

¹Now Joseph gave these instructions to the steward of his house: “Fill the men’s sacks with as much food as they can carry, and put each man’s silver in the mouth of his sack. ²Then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one’s sack, along with the silver for his grain.” And he did as Joseph said.... God has uncovered your servants’ guilt.

The Old Testament has often been described as “God’s Picture book”. What is meant is that the great themes that we see being worked out in the New Testament, in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus, His death on the Cross and in the Resurrection are wonderfully illustrated in the way in which God dealt with his people right through the ages. The stories that are so familiar to us, that we learned from our earliest days give us a dramatic insight and understanding of how God deals with our hearts and draws us to himself supremely in Jesus.

You have only to look at Joseph and the way in which he was despised and rejected by those who should have been his brothers, cast out by them, wrongly convicted when he had done no wrong, a victim of injustice, as good as dead and yet by the grace of God rising to become a great prince, the saviour of his people at whose feet every knee would bow. From the life of this one man comes a beautiful illustration of the whole Lenten theme of the supreme Man of God who was condemned to death, cast outside the city walls by his own people and nailed to a Cross. Who was yet was raised from the dead to be the Prince of Peace, the Saviour of His People. In Joseph we see God’s unmistakable picture dramatically illustrating the whole plan of salvation that existed before the creation of the world deep in his very heart and nature. Here it is being worked out in the daily lives and in the hearts of this man and his brothers as God deals with them day by day in his great Love. If we can think of these events in that way it will perhaps help us to understand what I have always considered the most puzzling aspect of the story. Why all this messing about with Silver cups? Why does Joseph put himself and his brothers through all this mental anguish and stress when all he has to do is to reveal himself to them and forgive them. He is obviously willing to do that so why has the story not dissolved into a tearful, happy ending with the violins playing in the background? If this was Hollywood we would be crowding out of the cinemas and queuing for chips by now fully satisfied. Why does he prolong the agony? What is to be gained by hiding the silver cup in the bag and the accusation? ***‘Why have you repaid good with evil?’***

We might have thought that this was merely revenge and I think we would have understood it. The brothers had it coming and we could take a certain satisfaction in watching them squirm as their problems come thick and fast but there is something far greater at work. In his love for them God knows that it is not enough simply to make them sorry for what they had done. That is only one small part of what needs to happen in these men. For them the root cause was their sin and lies and God knows **that** has to be dealt with.

All those years ago, the Brothers had committed a terrible offence disposing of their hated brother, lying to their father. As a result they became deeper and deeper embroiled in the lie until some 30 years or so later they're still trapped. Sin does that. It often begins so innocently, just a bit of harmless fun or as in this case a solution to their immediate problem but as days go on and the pull of it grows stronger, it takes up more and more of our lives until suddenly we wake up to the fact that we're far from God. Look at our own nation. This is the land in which the Reformation brought the preaching of the Word, systematic bible teaching as the cornerstone of its people. Over the years those foundations have been lost and we've slipped further and further from God.

In the land of Eric Liddell, God's day was so prized and preaching so valued that our largest city held the motto, "let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of Thy word." Now worship and preaching has become so neglected by both church and people in Scotland that the majority of our people have virtually done away with the day all together. We have come a very long way from John Knox's ideal of a church and school in every community which gave us an education system that was the envy of the world, a vision that produced from our little country men and women who altered the course of human History. We have come a long way from God and the way back will be long and painful.

There's only one way to deal with sin and that is to strike at its very roots. We need to come to the one who has taken all of human sin upon himself and to come to him in repentance. When God sent His son to live among us He exposed, drew out the poison of human sin getting right to the very heart of the human condition. This was no half-hearted wishy-washy sweeping of it all under the carpet but the root and branch destruction of evil and all its ways and all its effects in our lives. It had to be whole hearted, just as our response must be too. You cannot give a bit of your life to God, and keep the rest. You can have a little bit of religion, that's possible and indeed most people would think its best not to have too much of it, enough to bring you some comfort but not so much that it interferes with your life. You can have a small stake in a system of beliefs, enough to give you some sort of grounding but not so much as will make you a fanatic but you cannot have a little bit of a relationship with God. He will never be satisfied with that and neither ultimately will you.

His Love for us is whole-hearted and that means that when something needs to be dealt with at source in our lives God does not flinch from that. The sin that hung over the brothers like a dark cloud had to be exposed and dealt with as God gets to the heart of it. **God has uncovered your servants' guilt.**

So the brothers find themselves dragged back, back to Egypt, back to Joseph, back to the consequences of their sin, back to the root of their problem. They cannot escape until it's dealt with. This has gone on far too long almost 30 years by now. They have swept it under the carpet and now it is ten times more difficult for them to deal with but there will be no peace until they come to God and allow him to purge their hearts. The process may be very hard but it is very necessary for them. This is what repentance means and it is what Jesus has come to do for us on the Cross. Here it is being worked out in the lives of these 12 brothers. When they had first headed back for home they must have felt some relief; the strain was off and they had got away with it. Things had worked out better than they expected and we can be fairly sure that if the crisis had been over at this point they would have gone back to their old ways quickly. When immediate crises pass promises made under pressure are forgotten and we quickly return to patterns which do not follow God's way. God's hand on us which felt so strong and comforting, now feels heavy and restrictive. We very swiftly adopt what is at best, a superficial Christian life-style and at worst an abandonment of all we learned. In love for them God, through his servant Joseph pursued them to bring them to a new faith and new life.

Joseph's tears in the previous chapter prove that his scheme wasn't enacted out of revenge but out of love; a robust love which faces up to problems and is not blind to the faults of others. The conviction of sin was there but they had to realise their total helplessness before they would trust God and be changed and a wonderful change was under way in the hearts of those brothers. There was no selling of the young brother into slavery this time. They all stood together and returned with Benjamin to Egypt. Perhaps the change is most clearly seen in Judah for back in 37;26-27 he appears a man of compromise and not principle, then in Ch 38 a man of utter moral bankruptcy but here he says: **God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves.**

In vs32-34 he offers to sacrifice himself and take the place of the condemned Benjamin for love of his father Jacob. That kind of spiritual growth and change didn't happen overnight nor without considerable pain and upheaval. He had to face up to sin eating away at his heart, confess that sin to a Just God before he would know peace and God kept going with this man. Eventually his tribe would become Israel. The mantle of faith would fall on him and the saviour of the World, Jesus himself would come from the tribe of Judah. This is surely the

point of the chapter for us. We look around us and are depressed, worried anxious. We recognise a nation far from God we may feel that that is where we are as individuals but we are being told not to despair. God is never, not for a single moment, out of control.

As the situation deteriorates, and the brothers are utterly confounded God through Joseph is in constant command. The Nation must repent, change direction and we pray God will bring it to that point even if it is a sore, hard place to reach, just as every one of us must come to that point when we can commit our hearts and lives to Him. Joseph remained faithful, prayed, kept faith with God and with them, never sought out the easy path. God's church, His faithful people must do the same. The lost ground is hard to win back, but we are not dismayed, not afraid. God hasn't died, however much the world and the press gleefully tell us He has. The downward spiral can be stopped, and reversed by praying Christian folk and by hearts turning to him, seeking his forgiveness and peace. Folk like Joseph who never gave up on God or his brothers but stood firm, four square on His word and His promises. We take heart at this, pin our colours to the mast, and seek to show the world by our love of God and His word what He can do with poor twisted lives like ours which are handed over to him.

God has uncovered your servants' guilt.