah's eyes.

¹⁸ Then Judah went up to him and said, "Oh, my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself. ¹⁹ My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father, or a brother?' ²⁰ And we said to my lord, 'We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.' ²¹ Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.' ²² We said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.' ²³ Then you said to your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.'

²⁴ "When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. ²⁵ And when our father said, 'Go again, buy us a little food,' ²⁶ we said, 'We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down. For we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' ²⁷ Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. ²⁸ One left me, and I said, "Surely

he has been torn to pieces,” and I have never seen him since. ²⁹ If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol.’

These now are repentant, God-fearing, father loving, brother defending eyes. The point of this familiar narrative is to highlight their loyalty and love for their father. It matters to them that he is old, infirm, and vulnerable. It matters to them that he loves Benjamin fiercely. It matters to them that they have brought much grief in what they did to their other brother. It matters to them that this will kill their aged father. There is no jealousy here. There is no disloyalty here.

The Substitution for his Brother (v.30-34)

O, the great gospel heart of the Bible shines in Judah’s words.

³⁰ “Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy’s life, ³¹ as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. ³² For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.’ ³³ Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. ³⁴ For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father.”

He will take his brother’s place. He will be a substitute. For the sake of his father and the safety of his little brother, he will take his place in punishment. He will fulfill his covenant. He will keep his word. He will leave the place of position and prosperity. He will become a servant in Egypt. He will, if necessary, give his life for the life of his brother.

So here is Judah, the tribe from which the kings of Israel and the great Ruler and Redeemer will come. As a shadow of the greater to come, he takes the place of the accused, fulfills the justice required all for the good of little brother and the love of his father.

Reflect and Respond

Look to Jesus who was faithful and loyal to His heavenly Father...

He served His Father's purpose and plan for His life...

He upheld His Father's name and reputation...

He defended His Father from attacks...

He did what His Father wanted Him to do...

Look to Jesus who was faithful and loyal to His earthly people...

He loves His earthly family with a fierce and unending loyalty...

He shed his blood to gather His earthly family...

He defends His earthly family against their enemies...

Without meaning to, Woodrow Wilson spoke truly when he said in reference to our nation in crisis, "Loyalty means nothing unless it has at its heart the absolute principle of self-sacrifice." Jesus' commitment to care for, to defend and protect, to stand up for His people is accompanied and empowered by His willingness to die for them. In Jesus, holy loyalty was sacrificial love.

How then do we reflect the loyalty of Christ as Christians?

First it will depend on the sphere in which you are speaking. Loyalty to a church is not the same as loyalty to God. Yet, a deep, loving, committed, caring for people as church is simply a Biblical command. Philippians 2 works this out using different language and imagery. The difference is quite simple. God will never do anything wrong, sinful, foolish. People will.

Second, loyalty is not to be blind. It does not defend the indefensible. Jesus is transforming each and every one He is loyal to. Joseph does not, out of loyalty to family, simply accept his brothers if they are unrepentant. But true godly commitment to strong relationships will persevere to talk, share, pray, challenge, encourage, admonish, rebuke all the while hoping for God's work in the hearts of others.

Third, loyalty recognizes that we live in a fallen sinful world. Christians sin. Sometimes they don't repent and it gets dealt with. Often, they do and grace with mercy reigns. So, while you may actually be perfect (*really... ?*), it may be good to remember most other people are not.

What is the Lord calling us to in this? To love one another. To care for one another. To patience with one another. To grace and mercy with one another.

What should we see in this story of Joseph and his brothers? O, see our Redeemer - see Him standing in our place. See Him bearing our punishment. See Him willing to come to the world and die in our place. See Him dying and raised again, all for the good of little brothers and the love of His father. See Him one day gathering all the Benjamin's who have trusted His Name and bowed to His rule around Him bringing them safely home.

Soli Deo Gloria - Amen.