

Message for Week 4: Ask for Help

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”
(Matthew 7:7-8)

The Brothers Come to Egypt

While Joseph was gathering grain during the years of plenty, his brothers back in Canaan had no idea that a famine was approaching. They enjoyed living large off the land, and had few cares. Then came the famine. There was probably a year’s worth of grain stored up, but with nothing growing that was soon gone. Rumor had it that there was grain in Egypt, and the brothers set out with their donkeys, leaving Benjamin at home. Jacob was afraid something might happen to the only remaining child of Rachel, his beloved wife.

It had been about 21 years since the brothers had seen Joseph. They had not forgotten him--their father was still grieving his loss--but they presumed that he was probably dead. Meanwhile, Joseph had changed. No longer a Hebrew youth of 17, he was the 38-year-old governor of Egypt, with Egyptian dress and language. The brothers came to buy grain from him, not recognizing him at all. But Joseph recognized them.

The brothers came and bowed down to Joseph, humbly asking to buy food. In western culture we seldom bow to one another, outside of a stage bow, though many will bow down in prayer. In oriental cultures bowing to others is more common. In ancient Israel it was a sign not only of respect, but also of friendship. When Jacob approached his brother after 20 years of absence he bowed to the earth seven times before embracing his brother and weeping on his neck (Genesis 33:3-4). David bowed to Jonathan three times with his face to the ground before embracing and weeping at a final farewell (1 Samuel 20:41-42). Now Joseph’s brothers were bowing down to him. In a way it was a fulfillment of Joseph’s dream 21 years earlier, but this bowing was not a sign of love, but just a formality--a traditional sign of respect given to a complete stranger because of his high position.

Joseph’s Reaction

Joseph recognized his siblings, and sensed that this was the beginning of his dreams being fulfilled. But Joseph didn’t want just obligatory deference. He wanted acceptance and love. Would he get that from these brothers who had betrayed him? He could easily make them fear him. His power was absolute. But could he win their brotherhood?

He accused them of being spies. Was that just because he thought it would demean them? Or was it retribution for when they accused Joseph of being a spy for bringing a bad report to their father a decade ago? Flustered at his accusation, they stammered, “No, we are twelve sons of one man, come to buy food.” They assured him that they were twelve, but then had to explain why there were only ten of them. “One is dead, and the youngest is at home with our father.”

Now, the brothers have mentioned their father--who loved Joseph so much--and Benjamin, his only full brother and the only brother who had not betrayed him. What kind of emotions were stirring in Joseph? Anger for what they did so long ago? Longing to see his father and brother again? Joseph tells his brothers that one of them must go home and bring

their youngest brother to prove the validity of their words. Then he imprisoned them for three days. Did he want them to experience what it was like to be thrown in a pit? Did he already have a plan, or was he using those three days to assemble one?

The Brothers' Remorse

After three days Joseph brought his brothers out and spoke more gently to them. He said that all but one could go home to take food to their families, but they would still need to bring back the youngest brother to prove their innocence.

The brothers were dismayed. "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us." They didn't know that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. Joseph turned away and wept, then returned.

Was this a turning point for Joseph? Here his brothers were admitting the wrong they had done to Joseph, accepting the blame for not having had compassion on him when he was in distress. Were his brothers actually sorry for what they had done? Had they changed? It seems that Joseph already knew they were telling the truth about having a younger brother, but he didn't know if they had actually repented of what they had done to him. Given another chance would they now act differently?

The Brothers Return to Canaan

Joseph then imprisoned Simeon and sent the other brothers home loaded with food. Secretly he had also ordered the money they had used to buy food to be placed back in their sacks of grain. When the brothers discover the coins in their sacks they are dismayed, imagining that they will be accused of theft. Did Joseph mean to frighten them? Was he just being generous and anonymously providing for his family?

The brothers came home to Jacob and told the whole story. Jacob was angry and grief-stricken. He believes he will never see Simeon again and is afraid that he will lose Benjamin as well, if he allows Benjamin to go with the brothers to Egypt.

The brothers' confession seems to be a turning point. What significance was it for the brothers to confess to each other their guilt about what they did to Joseph? What significance did it have for Joseph that he overheard this confession? Why did it bring Joseph to tears?

Whom do you identify with in this story?

- Joseph, acting like a stranger, protecting his heart
- The brothers, hobbled by guilt, struggling just to put food on the table
- Jacob, grieving and angry over loss of connection with his loved ones

Turning from Sin

We don't have to go far to see the relevance of this story to our lives. If there is anything about your dream that involves cooperation, caring for others or developing true friendship, you can see how vital to your dream it is to resolve guilt about past injuries, to overcome grief about lost love and fear of future losses, and to be able to show compassion.

Here our focus is on the change in Joseph's brothers when they acknowledged and regretted their crime. The Bible says that we all will receive the consequences of our choices.

“The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ezekiel 18:20). Still the Lord is merciful, and wants to forgive everyone for every bad thing they have done. All He asks is that we be willing to repent from our evils. “If a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?” says the Lord GOD, “and not that he should turn from his ways and live?” (Ezekiel 18:21-23)

In the New Church the path to changing ourselves is laid out in a few steps. “Active repentance is examining ourselves, recognizing and admitting our sins, praying to the Lord, and beginning a new life” (*True Christianity* 528). It begins with having a concept of evil and then looking for sin in ourselves.

"The evil that is sinful is simply evil against our neighbor; and evil against our neighbor is also evil against God, which is what sin is. Nevertheless, having a concept of sin does nothing for us unless we examine the actions we have taken in our lives and see whether we have either openly or secretly done any such thing.

Before we take this action, everything about sin is just an idea to us; what the preacher says about it is only a sound that comes in our left ear, goes out our right ear, and is gone. Eventually it becomes a subject relegated to vague thoughts and mumbled words in worship, and for many it comes to seem like something imaginary and mythical.

Something completely different occurs, however, if we examine ourselves in the light of our concepts of what is sinful, discover some such thing in ourselves, say to ourselves, "This evil is sinful," and then abstain from it out of fear of eternal punishment. Then for the first time we receive the instructive and eloquent preaching in church in both of our ears, take it to heart, and turn from a non-Christian into a Christian." (True Christianity 525)

One of the keys to overcoming evil in our lives is asking for help. We read, “There are two duties that we are obliged to perform after we have examined ourselves: prayer and confession. The prayer is to be a request that [the Lord] have mercy on us, give us the power to resist the evils that we have repented of, and provide us an inclination and desire to do what is good, since ‘without him we cannot do anything’.” (John 15:5)

The Brothers' Changing Relationship with Joseph

Joseph's brothers were anxious when they thought about what they had done to Joseph. Reflecting on things we have done wrong may cause anxiety. Ironically, that is a good sign. In the teachings for the New Church about this passage we read, “If a person when he inclines to evils - as most people do in adolescence - feels at all disturbed when he reflects on an evil deed he has committed, this is a sign that he will nevertheless accept what flows into him from heaven through the angels. It is also a sign that subsequently he will allow himself to be reformed. But if he does not feel in any way disturbed when he reflects on an evil deed he has

committed, this is a sign that he no longer wishes to accept what flows into him from heaven through the angels; and it is a sign too that subsequently he will not allow himself to be reformed" (AC 5470).

Joseph broke down weeping when he heard his brothers recognize and admit their sin. On a deeper level Joseph stands for the Lord, and his weeping pictures the way the Lord feels when we see and admit our faults. *Secrets of Heaven* says of this passage, "It is well known that weeping is an expression of grief and love; it is consequently an expression of mercy since mercy is love that is grieving. Divine love therefore is called mercy because left by itself the human race is in hell; and when a person recognizes within himself that this is the case he prays for mercy." Jesus expressed the same kind of grief and love when He wept for Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and for Lazarus (John 11:35).

Joseph the Stranger

Although Joseph wanted to see Benjamin again, he did not reveal himself to his brothers yet. He maintained his Egyptian demeanor and language, acting as a stranger to his brothers and speaking harshly to them. Joseph was overcome with love for Benjamin, yet he pretended not to care because he was testing to be sure that his brothers really were changing, and he was not sure whether he would see his brothers or Benjamin again if he did not pretend to be angry.

In our spiritual life there are often times when we come across hard things. Sometimes it appears that God is distant, unknowable, uncaring or even wrathful and punishing. Sometimes it is the commands that are hard: You shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not commit adultery, You shall not covet. It may seem that the trials we go through are too difficult or that there is just too much suffering in the world to believe that there is an all-powerful, loving God who simply wants us to be in His family. Yet the fact is that the trials are allowed to help us become better.

In this story the brothers are gradually becoming aware that they can't survive on their own and that their own faults are a cause of their problems. The Lord leaves us feeling as if we have been abandoned in times of temptation is so that we will recognize our need for Him and ask Him for help. In fact the Lord is closer to us in temptations than at other times, because our humility at that time opens us up to His presence (*Secrets of Heaven* 840, 2334, 2338, *New Jerusalem* 200). But the *feeling* is that the Lord is then a stranger to us--we don't recognize His presence, and we feel judged and accused by His truth.

Asking for Help

In our spiritual life, the Lord tells us to ask for what we need.

*"We frequently read in the Word, that the Lord answers when they call and cry (as in Psalms 4:1; 17:6; 20:9; 34:4; 91:15; 120:1). Also, it says that He gives when they ask (Matthew 7:7, 8; 21:22; John 14:13, 14; 15:7; 16:23-27). Yet the Lord gives them the ability to ask, and what to ask for; therefore the Lord knows it beforehand. **Still the Lord wills that we should ask first**, so that we may do it as if we were doing it from ourselves. In this way it becomes our own. Otherwise, if the request itself were not from*

the Lord, it would not be said in those places, that "they should receive whatever they asked." (Apocalypse Explained 376)

Often we may feel that our prayers are not answered, for often we ask for things that are not helpful in the long run (*Secrets of Heaven* 8179). We may ask for our troubles to stop but they continue. We want immediate healing, but hurt remains. Yet there is one request that the Lord always grants:

*"If we do not shun evils because they are sins, but only because they are injurious, we do not look to the Lord, but only to ourselves, and so we remain in our perverted state. But when we shun evils as sins we fight against them because they are contrary to the Lord, and against His Divine laws; and then he prays to the Lord for help and for power to resist them. **This power when asked for is never denied.**" (Doctrine of Charity 204)*

Your task for this week is to ask for help. Recognize ways you may have hurt people and be willing to admit your faults. Identify some way in which you have hurt someone else and ask the Lord and (if appropriate) the person you hurt for forgiveness.