

Navigating Family Conflict

Session 6

November 17, 2024

Joseph and His Brothers: Family Reconciliation

The Point: Forgiveness can lead to family healing and restoration.

Session Passages: Genesis 42:3-5,21-24a; 45:1-5

Genesis 42:3-5

Connection to the Point. The crisis of famine brought the brothers before the brother they sold into slavery.

Setting. Having been sold by his brothers, Joseph ended up in Egypt where he was thrown in prison after being falsely accused of sexual advances toward Potiphar's wife. Through all his adverse circumstances, however, the Lord was with Joseph. While Joseph remained in prison, two of Pharaoh's officials offended the king and were placed in the same prison. The chief cupbearer and the chief baker each had a dream. Giving credit to God, Joseph accurately interpreted each dream. He requested the cupbearer, whom Pharaoh restored to his position, to remember Joseph to Pharaoh. However, the cupbearer failed to do so until two years later when Pharaoh experienced troubling dreams. Joseph successfully interpreted Pharaoh's dreams to indicate seven years of great abundance in Egypt followed by seven years of famine. Joseph advised Pharaoh to set a discerning man over Egypt to prepare for the coming famine, and the king selected Joseph as second-in-authority. The seven years of abundance ended and the famine began. When Jacob learned food was available in Egypt, he sent his sons to buy grain, setting the scene for the brothers to encounter Joseph.

Ten of Joseph's brothers/Joseph's ten brethren (v. 3). Jacob had twelve sons by his two wives—Leah and Rachel—and their two maids. Joseph's ten brothers whom Jacob sent to Egypt to buy grain were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun (Leah's sons), Gad and Asher (sons of Leah's maid Zilpah), and Dan and Naphtali (sons of Rachel's maid Bilhah). The ten brothers did not include Joseph and Benjamin, the sons of Jacob's favored wife Rachel. The patriarch kept his youngest son, Benjamin, the only remaining son of Rachel as far as he knew, at home lest calamity befall him. The ten brothers became leaders of ten of Israel's twelve tribes. Actually thirteen tribes made up the later nation of Israel because Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's two sons, each became the leader of a tribe. Jacob adopted these two sons of Joseph as his own (48:3-6). The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh took the place of a Joseph tribe. Only twelve tribes received tribal inheritances in the promised land. The priestly tribe of Levi did not. Rather the Levites were placed in forty-eight Levitical cities throughout the land.

Grain/Corn (v. 3). The Hebrew word translated *grain/corn* comes from a verb meaning "to purge" or "to separate" in the sense of winnowing. It can designate various kinds of grain. Common grains in the Old Testament world included wheat, barley, spelt, and millet. The King James Version typically translates the word as "corn," which in the English of that time did not mean maize but rather any grain. Wealthy individuals made bread from wheat, while poor people used coarse barley. Grains of wheat are hard and dry and easily preserved in storehouses (Gen. 41:49). Wheat, an annual crop, grew about three feet high although primitive varieties could grow taller in rich soil. Barley, a grain with a shorter stalk, could grow in poorer soil than wheat. It ripened earlier than wheat. It was sometimes roasted and eaten as parched grain (Ruth 2:14). Barley also was used as fodder for cattle. Wheat and barley straw that remained after threshing might serve as fuel.

Benjamin (v. 4). Joseph had eleven brothers. Rachel, Jacob's preferred wife, had given birth to two of them—Joseph and Benjamin. Rachel had died while giving birth to Benjamin. With her last breath, she had named her son Ben-oni, meaning "son of my sorrow." Jacob, however, called him Benjamin, meaning "son of the right hand" (35:16-20). When Jacob sent his other sons to Egypt in search of grain, he declined to send Benjamin out of fear that some harm might come to this only remaining son of Rachel. Recalling his own devious behavior related to Esau, did Jacob suspect his sons of foul play regarding Joseph? In any case, he seemingly distrusted the brothers since he apparently considered them

responsible for what he believed was Joseph's "death" (42:36). The greatest sorrow a parent could experience in ancient Israel was the loss of a son (Lev. 26:22; Job 1:18-20). With a sense of powerless resignation, Jacob eventually sent Benjamin to Egypt with his brothers (Gen. 43:14). This patriarch knew the family's only hope for survival lay in obtaining grain in Egypt.

Famine (v. 5). The term identifies an extreme shortage of food. The most common cause of famines mentioned in the Bible was drought. The Scripture records famines as occurring in the times of the patriarchs, the judges, the reign of David, and the prophets Elijah and Elisha among others. Other natural causes of famine included locusts, wind, hail, and mildew. Oppressors also might destroy or confiscate food. When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem, the result was severe famine for Jerusalem's inhabitants (2 Kings 25:1-3). Famines in Israel often were severe. Some famines lasted for years. Starving people resorted to consuming such things as wild vines, animal heads, garbage, dung, and human flesh (see 2 Kings 6:24-25; Lam. 4:4-10). Some famines came as God's judgment on His disobedient people (2 Sam. 21:1; Amos 4:6). When the Lord sent famine as judgment on His people, His purpose was redemptive—to bring them back to Him (Hos. 2:8-23).

Genesis 42:21-24a

Connection to the Point. A hint of sorrow and repentance can be heard as the brothers responded to their current circumstances.

Setting. As ten of Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy food during the famine, they encountered Joseph in charge of the country. They bowed before him for he was selling grain. They failed to recognize him, but he identified them as his brothers. Joseph remembered how harshly they had treated him and determined to test these men. First Joseph accused them of being spies. Then he imprisoned them for three days. Finally, he required one of them to remain confined while the rest returned home with grain for their households. Upon their return to Egypt, Joseph required they bring their youngest brother to prove they were honest men (Gen. 42:6-20).

Being punished**Verily guilty** (v. 21). Joseph's brothers interpreted the harsh treatment from Joseph as well as the stiff demands placed on them as punishment for what they had done to Joseph twenty years earlier. Thus they acknowledged their guilt. These guilt feelings were deep as evidenced by the fact they readily surfaced after so many years. Reuben attempted to relieve some guilt by reminding the others he had told them not to harm Joseph (37:21-22). The term rendered *being punished* can also be translated "(are) guilty." The primary meaning of this descriptive word *Verily guilty* centers on guilt but moves from the action that brings guilt to the condition of guilt and then to the act of punishment. The causes of guilt may be either ritual or ethical violations of God's law. The Old Testament law provided procedures for obliterating guilt or obtaining forgiveness (Lev. 5-7).

People today sometimes refer to a principle of [cause and effect](#), often mistakenly equated with Eastern religions' belief in karma. According to many Eastern religions, the intent and actions of an individual cause or influence the future of that individual—good intent and good deeds contribute to better status in the next life while bad intent and bad deeds contribute to a poorer status. While the principle of cause and effect appears in Scripture, sometimes called the deuteronomic idea it is quite distinct from karma. This concept holds that obedience to God results in blessing, while disobedience brings punishment. The deuteronomic idea conveys a basic truth. Nevertheless, it has limitations as Job's three friends ultimately learned in their attempts to apply it to Job's suffering. Suffering with its attendant guilt feelings is not always evidence of sin. God may use suffering for other purposes including leading us to depend more fully on Him.

Deep distress**How distressed****Anguish of his soul** (v. 21). The term rendered *distressed**anguish* can refer to anything narrow, confining, or restricting. It also can designate the strong emotional response one experiences when pressed by enemies. Thus the word can describe intense inner turmoil. The deep distress inflicted on Joseph involved both physical and emotional elements. At one point they restricted his movement by confining him in a pit (37:24). Not until Genesis 42:21 do we learn Joseph at that time had pleaded with his brothers for mercy, but his pleas had fallen on deaf ears.

Joseph no doubt had experienced increasing emotional distress as he was sold to passing traders, ended up as a servant in Potiphar's house, and eventually was thrown in prison.

ListenHear (v. 21). The Hebrew word rendered *listenhear* in verse 21 differs from the term translated listen in 42:2. While in verse 2 the word serves as an attention-getter, in verse 21 it translates a common verb meaning "to hear." This verb, however, can convey subtle differences in meaning according to its context. It can mean more than auditory reception of words. For example, when the Lord reprimanded His people through the prophet Jeremiah for not listening to Him, He meant they were not obeying His commands (Jer. 7:13). When David called on the Lord to hear his prayer in Psalm 39:12, he was pleading with the Lord to answer him. And when my mother commanded, "Listen to me" using that special tone of voice, I knew she meant, "Obey me." Joseph's brothers concluded trouble had come to them because they had refused to heed Joseph's cries of distress.

WeptBegan to weep (v. 24a). Joseph struggled to mask his emotions upon hearing his brothers interpret their present situation as punishment for their treatment of Joseph years ago. Throughout the Old Testament weeping was a spontaneous and natural expression of strong emotion. The verb is used in several different contexts. First a person might cry in distress (27:38), weep in sympathy over another's anguish (Job 2:11-12), or weep over another's death (2 Sam. 1:11-12). Yet another type of weeping accompanied pleading or complaint (1 Sam. 1:10-11). The Old Testament also reveals that people wept in repentance (2 Kings 22:18-20) or for joy (Gen. 46:29). The Lord has promised that in His new creation "the sound of weeping and crying will no longer be heard the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying" (Isa. 65:19).

Genesis 45:1-5

Connection to the Point. Joseph's revelation of himself to his brothers shows a heart of forgiveness.

Setting. Joseph still felt the need to test his brothers. Therefore, he required Simeon remain imprisoned in Egypt until the others came back with Benjamin. Joseph also ordered each brother's silver returned in his sack of grain. When the brothers lodged for the night, their discovery of the silver added to their fear and guilt. Jacob became emotionally distraught when he learned Simeon had been imprisoned and Benjamin must accompany the others on their next trip to Egypt (Gen. 42:24-38). After Judah promised to assume responsibility for Benjamin, Jacob finally relented for Benjamin to go. Jacob insisted his sons take double the silver as well as gifts for the man in charge. Joseph had the petrified brothers brought to his house for a meal (43:1-34) and arranged one final test. As the brothers prepared to return home, Joseph's steward placed his master's silver cup in Benjamin's sack. After the brothers left, Joseph sent his steward to retrieve the silver cup. When the cup was discovered in Benjamin's bag, the brothers refused to desert Benjamin. Judah pleaded to remain as a slave in Benjamin's place. Thus the men successfully passed Joseph's test (44:1-34).

ComposureControlRefrain (v. 1). After Judah's plea on Benjamin's behalf, Joseph lost control. The verb more literally means "restrain himself" or "be strong." Previously Joseph had been able to mask his emotions (43:30-31), but he no longer could upon hearing Judah's self-sacrificial offer. Joseph was emotionally overwhelmed by this proposal.

All his attendantsAll them that stood by him (v. 1). As second-in-authority in Egypt (41:39-45) and the prime minister at the head of the administrative bureaucracy, Joseph's responsibilities would have included superintending the land and supervising the judicial system. His power would have extended throughout Pharaoh's realm. Joseph also oversaw stockpiling excess grain in store cities in preparation for the coming famine (vv. 47-49). Such responsibilities necessitated attendants to fulfill specific duties.

TerrifiedTroubled inat his presence (v. 3). The verb depicts the brothers' initial response when Joseph revealed his identity. The term characteristically expresses the emotion of someone confronted with something unexpected, disastrous, or threatening. The verb can mean either "to alarm" or "to hurry." Both meanings come together in the related noun often rendered "sudden terror." In the majority of passages where the noun occurs, God is the agent who

brings terror on His people. The verb elsewhere expresses the panic that seizes an individual surprised by obvious doom (Judg. 20:41). The brothers could not comprehend what Joseph's revelation of his identity might mean for them since they had previously treated him so brutally.

Come near to me / Come close to me (v. 4). Why would Joseph issue this command? One reason might be so he could speak to his brothers more intimately. The brothers had not knowingly seen Joseph since he was seventeen (37:2). He had become second-in-authority in Egypt at age thirty (41:46). Additional years had passed as Joseph had prepared for the famine during the seven years of abundance. When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, five more years of famine remained (45:6). Thus some twenty plus years had passed. Furthermore, Joseph appeared Egyptian in dress, language, and social customs.

Be . . . grieved / distressed (v. 5). The Hebrew verb can express both physical pain and emotional sorrow. As a term of physical and mental discomfort, it appears in a variety of contexts. The form of the Hebrew verb in Genesis 45:5 usually depicts mental and spiritual anguish. Elsewhere this verb identifies Jonathan's grief over Saul's shameful behavior toward David (1 Sam. 20:34). Because Joseph recognized that God was in control and had sent him to Egypt to preserve life, he could act compassionately toward his brothers.

Angry with yourselves (v. 5). The verb rendered *angry* more literally means "to burn." It always appears in reference to anger. The term differs from other words for anger in that it emphasizes the kindling of anger like the kindling of a fire or the heat of that anger, once it is kindled. The word can refer to either the anger of human beings or of God. In the context of Genesis 45:5 Joseph attempted to calm his brothers' fears by encouraging them to look at events in light of the bigger picture of God's purpose. Joseph's counsel reveals his great spiritual insight and maturity. He graciously invited his brothers to put their past behind them.

God sent / did send me (v. 5). Joseph chose to view his experiences from a divine perspective. He could forgive his brothers because he could see God's purpose behind his years of hardship in Egypt. The verb often describes someone dispatching another on a mission. When Jacob sent Joseph on a mission to check on his brothers (37:14), unknown to Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers, God was sending Joseph on a mission to save many lives. Years later when Jacob died, Joseph comforted his fearful brothers by reminding them that God had planned his coming to Egypt. This forgiving brother spoke kindly to his previous persecutors and promised to care for them (50:20-21). The Lord often sent people on official missions as His representatives. He sent Moses to bring His people out of Egyptian bondage (Ex. 3:10). He sent His prophets to repeatedly warn His people of coming judgment (Jer. 7:25). Through Isaiah the Lord promised to send His Messiah "to heal / bind up the brokenhearted" and "to proclaim liberty / to freedom for the captives" (Isa. 61:1; see Luke 4:18-21).

To preserve life / save lives (v. 5). This phrase translates a single word in the original Hebrew. Some Bible scholars view it as a figure of speech for the grain Joseph had stored to sustain existence during the famine. In any case Joseph recognized his God-sent purpose as enabling his family as descendants of Abraham and Isaac to survive the famine. In Genesis 45:7 Joseph identified Jacob's family as a remnant. This significant Old Testament term refers to a smaller surviving group of His people through whom God would eventually work to send the Messiah.