

HONEST MEN?

“We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies.” (Gen 42:11)

You know the story. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery. God was with Joseph, however, and made him a powerful ruler in Egypt. His brothers came to Egypt to buy food and Joseph recognized them, but they did not recognize him. Joseph then devised a plan that would reveal the true character of his brothers. Just as their jealousy provoked them to sell him into slavery, he would give them an opportunity to also sell his biological brother, Benjamin, into slavery. To set the stage for this test, Joseph accused his brothers of being spies who came to Egypt to see where the land was unprotected.

His brothers responded by claiming to be “honest men”. Joseph accused them of being spies, but they were not spies. They came to Egypt with the benign hope of buying food. They posed no military threat and had no sinister plans to overthrow the Egyptian government,. They were “honest men”, they said, “not spies”. But were they really “honest men”?

In this instance they had been falsely accused. They were not spies and must have been shocked to have such an unjust charge leveled against them. In response to this charge they claimed to be honest men, but were they really honest men?

No! They were not honest men! They had sold their brother into slavery and conceived a diabolical plot to deceive their father. They slaughtered a goat, dipped Joseph’s coat in the blood, and presented it to Jacob as evidence that Joseph was dead. Then, of all things, “all of his sons and daughters came to comfort him” (Gen. 37:35). Their duplicity almost defies description! Their father loved Joseph to the point that he refused to be comforted. The weeping old man said that he would go to his grave in mourning. He believed that Joseph was dead, but Joseph was not dead. His brothers knew that Joseph was not dead, but refused to tell the truth. Instead, they feigned sorrow and sympathy and sought to “comfort” their aged father. How utterly diabolical!

Their deception was not a brief and momentary lapse of judgement, it was a life style. Every day they had to mentally renew their allegiance to a lie. Every day they had to guard against letting the truth slip out. Every day they had to live with the fear that one of them might betray their evil covenant and tell the truth. Yet, they actually saw themselves as “honest men” because in this one instance they had been falsely accused.

The spiritual implications of this story are profound. Every way of a man is right in his own eyes (Prov. 21:2). The wicked one has so distorted our thinking that we can look in the mirror and forget what manner of man we saw. The only hope we have of salvation is to pierce through this thin veneer of self deception and recognize that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Take David for an example. He lusted after Bathsheba and happily discovered that she was married to a Hittite. Deuteronomy 7:2 specifically forbade marrying or showing mercy to a Hittite. Thus David was not ashamed to sacrifice this “Hittite” on the altar of his own selfish lust. In fact, he had Uriah carry his own death warrant and hand it to Joab (2nd Sam. 11:14). The fact that a few Hebrews died with this Hittite was of little concern to David. As “God’s anointed” he evidently saw himself as an “honest man”.

David’s redemptive example for all came when the Word of God compelled him to acknowledge the truth. Please prayerfully read the 51st Psalm and then seek to apply it to your own life. The fact that David acknowledged his sin was the key to his salvation. So also with us!

There was also a happy ending with reference to the brethren of Joseph. In the course of their confrontation with Joseph: **“They said to one another, “Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us.” (Gen 42:21)** Praise the Lord! Their many years of lying and deception had not made them irreparably calloused and hardened. Quite to the contrary. The face of Joseph, like the angelic face of the martyr Stephen, goaded them throughout the years. In fact, it helped bring them to repentance so they could truly be honest men. The Word of God and true repentance will also do the same for us.