

"A Time of Testing"
Genesis 42:1-45:15
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Have you ever lived with a nagging secret? Let me share a secret that was told to me during a short-term mission trip to Honduras with a Lutheran group. It wasn't the most hospitable place due to gang activity in the area; however, we didn't experience any threat to our wellbeing during our daily service to the gang-infested community of Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. In the evening, we returned "home" to a facility with a locked gate and a man standing guard at that gate. Although we heard gunshots throughout the night, we never felt that we were in danger because when we were not serving the community, we were sheltered and protected in our "home."

We became a rather tightknit group. We shared stories around the campfire even though we had no campfire. This is where the story of the secret comes in. One of the pastors of the church shared a secret that ate him up until he confessed his sin. As an altar boy, he and his cohorts in crime drank the wine that was stored and used for communion and then refilled the bottles with water knowing that God would change the water into wine as told to us in John 2:1-11. Well, God did not choose to turn the water into wine in this case. The mystery of the communion bottles went on for some time while the altar boys kept this secret that continued to gnaw at them. This case was solved only after the altar boy - now pastor - "came clean" and confessed his sin. He kept this experience in his memory bank and it served him well as a reminder that he never wanted to keep such a secret again.

Ten of Joseph's brothers lived with a terrible secret for 20 years. It is probable that they never talked about it, but I'm sure that it never left them. You know the story. They had sold their brother Joseph into slavery to Ishmaelites who took Joseph to Egypt. They lied that an animal had killed him as they presented his blood-stained coat to their father, Jacob. Here is a good time to point out that sometimes Scripture refers to Jacob and other times calls him Israel. Keep in mind they are both the same man.

I am sure that none of us can imagine being part of this kind of horrible deception. I am also sure that any mention of Joseph or Egypt brought back the feelings of guilt to his brothers. They needed to be set free from the power of their terrible secret, and what a story of familial forgiveness and reconciliation unfolds as our Lord orchestrates situation and events in the lives of Joseph and his family members.

We will pause along the way and take a deeper look at mankind's guilt, God's guidance and provision, forgiveness, and reconciliation working in the lives of this family. Throughout this saga, we will recognize ways God uses evil to further His holy plan. As we take a deeper look at this reality story, we will gain more appreciation of God's power not only to design, but to implement a plan in which even the weather patterns respond.

Ultimately, we will celebrate God's great power to use evil for His glory as we learn more about the God of reconciliation.

Mankind's Guilt and God's Provision

Most scholars agree that it was in year one of the famine that Jacob, now Israel, shared with his sons that he had learned there was grain in Egypt. And so, we read in Genesis 42:1 that he asked his sons, "Why do you just keep looking at one another?" Jacob told them to go there and find some grain for them; so, "they would live and not die."

When Jacob asked that question, he may have noticed the strange expression on his sons' faces when the word "Egypt" was mentioned. The brothers knew it was likely that Joseph was sold as a slave there. I wonder if their conscience gave them pause anytime the names of Egypt or Joseph were mentioned.

Ten sons of Israel went to buy grain among those who journeyed, for the famine had spread to the land of Canaan. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother. Jacob demanded that his youngest son be left behind since he was the only son he had from his beloved and now deceased wife Rachel.

The famine was not only a world problem, but for Jacob, it was also a family problem. Of course, the famine was not a good thing, but God used it to further His plan. God can and does use material needs, and lack of them, in our lives to motivate us to do things we normally would never do. Normally, the brothers would never travel to Egypt, but need drove them there.

After the promised seven years of plenty, the years of famine came upon the Middle-Eastern world, but, thanks to Joseph and God's provision, there was abundant grain in Egypt. God had sent Joseph ahead to preserve his family so that one day the nation Israel could give the world Jesus Christ, the "Bread of Life."

Through an incredible series of events, Joseph had become Prime Minister of Egypt – Number Two to Pharaoh himself. Of course, it was Joseph who controlled the grain distribution to all the people of the land. And so it was that his ten brothers traveled to Egypt in search of grain and ended up bowing down before their brother with their faces to the ground. The Bible tells us that Joseph recognized his brothers immediately, but they did not know him. It was then that Joseph remembered his dream.

Verse 6 records the fulfillment of Joseph's first dream from Genesis 37:4-8. That Joseph's brothers bowed down to him fulfills the sheaves of Joseph's dream bowing down to his (37:7). When Joseph's brothers plotted murder against him and sold him into slavery, they did it with the specific intention to defeat his dreams. Instead, by sending Joseph to Egypt, they provided the way the dreams would be fulfilled.

Joseph acted like a stranger to his brothers speaking roughly to them. He interrogated them and accused them of being spies who were there to find where the land was unprotected. Joseph's strategy suggests that he was testing his brothers to force them to confront their sin and repent of it. It's also possible that Joseph was concerned about the welfare of his brother, Benjamin, and wanted to know if his other brothers were treating Benjamin as poorly as they treated him. The fact that he spoke to them in anger may not have been an act. He certainly had a right to be angry with them. Joseph may have been frustrated in wanting to reveal his identity, but he knew that his brothers were not yet ready for the truth.

The brothers explained who they were and that they were only there to buy grain. Joseph continued to accuse the brothers of being spies and he came up with a way to test them. He would send one of them back to get Benjamin, while the other nine brothers languished in prison.

Some people will argue that Joseph should have immediately revealed himself to his brothers and brought about “instant reconciliation.” True reconciliation, however, requires sincere repentance and humble confession of sin and that often it takes time for one person, let alone ten people, to get to that place mentally. Insincere repentance leads to an experience that isn’t reconciliation at all, but only a fragile truce. God had to bring Joseph’s brothers to the place where they admitted the evil things they had done to their brother and their father.

I believe that Joseph would have revealed himself to his brothers right then and there, but God recalled the dreams to his mind and guided him to be an instrument for the correction and restoration of his brothers.

God sometimes uses ways we might think are harsh to call us to go to where He wants us to be. We must never resent it, because it was the hardness of our hearts that demanded it. I am reminded of Psalm 119:67 which tell us, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.”

After spending three days in prison, the brothers were willing to accept Joseph’s terms for their release from prison. Joseph told the men that if their story was true, one of them would return to their homeland and bring their youngest brother to him. That action would validate their story.

As soon as the men processed this information, Joseph changed the test. The terms of the test morphed into the following: one brother must stay behind in prison while the other brothers were to take grain to their starving households. But Joseph remained inflexible about seeing the youngest brother before they were to receive any more grain. They must bring the youngest brother to appear before Joseph. He told them, “If you do this, you shall not die.”

Confession and Repentance

This whole experience brought the ten men to the place where conviction was starting to germinate in their hearts. Without knowing that Joseph could understand them, they discussed their own cruelty and hardness of heart. Reuben didn’t solve the problem by saying, “I told you not to do it,” but unwittingly he informed Joseph of his kindness in trying to rescue his helpless brother (37:21-22). Reuben was sure that Joseph was dead and that divine judgment was imminent, for he said, “Now comes the reckoning for his blood (42:22). One commentary tells us, “a guilty conscience sees every trouble as sin’s penalty” (Enduring Word).

At this point, Joseph’s emotions came out, so he left the room and wept privately.

This seems to be a good time to recap the deceitful plan Joseph had developed: 1) He gave the men the opportunity to experience being confined under guard for three days. This gave them time to think and come to the conclusion that God was dealing with them because of their sins (42:21). 2) He imprisoned one of his brothers, Simeon, as a supposed “hostage” until his absent brother Benjamin could appear in Egypt. 3) Joseph secretly returned the money used to purchase their grain to the brothers’ bags. 4) Joseph kept his own identity from them by using his second language, all the while hearing perfectly well their own expressed fears.

When these nine brothers arrived home and explained everything that happened to their father, they were desperately confused. But father Jacob was not confused at all. When his sons told him the terms of sale, Jacob wouldn't budge. No way would he surrender the young Benjamin to this Egyptian leader's examination, or even to the sorry band of sons who had allegedly lost Joseph to a wild beast so many years before.

It looked like a stalemate--stubborn souls refusing to confront their secret fears--until hunger, that great persuader, drove them toward compromise and compliance.

Examining how the brothers processed their guilt caused me to consider the way that I struggle with guilt. In fact, this seems to be a problem for many of us as evidenced by the fact that the United States government has a "Federal Conscience Fund," which collects money people send in because they know they cheated the government in some way. People have sent in money because they took army blankets for souvenirs, for cheating on postage, or on income tax. It appears that our consciences are notoriously weak or corrupt. One man wrote the IRS and said, "I cheated on my taxes and can't sleep at night. Here is a check for \$100. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest I owe." Would that it would be so easy to rid oneself of guilty feelings.

In verse 21, the brothers 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 on us."

In these words, we see the conscience of the brothers at work. Some describe the conscience as the sundial of the soul. It tells time well enough when there is light, but in darkness it is of no use. At night, you can shine a flashlight on a sundial and make it read any time you want. When the sunlight of God's Word shines on our conscience, it is reliable and trustworthy; apart from that, it isn't always reliable.

As believers, we are blessed. According to Psalm 119:105, we can always rely on God's Word which is "a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105).

In verse 24, Joseph was overcome with emotion as he saw and understood that God was working in the consciences of his brothers. I believe Joseph understood that God had to do a deep work in the hearts of these men for relationships to be restored which would pave the way for all eleven brothers to bow before Joseph in fulfillment of his first dream.

In this situation, there could be no quick and easy, "We are sorry, Joseph!" God guided events so the brothers saw their sin clearly and repented completely before Joseph would reveal himself. That's when he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes.

We may ask, "Why Simeon?" I believe that Reuben was absent when Joseph was sold into slavery and he also attempted to save Joseph. This made Simeon, the second oldest, responsible for what the brothers did. Looking ahead to Genesis 49:5-7, we see that Simeon demonstrated a lifelong pattern of cruelty.

Let's turn our focus away from the much-maligned brothers temporarily and give our attention to Jacob and his emotional state at this point. His statement in verse 42:36 is very telling when he says, "...All these things are against me."

The Old Testament patriarchs knew deep within their hearts, in the midst of tragedy, in the face of difficulty, that God was on their side even though, at first, they may question God's goodness and mercy.

Jacob was such a man. We see how he initially deceived himself by thinking God was not working everything together for good in his own life. Upon receiving his sons' report that Benjamin would have to make the return trip if they were to receive more grain, I am confident that Jacob was shaken. He revealed his fear in potentially losing two other sons as he lamented, "Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me." At the very moment Jacob felt that he had no happiness in the present and no hope for the future, but God was working out His plan.

We know Jacob was completely wrong: Simeon would be released; Joseph was in perfect health; Benjamin would return. You just feel like saying, "Hang in there, Jacob, for one more chapter and you will see that all these things are working out gloriously."

We are reminded once again that "all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Chapter 43 begins with the statement, "Now the famine was still severe in the land." The family watched their food supply diminish and Jacob told his sons, "Go back and buy us a little more food." Judah reminded his father that they couldn't return to Egypt without taking Benjamin along. That is when Judah guaranteed Benjamin's safety.

Israel capitulated and gave his sons the instructions to go back to Egypt. He also gave directions for them to take some of the best products of the land in their bags and take them down to the man as a gift - balm, honey, some spices, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds. In addition, he told them to take back the money that was returned in their sacks which may have been an oversight made by the Egyptians. And then he, Jacob, acting more like Israel, submitted and trusted the God of his fathers as he told his sons to take Benjamin even though it grieved him.

In Genesis 43:14, Israel gave the blessing, "May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man so that he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, If I am bereaved, I am bereaved."

So, the men took the gifts and double the amount of silver and Benjamin. They hurried off to Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph.

We can only imagine how anxious Joseph must have been as he awaited his brothers' return. Simeon was brought out to them upon their arrival. Joseph inquired about their aged father. He was deeply moved when he saw his brother Benjamin and he said, "God be gracious to you, my son" (Genesis 43:29). Then Joseph hurried out and went into his private room and wept. After composing himself, he came out and ordered food to be served.

The clues that Joseph knew them were there. The men had been seated before him in the order of their ages, from the firstborn to the youngest; and they looked at each other in astonishment. Benjamin received five times the portion of anyone else's. I am sure that the brothers felt comfortable that the Egyptian ruler had taken a liking to their youngest brother.

However, this was a time of transition as the brothers moved from fear to peace. It was also a time of false joy because they had not dealt with their sins yet.

Warren W. Wiersbe tells us: "It is one thing to be relieved and quite another to be forgiven and reconciled." They needed to ask Joseph for his forgiveness.

Joseph gave instructions to the steward of his house to fill the men's sacks with as much food as they could carry and put each man's silver in the mouth of his sack. In addition, he instructed the steward to put his own silver cup in the mouth of the youngest one's sack along with the silver for his grain.

As morning dawned, the men were sent on their way. They had not gone far when Joseph said to his steward, "Go after those men at once, and say to them, 'Why have you repaid good with evil?'" (Genesis 44:4).

The men were searched and, of course, the silver cup was found in Benjamin's sack. They all returned to Joseph. The test was still in progress as Joseph told them to return home, but Benjamin must become his slave.

It was time for Judah to step up and show what was in his heart. He appealed to Joseph to allow him to bear the blame and that he would willingly remain as Joseph's slave, if he would let the boy return to his father.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

In verse 45:5, the scene is one of forgiveness and reconciliation as Joseph revealed to his brothers that he was the brother whom they sold into Egypt. He assured them they should not be distressed or angry with themselves because it was God who had sent him ahead of them to preserve life. It was God who made him a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Joseph instructed his brothers to hurry back to his father and inform him that he was alive. Since there were five more years of famine ahead of them, Jacob needed to pack up everything and move to the region of Goshen where Joseph could provide for his father, Jacob's children and grandchildren, their flocks and herds and all they owned. Joseph urged his brothers to bring his father to him quickly.

The final scene was dramatic as Joseph threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept over them. This family's story of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation demonstrates to us that God's wisdom and goodness will overcome man's evil.

Application

We know that Joseph's conduct as a servant, prisoner, and official was exemplary, but the way he dealt with his brothers and brought them to repentance was a masterpiece of spiritual insight, patience, and love. He endured much, but God was with him. Because of Joseph's faithfulness, God used His family in the founding of the great nation, Israel. In fact, it would impact all history. God used Joseph to further His plan of salvation.

Here are some lessons for each one of us to consider from this passage:

- 1) The great and glorious truth of God's providence is that He can, and does, use the evil actions of man towards us to further His good plan. This means God's wisdom and goodness are greater than man's evil (Genesis 45:5-7).
- 2) How we react to difficulties matters to God. Ask yourself this question...How do I react to hardships and unfair treatment? Am I like Jacob and say, "all things are working against me?" – Or do I react with faith and forgiveness like Joseph?
- 3) When we sin, God wants us to repent and trust that He will forgive us. If we still struggle with guilt, we need to remember that those feelings are not from God; and, therefore, have no place in a believer's heart.
- 4) Unlike Jacob and his sons, we need to turn to God in prayer especially during a crisis to know His will for us.

This brings us to the thought that until Jesus arrived on earth, man's understanding of His provision was limited. And so, we come to the Christmas season when we celebrate Jesus's birth. The world knows it as the season of peace and joy; or at least that it should be.

How lovely it is that we can turn to this season with all of its wonderful sights, sounds, and aromas that remind us of home and days gone by. God wants us to enjoy all of that, but we mustn't let that distract us from the angels' announcement to the shepherds long ago. It was a message of celebration, salvation, and reconciliation. I believe God still wants us to hear that message today!

Let's, by all means, **celebrate** the advent of Jesus Christ who entered the world to take away the sins of all those who accept Him as their Savior. Yes, this was God's plan all along: to offer **salvation** to anyone who believes in His son as Messiah, Redeemer and Savior! When Jesus gave up His life on the cross, He provided us with the way we would be **reconciled** to His Father who hates sin. And why would Jesus die for sinners like us? ... Because He **loves** us more than we know.

In the angels' announcement to the shepherds, God communicated three things: celebration, salvation, and reconciliation. What is he communicating to you this Christmas?