

Admitting Fault: A Biblical Story

By Dr. Bill Long

Davon has skillfully pointed out how difficult it is to admit fault, especially in a family or family business situation. The weight of the past, need to justify oneself, unwillingness to give the advantage to the other, and continuing resentment may make admitting fault and receiving forgiveness a rare experience.

The Biblical story of Joseph and his brothers gives us a privileged glimpse into the emotional dynamics of admitting fault and receiving forgiveness. At the end of the story (Genesis 50), after their father Jacob has died, the brothers worry that Joseph will exact revenge on them for their earlier mistreatment of him by throwing him into a pit and then handing him over to some international traders. In their vulnerability, they speak to Joseph.

Appealing to the authority of their deceased father Jacob, the brothers say, “Now, therefore, please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father” (Gen 50:17). They don’t even have the courage at this point to claim they are Joseph’s brothers—all they do is entreat his forgiveness because of their common religious faith. They call what they did a “crime,” though other translations use the word “transgression” or “sins.” They know they were wrong. They own their fault in unambiguous language.

Once they take responsibility for fault, Joseph really only has a few alternatives in response. He can indeed take advantage of their vulnerability and increase pressure on his brothers, but he does two things instead. The first is that he weeps: “And Joseph wept when they spoke to him” (50:17). The honest confession of fault triggered something deep within Joseph. Then, a few verses later, he interprets all of this in light of God’s purpose for their family: “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good...” (50:20). Willingness to admit fault not only brought the family together but it enabled a new understanding of family in the light of God’s gracious purpose. As Thanksgiving is nigh, consider where you have erred, and whether admitting a fault might be something you ought to do this year.