

**“Sticking with It to the Not-So-Bitter End”**

**Genesis 45:1–15**

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In his book *Cry, the Beloved Country*, first published in 1948, Alan Paton tells a story about a divided family and nation. In Apartheid South Africa, Zulu pastor Stephen Kumalo searches for his wayward son, Absalom. The son’s name alone warns biblically-literate readers that trouble might be ahead. Early in the story, Kumalo is talking with a man named Msimangu who tells him his brother has become a politician who says people must do what God has not. This leads to an interesting exchange in which Msimangu says “these things,” as in political activities in a time of unrest, must go on. “How can you say they must go on?” Kumalo wonders, to which Msimangu replies.

They must go on... you cannot stop the world from going on. My friend, I am a Christian. It is not in my heart to hate a white man. It was a white man who brought my father out of darkness. But you will pardon me if I talk frankly to you. The tragedy is not that things are broken. The tragedy is that they are not mended again. The white man has broken the tribe. And it is my belief — and again I ask your pardon — that it cannot be mended again. But the house that is broken, and the man that falls apart when the house is broken, these are the tragic things. (pp. 55-56).

The tragedy is not that things are broken. The tragedy is that they are not mended again. It seems like an accurate statement about racial division, family conflict, and the human condition. We have differences, this is inevitable, but not tragic, in and of itself. What is tragic is how rarely any division is ever healed.

We have been following a story in Genesis that seems to embody this principle. In fact, this whole collection of stories about the great patriarchs of ancient Israel seems to be driven by a theme of brokenness and division.

Abraham would sacrifice not only his son but various women too. Jacob tricks his brother, Esau, and deceives his father, Isaac. Then, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. He is a spoiled little snob, but he doesn't deserve this! If you are like me, you are ready to be done with this family and move on to some nice Jesus stories!

But this is not the time to leave Genesis because this story has a happy ending. This is not a tragedy, in the classical sense. This thing that is broken — Joseph's relationship with his brothers — will be mended again, at least in big-picture terms, this is a realistic story. It will be mended in today's reading, and we don't want to miss it.

It's like many television series where the bad guys and gals prevail again and again at the expense of the good guys and gals. We keep watching because we want to see good prevail and evil receive its comeuppance! The good and bad are not so easily separated in this story, but there is unresolved tension that finally gets resolved today. So, we might as well stick with it to the not-so-bitter end.

Time has passed since we left Joseph last week headed to Egypt as a slave. After many twists and turns, he has become Pharaoh's right-hand man, a royal vizier. The region is experiencing a famine, just as Joseph has predicted, and his brothers come to Egypt, in search of help, not realizing the position he is in and not recognizing him when they see him. He keeps them in suspense for some time, toying with them. He has been the victim. We would understand any desire for revenge. He does not seek it, but nor does he immediately embrace his brothers in forgiveness. As we have noted, this is a realistic story.

Joseph tests his brothers a couple times, sending them home with needed grain but hiding the money they used to pay for it in their sacks, and hiding his silver cup in Benjamin's sack the second time. When the money is discovered, it is returned. When the cup is discovered and returned, Joseph offers them a deal. He will keep Benjamin as a slave and allow the others to return home to their father.

At this point, Judah offers an alternative. He will take Benjamin's place. Their father told them that his wife (Rachel) bore two sons — one left and was surely torn apart by animals (a reference to Joseph who is standing right

there, irony drips off every word in this narrative), the other is Benjamin; if he is taken, Jacob will give up on life.

This is where we join the story, and Joseph has hidden the truth as long as he can. He sends everyone but his brothers out of the room and weeps so loudly that the Egyptians hear him. He says to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” He may have rehearsed what he would say a thousand times, but he is so overcome with emotion that he just blurts it out. And his brothers stand there speechless.

The NRSV says they cannot answer him, so dismayed are they at his presence. “Dismayed” — distressed, alarmed, worried. We can understand why they might feel this way. They’re not just happy to see him. The Tanakh translation, a Jewish rendering, says they are “dumbfounded” on account of him, astonished, amazed. Surely they are both dumbfounded and dismayed, and they are speechless.

Joseph tells them to come closer and not be angry with themselves or distressed. God has used their evil actions for good, enabling Joseph to be in the position he is in now, able to help them. And help them he will, providing land and the means to survive the five more years the famine will last. He tells them to go and tell his father he is alive, he is in power, and he is providing them land in Goshen.

Joseph does not speak words of forgiveness, but sometimes actions speak louder than words. He doesn’t seek to harm them; he extends mercy in the most tangible form. He does earlier give Benjamin five times as much food as the others, and at the end of this scene, Joseph falls upon Benjamin’s neck and weeps, as Benjamin weeps too. The family pattern of favoritism continues, though perhaps we can cut Joseph some slack. He and Benjamin are the only two sons of Rachel.

As far as we can tell, the other brothers do not weep. Perhaps they are still dumbfounded and dismayed, unable to express much. But the story ends with this statement, “And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.” The Tanakh translation says, “only then were his brothers able to talk to him.” Once Joseph expresses his emotions, they are able to speak.

The text is silent on many points we might want to explore, leaving space for us to ponder the options. What is in the heads of these brothers

throughout this experience? Are they relieved to see Joseph? Are they terrified? Are they angry and jealous? He has risen to the top yet again, Dad's fair-haired child! Are they genuinely contrite and grateful for this reunion and reconciliation? We don't really know.

And what is in Joseph's head and heart? A great deal, to be sure; his emotional outbursts make this clear. Most likely he feels a mixture anger and joy. He wants to hug them and kick them in the shin at the very same time. But joy wins out, God has used their actions for good, he is in a position to save his people. And as a result, something that has been broken, seemingly broken beyond any hope of repair, the relationship between Joseph and his brothers, is mended again.

The message for us is that some things that seem irrevocably broken can be mended — personal relationships, church conflicts, perhaps even cultural divisions.

I have shared with some of you a story about a man who lost his son suddenly around the age of forty. He was my age exactly. For the better part of a year, this grieving father was stuck on anger, understandably so. He was angry with God, but God can be difficult to get to when we are angry. So, he transferred that anger to me.

It is not unusual. I understood what was happening, but it still felt horrible. It seemed like this misplaced rift might never heal, but I tried to keep the door open, and one day a simple word spoken during the celebration of communion, along with a gentle touch on his shoulder, stirred tears and eventually reconciliation. A seemingly irrevocable division was mended, his heart began to heal, and for the rest of his life, we remained extremely close. I could never replace his son, but our relationship was like that of a father and a son. It can and does happen. Broken relationships can be mended.

Church divisions can also be healed. I have known of some pretty intense church feuds. A district court judge in another setting was asked to moderate a meeting of another church in the city. When he walked down the aisle in that packed sanctuary, he was approached by two men, each of whom wanted to have the opening prayer. One was the pastor, the other was the deacon chair, they were leaders of rival parties. Realizing "prayer" was not going to be prayer, the judge told them, "Gentleman, there will be no opening

prayer today.” Somehow they got through that meeting and the church survived. Not everyone reconciled completely, but peace was made. Church divisions can be healed.

But the challenge is greater when the division is cultural — between racial and socioeconomic groups, between religious traditions, between parties and ideologies. Is there any way to bring together the MAGA right with the most-progressive left? Can anything bridge the gap between rural and small-town America and urban America? Will we ever escape the dark shadow of racism? How can people who claim Christian faith as their primary motivation for diametrically opposed views on abortion, sexual identity, capital punishment, immigration, and climate change ever find common ground? The psalmist speaks of a time when love binds all in unity, but is the time possible this side of eternity? It is difficult to envision any of these realities being mended.

But there is another part of the Genesis story’s message we need to hear. The message is not just that what seem to be irrevocably broken things can be mended, but that God sticks with us until they are. Joseph and his brothers reconcile not because they tenaciously pursue reconciliation. In fact, none of them does. It is God who guides Joseph not only to survive but to rise to a position of leadership. It is God who uses his role not only to save his people but to reconcile his brothers to him. They may have given up on each other completely, but God has not given up on them. And this is why healing occurs.

There is a scene in the film “The Count of Monte Cristo” in which Edmond Dantes, falsely convicted of treason, is in prison and disconsolate. A priest who is also in prison encourages him to rely on faith. “I don’t believe in God,” Edmond says, to which the priest replies, “It doesn’t matter. He believes in you.”

In the end, this is what matters, this is how healing occurs when we think it cannot; it’s not just about us, it’s about God. God believes in us, and God is at work for healing, no matter what. If we question this reality, we need only look at the cross. That’s how far God is willing to go. Whether we stick with it to the not-so-bitter end or not, God does. And in God’s grace, that end is not just not-so-bitter; it is glorious!