October 23, 2022

Sermon 50

Genesis 42:1-38

Rob Conti

We’re obviously in chapter 42 and God’s overall plan is really starting to come into play. He’s going to bring the children of Israel into Egypt and this is the first really big step of doing that. So, tonight we enter into a part of the story that really will have its fulfillment in chapters 45-46, because what this is all driving towards is reconciliation. And that’s where we’re going to be in a few weeks, seeing this family reconciled, seeing Jacob and Joseph reunited and weeping on one another’s necks in this beautiful picture of reconciliation that, for us, will foreshadow the reconciliation that we have in Jesus. And that’s where we’re going, but for tonight, as this kicks off, the theme that becomes so evident throughout the chapter is fear.

Fear. We’re going to see Jacob’s fear that really bookends the whole chapter; we’re going to see the fear that the ten boys exhibit when they’re confronted with the memory and the pain that they caused in their brother’s life; we’re also going to see Joseph’s fear. But they’re going to be compared and contrasted pretty clearly.

So, I want to say this. The main point of the sermon is that a holy and biblical fear of the Lord will lead to reconciliation with God and with others. A holy and biblical fear of the Lord will lead to reconciliation with God and others.

This is 20 years since Joseph was thrown in the pit and sold into slavery. Just for context, Joseph is somewhere around 40 years old, maybe a little bit younger, maybe a little bit older, but somewhere around 40. Jacob is around 130 and Benjamin is 30 years old –ish, somewhere around there. We know that when the reconciliation happens that Benjamin …. When you just read the story and see the way that Jacob is treating him, you would think that he’s 11. He’s 30. He’s a grown man and when he comes to Egypt he brings 10 kids with him. That’s just for context. Picture in your mind that’s what’s going on.

We see the story unfold where God sends the famine. It’s not just hit Egypt; it’s hit Canaan. And Jacob looks at his sons and he’s like, “Now, why are y’all sitting around? You’re just looking at each other and waiting to starve to death. I heard there’s food in Egypt.” And he sends them down but he won’t send Benjamin. We see that when they get there that there’s an irony that happens. Joseph confronts his brothers but they don’t recognize him and for good reason. He’s clean shaven and he’s dressed like an Egyptian. He’s probably got a good tan going on and he’s speaking Egyptian. He speaks to them through a translator because they don’t understand him. But he, right away, recognizes them. And they all get around him and bow down. And you remember that scene, right? It’s a dream come true—literally. It is. He dreamt that. Remember when he’s a teenager and he says, “Hey, guys, I had this dream where y’all come and bow down to me,” and they all got upset – but it’s happening. And God gives him this wisdom.

We’re going to come back to this but I just want to summarize. God’s going to give him this wisdom because, in this moment, who among us would blame Joseph if he just told one of the trained guards that stands ready to obey whatever he says, if he told him to put a spear through one of them? “Take vengeance. Get your revenge, right now. These jokers, your flesh and blood, your brothers, betrayed you, tortured you, beat you up, threw you in a pit, and sold you into slavery.” You know, how your older brother used to pick on you. It’s crazy. How did he not just give in to bitterness and anger? Now, he’s in this position of power and he can unleash on them vengeance. But he has the wisdom in this moment to know that vengeance doesn’t belong to him; that’s not his to unleash. It becomes this beautiful picture that leads to reconciliation. But he’s going to test them, he’s going to test them. Did you see that when we were reading through that chapter? He tests his brothers, and the test is not about them spying out the land, right? He uses that phrase, “You’re here to see the nakedness of the land.” What he’s accusing them of is, “Oh, yeah, you say you’re from Canaan. No, you’re from some enemy country and you’re here to spy out our weaknesses and you’re coming under the guise that you need food. You’re a beggar, but really you’re trying to see where we’re most vulnerable.”

So, he’s making that accusation but that’s not really what it’s about. That’s not what the test is about. The test is not about spying out the land but about reconciliation. Joseph’s testing them to see: Is there hope here? Is there any hope for these jokers? Has there been any change of heart? Has their character changed? Will they continue to lie and act in their own self-interest? Will they care about whoever gets left behind? Is there any real remorse for what they did or did they just have a fear of punishment? And he’s testing them for information. He doesn’t trust them. The irony when he says, “Y’all are spies.” What do they say? “We are honest men.” That’s where I would have lost it. If I was keeping my cool, right there, I’d have lost it. I know me. When I’m starting to get aggressive, I laugh. I don’t know. I’m weird. When I’m happy, I cry. When I’m aggressive, I laugh. My wires got all messed up. But I just start laughing but it’s crazy, like it’s diabolical. It’s not good. It’s not fun to be around. I just would have lost it. I’d have started laughing. I’d have been laughing on my way to get one of the spears myself. “Honest men! That’s hilarious! What’d you tell dad? Where am I? Oh, yeah, a goat ate me. What did you say? You made something up.” The irony of, “No, we’re honest men. You can trust us,” and he’s going, “No, no, no. I’ve got to test what they’re saying.” He’s like, “Is my dad alive? And how have you treated Benjamin? I know how you treated me; what did you do to him?” He’s testing them to see. He wants proof of life.

So, through the circumstances of this chapter—the famine, the brothers fulfilling the dream—God gave Joseph wisdom in the testing, and what comes from that, what emerges from that, for us to consider, is the different way that fear is experienced by these different characters. We will see Jacob demonstrate an unhealthy fear. We will see the brothers grapple with the fear of punishment for their great and terrible sin. We will see Joseph walk – this is it – we will see Joseph walk in the wisdom that comes from a healthy and biblical fear of the Lord.

Let’s look at the first couple of verses. I want to look at Jacob’s fear first, so we will look at the bookends of the chapter. First, verses 1-5.

When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you look at one another?” 2 And he said, “Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.” 3 So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. 4 But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. 5 Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan.

Now, jump down to verse 35, the end of this part of the story.

As they emptied their sacks, behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack. And when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were afraid. 36 And Jacob their father said to them, “You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me.” 37 Then Reuben said to his father, “Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.” 38 But he said, “My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.”

He’s allowed the circumstances of his life and his grief to choke out his faith, and it’s been replaced by fear. He’s just fearful and bitter. That is not a subtle shot at his other sons standing around, right? “Benjamin is all I’ve got left.” That’s harsh; it’s bitter. He’s fearful. His grief and sorrow have choked out his faith. His fear is earthly.

I’m a little snakebit on using illustrations this weekend but I’m going to try. It’s a long story. But I think we can relate to this; this slippery slope of what ifs, where you just become so fearful, where bad things happen, and you get your eyes off the Lord, and you put them on your circumstances, and all of a sudden everything goes from a potential to serve the Lord, a potential for the Gospel, a potential to love people and to enjoy life, to potentials for an injury, or sickness, or failure, or the way that we view finances and relationships. Fear can just take over and grip your life. We saw that happen to a nation not that long ago. That’s where Jacob is right now. He’s allowed his circumstances to drive a fear that has momentarily eclipsed his faith in the Lord. Right now, what he needs is a bigger view of God, a right view of God. He needs to remember who his God is. Right now, he is so afraid of death taking his boy.

I’ll read this to you from Matthew 10:26-33. Jesus is teaching, and what He’s teaching about is, “As you guys go out into the world and proclaim the Gospel, you are going to be violently persecuted. There is going to be violence against you. The world is going to push back against you.” He says this, “They’re going to throw you in prison. They’re going to do all kinds of bad stuff to you. They’re going to torture you and some of you will die.” Then, He says this,

“So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.”

They will be dealt with. Vengeance belongs to the Lord.

27 … “nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.”

Go ahead. That’s fine. It’s funny. I have eyebrows and a beard – I have hairs on my head and they are numbered.

31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Jesus is talking about the intense persecution that His followers will experience for proclaiming the Gospel. We are not to fear anyone other than God. The worst – and this is not sarcasm—the worst they can do is mock, imprison, torture, and kill us. All of that is temporary suffering. Rather, Jesus teaches us, that we should fear the One who has the power to deliver us into Hell. But this fear gives way to confidence. Did you see it? This fear gives way to confidence in His love and concern for us. If He cares for birds, how much more us? There is a sweet promise that proclaiming the Gospel may cause suffering but the One who has the power of Heaven and Hell will claim you as His own. A correct biblical and holy fear of God will eradicate, appropriate, and/or absorb all other potential fears, whether real or imagined in my life. I’m going to read that again: A correct biblical and holy fear of God will eradicate, appropriate, and/or absorb all other potential fears, whether real or imagined in my life.

So, of what or of whom shall I be afraid? What could I fear that is greater than the power of God. Pause. Jacob is 130, and for most of his life he’s had these awesome experiences with God. He has seen God move. He has wrestled with God, but he’s lost sight of this. He’s allowed his fears in his mind to become more powerful than his God. That’s why we do this. That’s why we open the Word. That’s why we sang this song that we sang earlier. Who is more powerful than God? What is more powerful than God? Nothing. No one. And a right fear – when I fear Him and see Him in a correct way – that appropriates every other fear that would potentially take over my mind, and my emotions, and my actions. It puts everything else into perspective.

Of what or of who shall I be afraid? What could I fear that is greater than the power of God? What circumstances in my life are outside of the wisdom, knowledge, and sovereign purpose and plan of God? What government or person has more power or authority over my life and destiny than Jesus? That’s rhetorical, right?

Think about these believers, the disciples – when Jesus teaches them that, there’s Nero. “You’re going to face Nero.” Was there opportunity for fear? Yeah. He was the emperor, powerful, with the Roman army at his command. They’d do whatever he’d say. He’d say, “Take that human being, put him on a pike, set him on fire,” and they’d do it. “That this group of people and feed them to lions,” and they would do it. But that authority does not trump, does not defeat, does not overshadow or eclipse the power and authority of Yahweh.

Jacob is fearful. The boys are fearful. But there’s a big difference in the fear of the Lord and being afraid of the Lord. Psalm 27:1,

Yahweh is my light and my salvation.

This is what we sang.

Yahweh is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? Yahweh is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?

The fear of the Lord – the fear of Yahweh. What does this mean? What are you talking about? This can be so confusing. A perverted, unbiblical view of God – if that’s what’s in your heart and in your mind, it’s easy to go, “I know why somebody would be afraid of God. He’s holy. He hates sin. He’s all-powerful and He knows everything. Therefore, He knows that I’m a sinner, He knows my thoughts, He knows my words, He knows what I’ve done.” There is a type of view of God that just sees Him as an angry, violent, potentially in your mind, abusive father figure. And that type of view of God, that type of fear of God, is going to cause you to flee from Him, to be angry at Him, to be bitter towards Him when the circumstances of your life don’t go right, because you’re going to see everything negative in your life as punishment from that angry God. But here’s what I would say, “That God doesn’t exist.” That’s a caricature of the One, True, Living God. We should fear Him, because some of those things are true. He is holy – absolutely. He is holy, holy, holy, and He is perfect in His righteousness and His justice. And He’s appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness. He does hate sin, and He does know everything, and He sees everything, and He hears everything, but He is love. In a right view of God, for God to reveal to us His nature and character, to see His holiness and His justice – He does that so that we would run to His steadfast love, to His grace and mercy, because we see in Him – yes, I fear Him because of who He is but I also fear Him because of what He offers. The fear of the Lord will draw us into his grace and His mercy.

The fear of the Lord, His greatness, His wisdom, His love, His justice, His power, His majesty, His knowledge, His sovereignty, His beauty, His patience, His utter transcendence – this makes everything and everyone else look small, and powerless, and foolish, and very, very finite. It draws us to Him because He is just so awesome, and there is no one else like him, and there’s salvation nowhere else. And there is safety and forgiveness nowhere else.

And my hope is that’s how the boys began to fear the Lord. I keep saying “the boys” because that’s how I would write it down in my notes. Joseph’s ten brothers, the sons of Jacob minus Joseph and Benjamin – this test is laid on them and he says, “Y’all are spies,” and he puts them in jail. They don’t think that Joseph can understand them. Again, he’s talking to them through a translator and he’s only spoken to them in Egyptian. Then, they have this conversation in verses 21-22,

21 Then they said to one another, “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother,

All this starts to come down on them and what comes out is, “We deserve this. We deserve what we’re getting.”

“In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw…”

This part is hard to read. Before I slowed down to really start studying this chapter, we read the story of when they sold him into slavery, but the picture I had in my mind (and Spencer painted a graphic picture talking about the chains and the fetters that they put around his wrists and his ankles), when I read this it was like a whole new view. This has been on their hearts and minds ever since they left. Do you use what he says?

“We saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen.”

It’s graphic. You see Joseph who’s been beaten and thrown in that pit. He’s dragged out, they chain him up, and they are dragging him off into slavery, and he is pleading, and begging, and crying out to his kin, his brothers, “Don’t do this! Save me! Rescue me!,” and they just look at him. I picture him foaming at the mouth, just crying, begging, and pleading for his life, and his own brothers do nothing. Whew!

“That is why this distress has come upon us.” 22 And Reuben answered them, “Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.”

I hope, I don’t know – it’s speculation – I hope this is godly conviction over their sin and not just like, “What goes around comes around. We deserve this.” My hope is that they are convicted because they have known, and God, over these 20 years, has been convicting them. I hold out that hope because of the reconciliation that’s coming in later chapters.

God, in His grace, convicts of sin to bring us to repentance. This is the whole point of the Law, the whole point of a good and right fear of the Lord.

This is interesting. Remember that this is the exodus generation, the original audience. These are the first guys hearing this story. It’s that generation that came out of slavery. It’s the same generation that – I’m going to go to Exodus 20 and that’s when they were receiving the Law. Remember that? They were on Mount Sinai and remember that God shows up. At first, all the people were around the mountain and God shows up, and how does He show up? It’s intense. There’s this dark cloud that descends, and lightning and thunder, and everything is shaking, and the people are so afraid. They hear the voice of God and all they can think is, “We are going to die!” Right? It’s intense. So, they’re like, “Hey, Moses. We really, really liked it when you would meet with God.” Listen to what Moses says. Pay attention; I think it will be on the screen behind me. There’s irony here, or their tension here. There’s mystery here.

20 Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not…”

What does it say?

“… sin.”

He’s saying, don’t have a fear that makes you want to run away, and close your ears, and not hear from the Lord. Don’t have that type of fear. That’s not why God’s testing you. God wants you to have a fear of Him. Listen to this – a fear, a right, and holy, and biblical fear of the Lord will lead to obedience. It will lead to obedience. Because that fear sees God as awesome, and this fear begins to change the way that we see Him from maybe this angry, powerful, abusive, father figure or king, to that He’s so beautiful, He’s so powerful, He’s so good. I want to obey Him. I want to obey Him because of who He is.

Moses here sets out a contrast. This is from Ligon Duncan and it’s so good.

Moses here sets out a contrast. There’s a difference between being frightened of God and fearing God. If you fear God, there is no reason to be frightened of Him. But, if you do not fear God there is every reason to be frightened of Him.

I’m going to read that again. I’m dyslexic, and something like this, man, spins my brain out.

Moses here sets out a contrast. There’s a difference between being frightened of God and fearing God. If you fear God, there is no reason to be frightened of Him. But, if you do not fear God there is every reason to be frightened of Him.

A right fear of God brings us into His love, brings us into His grace, brings us into His salvation. If we don’t fear God, that is a scary place to be. That means you’re still in your sin. That means you haven’t embraced His salvation. That means you’re under His wrath, and that should cause us to tremble and fear.

Listen to Jeremiah 32, talking about the New Covenant.

39 “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good…

We don’t think like that. It seems so contrary.

“…that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. 40 I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.”

The fear of the Lord keeps us secure. The fear of the Lord keeps us secure in our relationship with Him. Jeremiah 33:8-9,

8 I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. 9 And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.

The fear of the Lord leads to repentance, forgiveness, and eternal life.

Sinclair Ferguson said this, really slowly,

It is that indefinable mixture of reverence and pleasure, joy and awe, which fills our hearts when we realize who God is and what He has done for us. It is a love for God, which is so great that we would be ashamed to do anything which would displease or grieve Him, and makes us happiest when we are doing what pleases Him.

That’s so good. It’s so good to see Him for who He is. Yeah, we fear Him, but it’s more than just respect and awe. There is a trembling, there is a fear. He knows everything. He’s all-powerful. But it just keeps drawing us deeper into relationship with Him.

I’ll say this. The fear of the Lord leads to an understanding of God’s perfect love for us in Jesus. The fear of the Lord leads to an understanding of God’s perfect love for us in Jesus.

1 John 4:15-19,

15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17 By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. 19 We love because he first loved us.

The fear of the Lord leads to an understanding of God’s perfect love for us in Jesus. And that type of love casts out the type of fear that lives in dread of punishment, of Hell. When we understand the perfect love of God for us in Jesus, it displaces all fear of eternal punishment. Fear of Hell is gone and a healthy, biblical fear remains, where I just want to obey Him, I just want to please Him.

So, the key verse is verse 18, when Joseph says, “For I fear God.” Again, Jacob is being choked out by worldly, earthly fear. The brothers, Lord willing, are under a fear of the Lord that’s leading them to repentance. But Joseph, he is walking in a fear of the Lord that produces wisdom; that produces wisdom. Joseph demonstrates a fear of the Lord that dictates His actions. How did he not become bitter and angry? How did he keep from walking away and just completely embracing Egyptian culture? How did he not take revenge in that moment? His fear of the Lord provided the wisdom that he needed, which is going to have this huge payoff in reconciliation.

Proverbs 9:10 – Y’all know it well.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Wisdom—y’all know. Wisdom is not knowing a bunch of stuff. Wisdom is not sounding smart while you sit around and talk about theological things. Biblical wisdom is living skillfully. Biblical wisdom is taking the truth of Scripture and applying it correctly to your life. Biblical wisdom is seeing God for who He is and then living in light of that. That’s what we see Joseph do in this story. His brothers come and bow down before him and all of a sudden he has this crazy plan that’s going to test them. Yeah, God’s giving him the wisdom that he needs to navigate the circumstances and relationships of his life, and it’s all leading to reconciliation.

We have that opportunity, so we walk in a biblical, healthy, godly fear of the Lord. He’s going to provide the wisdom that we need for our circumstances and our relationships.

Philippians 2:12-13,

Therefore, my beloved, as you’ve always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation…

Your own salvation, secure in Jesus. Jesus did all the work and worked it in you, now you work it out…

…with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

The fear of the Lord leads to walking in wisdom. The fear of the Lord leads to obedience. The fear of the Lord leads to a fruitful life.

So, I’ll just ask, hopefully throughout this sermon you’ve been asking yourself, “What kind of fear of the Lord do I operate under? What kind of fear of the Lord do I have? Am I afraid of the Lord? If you are not afraid of the Lord you should be the most fearful person in the room right now. If you can know that you’re walking and living contrary to the nature, character, and law of God, then you should be terrified, because He’s real, this is His world, and He is holy, and that day of judgment is coming. But see Him in that and then see the love, and the grace, and the mercy that He offers you through Jesus, who went to the cross, to take your punishment, to take the wrath of God in your place, so that you could then walk in a fear of the Lord that is much more like how a child fears a godly parent who loves him and has nothing but security, and peace, and joy for that child. That child does not want to displease that father.

So, let’s pray and we’ll worship the Lord.

Father, we love you. We thank you. We thank you that you’ve revealed yourself through your Word. We thank you that you’ve revealed yourself through stories like this, that we can see how different people respond to you, and learn from it, and glean from it. I do pray for anybody in here who doesn’t know you, that God, in your kindness you’d lead them to repentance, that you would give them the gift of faith to believe in Jesus. I pray, Lord, for all of us, that we would not neglect this, that we would stop and truly meditate on who you are, and walk in a fear of you so that no other fear would take root in our hearts and minds. I pray that if there is fear in our life that dictates how we live and how we have relationships that is unhealthy and that’s choking out our faith, I pray now that, even as we sing these songs, that you would reveal that to us, and that we would confess it, and that all would get eclipsed by a right view of you, of your power, of your goodness, of your beauty. Lord, we love you, and you alone are worthy to be worshipped. In Christ’s name, Amen.