



The Faith Test

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Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Genesis 42:1-17

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It was my freshmen year in college. I was enrolled in Speech 101. We met on the third floor of Slocum Hall. Our first assignment was a five minute speech on any subject of our choosing. While I don't recall my topic, the speech is still unforgettable to me.

On the day of my inaugural speech, the professor sat at the back of the room with my outline in hand. I took my place at the front of the class without benefit of notes or lectern. About halfway into my speech, it happened. My brain locked up. I had no idea what to say next. I stood there frozen, my face flushed.

I asked the professor if he could give me a hint or say something to trigger the next thought. He said nothing. He only shook his head no.

I didn't move. I said nothing. Then, in a flash, it hit me. I've got to get out of here. I marched back to my seat, gathered up my books and walked out of class. I vowed never to return. I'll just go to the registrar and drop the course.

But it wasn't that simple. The registrar explained I was too late for a full refund. I didn't have the nerve to tell my parents what had happened, so I went crawling back to the professor, seeking to be readmitted. I asked him whether it was possible to pass the class after bombing my first speech. He seemed optimistic. I received a C- for my final grade. It was generous on his part.

Given that inauspicious start, I never could have imagined eventuating into a profession where public speaking is so important to the job. What drew me to preaching wasn't the speaking, that's for sure. It was the subject matter. When I committed my life to Christ several months after that fateful speech, I wanted to tell the whole world what had happened to me. Still do!

I've titled this sermon "The Faith Test." Everybody in our story faces a test of monumental proportions.

We're now midway through our sermon series on the messy life of Joseph. Last Sunday's text from Genesis 41 marks a turning point in this eventful story. Joseph's fortunes change dramatically when he transitions from prisoner to Prime Minister. We left off with the verse, "All the world came to Egypt to buy grain" (41:57).

I said last Sunday that you won't believe who shows up next to buy grain in Egypt. Would you believe Joseph's brothers who sold him into slavery 20 years earlier?

Jacob sends ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain during the famine. He holds back his youngest son, Benjamin. With Joseph out of the picture, the favored-son mantle now falls to Benjamin, the last remaining tie to Jacob's beloved wife Rachel.

The sons arrive and bow before the Prime Minister. Their bowing fulfills the dreams of young Joseph who envisioned his brothers genuflecting before him.

They don't recognize Joseph. After all, he carries an Egyptian name, wears Egyptian clothes and speaks through an interpreter. It's been 20 years. Those of you who go to high school reunions, don't you wear name tags?

Joseph decides to play hardball and accuses his brothers of being spies (42:9, 12, 14, 16). They claim to be sons of one man. An espionage group wouldn't originate from a single man. Then they provide a snapshot of the last 20 years. Father Jacob is still alive and home with their youngest brother Benjamin. They even mention the one "who is no more" which is ironic, given they are now kneeling before him. They claim to be honest men. Let's just see about that!

Joseph issues them a test: "This is how you will be tested. As surely as the Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of your number to get your brother, the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth" (42:15-16).

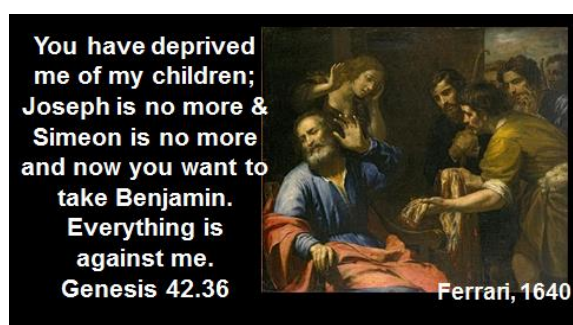
This is how you will be **tested**...get your brother, the rest of you will be kept in prison so that your words may be **tested**. Genesis 42:15-16

The brothers are locked up for three days; a taste of their own medicine perhaps. Joseph seems to have mixed emotions about his next move. Maybe that's why he puts them in prison, to stall for more time. While outwardly he plays the tough guy role, inwardly he is moved to tears by their surprise visit.

Joseph summons the brothers back to his chambers. He's had time to think it over and has changed his mind. One of them, Simeon, must remain in prison. The others are to go home and return with their youngest brother. He offers hopeful words upon their departure, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God" (42:18).

While traveling home, they find the money in their sacks that was used in purchasing grain. They panic, expecting an added charge of thievery. For the first time, they express remorse for what they have done (42:21-22).

We know as readers that Joseph has secretly arranged for the money used in buying grain to be placed back in their sacks. It's another test. Will the brothers pocket the money and tell Jacob another cock and bull story about what happened to Simeon?



The sons swallow hard when they tell Jacob that Egyptians are holding Simeon hostage until Benjamin shows up. Jacob has a virtual meltdown. "You have deprived me of my children; Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more and now you want to take Benjamin?" Everything is against me" (42:36).

I can't say that I blame Jacob. Every time his sons leave they return with one less son. Jacob's last comment is telling, "Everything is against me." Clearly, he hasn't yet recovered from Joseph's apparent death.

Initially, Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go. In the end, he has no choice. The famine threatens to take them all out, so he lets him go. This is where the chapter ends.

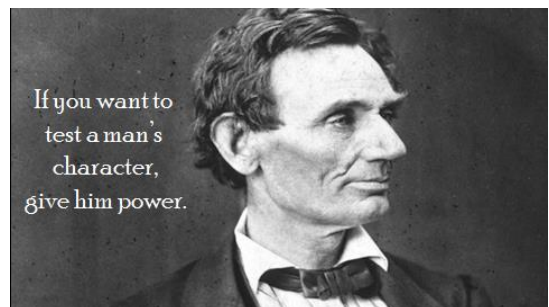
Everyone in our story is tested: the brothers, Jacob and Joseph. All of them are tested.

Take the 11 brothers. They're put in the same situation in which they once faced and failed with Joseph. Will they do right this time by Simeon? Will they lay aside their jealousy and protect Benjamin? Come back next week to see if they pass the test.

Father Jacob is tested also. He comes across here as an embittered, cynical old man. "Everything is against me?" Really, everything? Can Jacob come to the place where he can learn to trust God again?

Even Joseph is tested. Will he seek revenge or practice reconciliation? Refusing the advances of Potiphar's wife pales in comparison to this test. Will Joseph exercise wrath or extend forgiveness to his brothers?

Abraham Lincoln said, "If you want to test a man's character, give him power." When Joseph's brothers hold the power, they make really poor decisions. What will happen when the tables are turned and Joseph possesses all the power? Will he pay them back in kind or turn the other cheek?



This choice between revenge and forgiveness isn't merely academic for us. We live in families where similar choices must be made. Will we perpetuate another cycle of estrangement or begin a process toward reconciliation?

We're not told in so many words what God is up to in this story. But this much is clear; God is testing this family. Some of you cringe when you hear this word test. Some of you have test-anxiety and panic at the thought of being tested by God.

There are more than 200 references in Scripture to God testing people. But the word commonly used for God's testing means to



Test: to prove genuine and to refine

“prove” genuine. God tests us to refine us like silver. God doesn’t want us to fail. God intends us to pass the test. God places these brothers in a do-over position so this family can confront their messy past and create a

hopeful future. God is working behind the scenes to reconcile this broken family. God tests this family to achieve their best possible outcome.

Today, we’re honoring senior members of this church who have faithfully served with the gift of years. In American society we celebrate the young and ignore the old. Today, we’re doing the reverse—we honor those who have invested time and money over the years to promote God’s mission through this church.

I interviewed eight people recently with long associations with this church. They range in age from 76 to 101. Together these eight people have been committed to this church for, get this, 350 years. We’ll share their stories at our Gift of Years celebration after worship next Sunday. You’ve heard a sampling of their stories.

The first interview was with Cap, a physician, who represented this church as a medical missionary treating leprosy in Africa. He challenged us to think about the power of confession as a way to foster greater trust and unity within our church family.

The second interview was with Shirley who, with her husband, began a ministry of small groups in this church. She and others have left us a legacy of small groups as a means to foster spiritual friends in our church.

The third interview was with Harris, who shared the memory of his wife dying unexpectedly some years ago. He admitted to being totally unprepared for the ensuing crisis. When he asked God the question, “What do I do next?” he heard God say to him, “Follow me, I’ll show you the way.”

The last interview you’ll hear is with Frank, who has lived out his Christian calling as a 17-term, 34-year member of Congress. I

asked Frank about a special memory in this church. He recalled giving his life to Christ at a Billy Graham Crusade but regretting his decision not to go forward to publicly announce his decision. He remembered an evangelistic team visiting our church in the mid-70s. I'll let Frank tell you what happened next in his own words.

What do you need to do today in response to this sermon?

Maybe you need to begin a process of reconciliation toward someone with whom you are estranged.

Maybe God wants you to recognize that you are being placed in a do-over situation so you can confront your messy past to create a more hopeful future.

Maybe you are feeling anxious right now and need to heed Jesus' call, "Follow me. I'll show you the way."

Maybe everything in life seems to be stacked against you and you need to learn to trust God with your life.

Maybe today is the day you decide once and for all to open your life to Jesus.

