
Troubled Souls in Testing Times

Genesis 42

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Many people today are uneasy, anxious, and disquieted in soul. With ever more riches and ever louder entertainment and ever more frenetic activity, they try to drown out the quiet voice of conscience. But its whispers are persistent and disturb people's peace.

What a tricky thing we have made guilt out to be. Psychology as an alternative spirituality attempts to demonize guilt. Many Christians are overly concerned that preaching and counseling, Biblical rebuke and correction, are just out put them a guilt trip. Yet, the Bible declares that guilt is a grace. It is a grace when the Spirit points to our sin and we stand charged before God.

But what has guilt to do with our story today? Joseph has declared over his newborn sons, "God has made me forget...all my father's household." (41:51) No sooner does he say this than his brothers turn up. How will a faithful and fruitful man deal with those who have sinned against him? Will he strike out in revenge? Will he ignore their sin with weak and foolish *craving* for reconciliation? Or will he show us God who moves with consummate skill to trouble our souls with testing and trials?

God is at work to bring the family together once again. But He will not do so without settling those matters of sin. But trials must come to test these brothers, to awaken and trouble their souls.

The structure here is in seven scenes making up a four-fold parallelism.

At Home in Troubling Circumstances (v.1-5)

Confrontation over their Purpose (v.6-17)

Confrontation over their Proof (v.18-25)

At Home with Troubling News (v.26-33)

How does guilt function in a time of trial and testing? Maybe there are broken family relationships that need exposing to trials so that suave, unaffected consciences will become so troubled that they will seek forgiveness at the cross and peace in reconciliation.

Their Terrible Circumstances (v.1-5)

The text opens with a scene of growing desperation.

42 When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" ²And 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." ³So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. ⁵Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan.

The Famine in their Land

Genesis 41:47 sets the background. There was a worldwide famine. Egypt had set aside an immeasurable trove of food. The Pharaoh had put Joseph into charge of collecting and distributing the grain. Joseph, who was a son and brother in this family, had been sold into slavery and eventually promoted to the vice-regency through his God-given skills and gifts. Now, all over the world, hopeful eyes and hungry bellies are turning to Egypt and making the long trek there for food.

The Fear in their Hearts

The news of the bounty in Egypt comes to Jacob, the patriarch's ears. The dialog here shows the fear in their hearts. The sons are afraid of Egypt. The father is afraid that some misfortune will happen to the last son of his beloved wife as he believes happened to Joseph.

But they must go or they will starve and die. So, ten of the brothers begin the journey to Egypt leaving the youngest, Benjamin at their father's knee.

Their Alarming Confrontation (v.6-17)

The long journey is hidden from our eyes. We are brought, it seems, to an open area, possibly near one of the vast granaries. There, 10 young men move in the line awaiting their turn.

The Accusation of a Crime (v.6-9)

⁶ Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." ⁸ And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. ⁹ And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them. And he said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land."

They come before a stern, powerful man bedecked with the symbols of his position and power. Neither by his name nor by his face do they know him. And so they bow to the ground, these brothers ten. But they are recognized. Joseph treats them like the strangers they had become and with hard words as befits their transgressions.

He remembers his dreams and is now seeing them beginning to unfold. So, this is not revenge. This is a wise and godly man knowing the hard sinfulness of these men, his brothers. Two have blood of a whole city and its environs on their hands. One has attempted to usurp his father's authority by sleeping with his father's concubine. One has refused to fully carry out his responsibility as a father-in-law, then had slept with his daughter-in-law thinking he was going in to a cult prostitute. All but one had intended to slaughter a brother and instead, had sold him into slavery. The sword of Joseph's sharp words is intended to pierce callused and hardened hearts.

He accuses them of being spies. They are here pretending to buy food. But they have actually come to see the effect the famine is having on Egypt. He knows this is not true. But he is moving to see what they will say.

The Protests of their Innocence (v.10-11)

Listen to their words.

¹⁰ They said to him, “No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹ We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies.”

Hear the shock. Sense the fear. Can't you see them pressing their faces ever harder into the ground? What does this Egyptian know? Why would he say such a thing? We are not spies. We are just brothers from Canaan. We have come to buy food. We are honest men.

The Test of their Statements (v.12-17)

Of all the things these brothers may be, they are not honest men. Joseph knows this.

¹² He said to them, “No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see.” ¹³ And they said, “We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan, and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is no more.” ¹⁴ But Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you. You are spies. ¹⁵ By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶ Send one of you, and let him bring your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. Or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.” ¹⁷ And he put them all together in custody for three days.

So, he again asserts his allegation. As if to prove their innocence, they fill in more details. They are from a family of twelve brothers. One has been left at home. One is no more – ah, what irony that the brother that is no more is the very one standing before them.

Joseph is probing their character while he is proving their story. If they are who they say they are, then send one of them back home and bring this little brother back to Egypt. If they can do this, then he will accept their story. Joseph well knows that Benjamin is not among them because of Jacob's fear that something will happen to him. What are these brothers going to do? He knows Jacob will never send Benjamin. And who to send that will have creditability when he returns and tries to tell Jacob what has happened?

He then puts them in custody for three days. Surely this is in the very same prison he was incarcerated in. Wonder what they are thinking? Can't you just hear the fearful whispering? What an awful situation they are in.

Their Awakened Consciences (v.18-25)

Three days they wait. Maybe they are going to die. What will they propose if the Egyptian leader insists on what he has demanded?

The Probing of their Hearts (v.18-20)

¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ if you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰ and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die.” And they did so.

Joseph meets with them and probes their heart deeply. He does so first by a startling announcement. Because he fears God he is going to change what he has commanded. This is stunning. He does not just fear “the gods”. He is not a religious or superstitious man. He is a man who fears Elohim. He, the Egyptian lord who stands before them as a God-fearer. What astonishment had to rush through their hearts! How would he even know, much less fear the God of Abraham, Isaac, and their father? What humbling because in all their protests of

innocence and honesty, they have never invoked the name or character of the God this Egyptian knows and reverences.

He also probes their heart by seeing what they will do with a different demand. They can live, load their caravan with grain and go home to their father – all but one. They must leave one of the brothers as a hostage, if you will. He will be the surety, the guarantee that they will return and when they do, they must bring the younger brother with them. As one who fears God, he will not be responsible for the death of the brothers nor the starvation of the whole household. But will they leave one of their number in Egypt. You bet they will (v.20b).

The Stirring of their Guilt (v.21-22)

²¹ Then they said to one another, “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. 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.”

Ah, the voice of Joseph’s pleas so many long years ago are still ringing in their ears. They would not listen to the distress of his soul; now, they must endure the distress of this situation. They see this as a punishment – they draw a direct line from their sin to this trouble. Joseph had begged them to let him go with many pitiful cries. They would not listen. Who is going to listen to their cries for mercy?

Reuben steps forward to pound the nails home. This may be self-justification. More likely, it is vain regret. Hadn’t he told them not to sin against Joseph? Hadn’t they not listened to his voice of reason and right? Now, it is time to pay. Now is the reckoning. They will know now by personal experience the terrible price of justice.

The Binding of their Brother (v.23-25)

Joseph understands what they have been saying.

²³ They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. ²⁴ Then he turned away from them and wept. And he returned to them and spoke to them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. ²⁵ And Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, and to replace every man’s money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. This was done for them.

They had been speaking through an interpreter. What a shock it would have been if they had known that their regret and recriminations were plainly heard and understood. Joseph left the room and wept. He has known these long years of pain and suffering, yet has remained faithful to God and tender toward others. And now, they have not only bowed their heads to the younger brother, but they appear to be beginning to bow their hearts to the Lord.

But, he will carry through with his plan. He takes Simeon out of the group and then, with an evocative reminder, he binds him up and takes him away. He orders that their bags be loaded with grain and when they are not looking, their money as well. In a final act of faithfulness and tenderness, he provisions for their journey home.

Their Troubling Concerns (v.26-38)

I am sure their hearts were heavy with many troubling concerns. What would father say? Will Simeon be OK? What are we going to do if we have to return? Who was that Egyptian anyway? Should we not fear the Lord as he does?

Their Disturbing Discovery (v.26-28)

Well, the first evening stop came.

²⁶ Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. ²⁷ And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money in the mouth of his sack. ²⁸ He said to his brothers, "My money has been put back; here it is in the mouth of my sack!" At this their hearts failed them, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?"

They prepared to feed the donkeys. One of the brothers opened the bag of grain and there was his bag of money! He ran to his brothers, trembling with fear. If this is discovered, they will be accused of being thieves as well as spies. They know the mighty hand of the sovereign God is against them. They are afraid and well they might be.

Their Faithful Report (v.29-34)

When they arrived at home, they tell Jacob all that has happened.

²⁹ When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰ "The man, the lord of the land, spoke roughly to us and took us to be spies of the land. ³¹ But we said to him, 'We are honest men; we have never been spies. ³² We are twelve brothers, sons of our father. One is no more, and the youngest is this day with our father in the land of Canaan.' ³³ Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, and take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. ³⁴ Bring your youngest brother to me. Then I shall know that you are not spies but honest men, and I will deliver your brother to you, and you shall trade in the land.' "

Now, most of us would be tempted to shade the story some way. But they faithfully rehearse what has happened, yet don't highlight the trouble Simeon is really in. This is evidence of repentance. The last time the brothers were in front of Jacob, they had been carrying a bloody robe and telling an awful lie. Now, they are telling the truth.

Their Father's Distress (v.35-38)

So, they begin to empty their sacks.

³⁵ 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."

Out pours the grain. Out thumps the bundles of money. What a shock! They had not checked all the rest of the bags. Every single bag of grain had its bundle of money wrapped in it. Do they remember the 30 pieces of silver they got as a brother's price?

Then the piercing words of a father's grief and accusation. He has lost his children. Joseph is no more. Simeon is no more. And now they want to take Benjamin away. But Reuben steps up in what appears to us to be a foolish promise and pledge. "Dad, I will take responsibility for Benjamin. If we don't bring him back, then you can kill my two sons." Well of course. This is just going to bring peace to Jacob's heart.

But Jacob will have none of it. They are not going to take Benjamin down to Egypt under any circumstances. Jacob is basically consigning Simeon to his fate. They had better hope the famine does not hold. Otherwise, a very hard decision is just a few bags of grain away.

Reflect and Respond

In conclusion, Kent Hughes is so helpful on this text.

"Joseph's brothers were wracked with guilt that, in the context of the Bible, put them in the way of grace. This was good guilt, healthy guilt, graced guilt. Without guilt there could be no forgiveness and no resolution. And without guilt they could never assume their covenant mantles." [Hughes, *Genesis*, p.497]

So, we see the movement of God's grace to break hardened sinners and bring them to repentance.

There is guilt, fear, and sorrow.

There is an awareness of sin and guilt before God.

There is fear over judgment and consequence.

And there is deep heart grief and sorrow over the offense against God and others.

These graces then overflow in the grace of repentance.

As you come to know your Bible better and walk with God more, you may be wrestling with guilt. This is a good thing. This is a grace. When we sin and sense guilt, feel accusing of God in our consciences, this is the very grace of God to us. Do not reject it. Do not drown it. Do not deny it. Acknowledge your guilt and the sin it is accusing you of. Confess your sin to the Lord and those you have directly sinned against. Turn away from your sin. Then, forgiven, your guilt will be turned to gladness.

So, may I ask a blessing on all of you this morning:

May God grace you with guilt over your sins, with sorrow and with fear so that you will turn to your Redeemer and find forgiveness of sin, freedom from sin and its guilt and fullness of joy.