

Setting the Stage for Reconciliation

Genesis 42:1-38

We live in a world at war, a nation divided and communities torn by violence. Sadly, the church has often done more to fuel the flames of the fire than to bring understanding and healing. Where are the peacemakers? Where are those willing to do the hard work of tearing down the walls of division and create conditions necessary for reconciliation? More importantly, who knows what is required before the process can begin? Where are the peacemakers? Our culture is so saturated with violence that, when I searched for images of “peacemaker” to illustrate my message, all that came up were images of guns and superheroes who kill people.

Perhaps Joseph can enlighten us, as “reconciliation” becomes our theme for the next three chapters (Gen 42-43)—121 verses. The amount of material the Scriptures devote to it suggest two things: first, how important the work is to God and the extreme measures he will go to in order to bring it about; and second, how complex and difficult the process can be. Authentic reconciliation requires extreme discernment, sensitivity and most of all, patience.

Last week we examined Joseph’s amazing exaltation. Having been forgotten in prison for thirteen years, he was elevated to second-in-command in Egypt. The patriarch declared that so sweet was this act of God, it made him forget all the pain he associated with his family (41:51). But did Joseph really forget, or did the ache for his father and brothers still reside deep within him? And what about his earliest dreams? Would they ever be fulfilled? How would God get the rest of Jacob’s family to Egypt, especially when Jacob’s father Isaac was warned never to go there (26:2)?

But, God is able. In the story of Joseph and his brothers, it is God who initiates the reconciliation process by means of a worldwide famine. Bruce Waltke calls this one of God’s “severe mercies”.¹ Surprisingly, Jacob’s family undertakes not one, but three journeys to Egypt. Each describes a necessary stage in the process of reconciliation. The first has an inverted structure. Death frames the chapter (42:2, 36-38) and, at the center, we find Joseph’s brothers in prison.

Literary Outline

A Leaving Canaan: Jacob speaks to brothers (42:1-4)

*"so that we may live and not **die**"*

B The journey to Egypt to **buy grain** (42:5)

C In Egypt: First audience with Joseph (42:6-16)

tension: accused of being spies

X Brothers in **prison** for three days (42:17)

C' In Egypt: Second audience with Joseph (42:18-25)

tension: Simeon incarcerated

B' Returning to Canaan (42:26-27)

money returned in mouth of sack with **grain!**

A' Return home: Brothers speak with Jacob (42:29-38)

*"his brother is **dead**...you will bring my gray head down to **the grave** in sorrow"*

I. Leaving Canaan: Jacob Sends Ten Sons to Egypt (42:1-5)

1 When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" 2 And 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." (Gen 42:1-2 ESV)

Jacob once again re-enters our story. Although he is quite old, he still carries the patriarchal authority and, in that role, is the initiator of the early action. He chides his sons for their lack any initiative to deal with the famine. Appealing to their need for survival, he orders them to go to Egypt to get grain so that they "may live and not die." Just as famine has a way of bringing nations together, death has a way of bringing even estranged families together.

3 So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. 4 But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. 5 Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan. (42:3-5)

One might expect that Jacob would send all of his sons on the journey to bring back as much grain as possible, but he keeps one behind. It is Benjamin, the youngest, Rachel's only other son. The narrator allows us a rare look into Jacob's thoughts,

explaining that the patriarch feared “that harm may befall him,” as it did with Joseph. So favoritism still prevails in this family, causing us to wonder if the family is doomed to repeated failure. But facing starvation, the narrator records no jealous reaction by the brothers. They simply obey, and leave for Egypt, setting the stage for reunion.

II. In Egypt Before Joseph (42:6-25)

A. Joseph recognizes his brothers (42:6-8)

6a Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. (42:6a)

By the time Joseph’s brothers arrive in Egypt, Joseph is well established in his rule and Egypt is bursting at the seams with foreigners lining up to buy grain. But though he has a monopoly on the grain supply, he does not use it to his own advantage by holding back reserves and driving up prices. He will sell to anyone in need. As the writer of proverbs would later reflect:

**The people curse him who holds back grain,
but a blessing is on the head of him who sells it. (Prov 11:26)**

Twenty years after Joseph’s brothers sold him to Egypt they now find themselves standing before him. But this time the roles are reversed. Now it is Joseph who holds their lives in his power.

6b 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. (42:6b-8)

The brothers bow down in humility before their brother. Joseph immediately **recognizes** (*nakar*) them and disguises himself (same word *nakar*) so they would not **recognize** him. This brothers used the same term when they asked their father to “**recognize**” Joseph’s blood-soaked tunic (37:33), as does Tamar when she asked Judah to “**recognize**” the pledges he gave her for her sexual favors (38:25-26). The theme of recognition plays a huge role in these stories. Whoever possesses this “knowledge” definitely has the upper hand.

With his brothers before him, Joseph remembers his dreams (37:5-9). Waltke suggests, "Even as Pharaoh's dream of abundance and famine formed the basis of Joseph's strategy to save the world, so his dream that his entire family would bow to him probably inspires him to develop a strategy that will bring all of them as a reconciled family to Egypt."²

B. Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies (42:9-17)

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." 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." (42:9-11)

Joseph does not drop his guard until he determines whether his brothers are trustworthy. He interrogates them, accusing them of being spies seeking out "the nakedness of the land," suggesting that they are violators of the worst kind. The probing accusation is designed to bring truth to the surface. Joseph desperately wants to know about his other family members. In their innocence they anxiously protest that their motive is solely to buy grain, and that they are not a regiment of spies, but brothers all from one father. Their logic being "a family does not risk almost all of its sons in the dangerous venture of spying."³ Pressed against the wall of accusation, they claim to be a family rooted in honesty and brotherhood, a far different look than twenty years earlier.

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." (42:12-13)

The grilling goes on. The harder Joseph presses his accusation, the more family details emerge. Now he learns they are twelve brothers from Canaan and the reason not all are present is that the youngest remained at home, and one is (literally) "no more". They assume Joseph is dead but can't bring themselves to say it. The irony is that the twelfth one, whom they think is "no more," is standing right in front of them.

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. (42:14-17)

Now Joseph becomes even more intense. He doesn't know if he can believe them. Perhaps out of jealousy they had killed Benjamin, just as they had thrown him in a pit. So he sets up a test to determine the truth. He will incarcerate all of them while one of them is allowed to return home to get their youngest brother. As he shuts the prison door, it closes with the ominous threat of "by the life of Pharaoh." Their lives are hanging in the balance. In that culture suspects were considered guilty until proven innocent. For three days Joseph's brothers remain in prison with the words "your youngest brother" echoing in the chamber. One wonders if this was the same cell in which Joseph was incarcerated for twelve years.

But surprisingly, after three days, Joseph's countenance lifts and the terms of departure change drastically.

C. Joseph's lightens the burden (42:18-24)

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. (42:18-20)

After only three days the prison doors are opened. Instead of detaining nine brothers and allowing only one to return home, Joseph requires only one to remain behind. The rest are free to go and take the needed grain home to feed their families. Joseph says he changed his mind because he fears God, demonstrating he is not motivated by revenge. Though the brothers might think Joseph fears one of the gods of Egypt, his words should have jarred their memories, reminding them they did not "fear" the one true God when they took no mercy on Joseph in the pit, and then

deceived their father. Joseph's desire is that they might have life, but what now stands between life (vs. 18) and death (vs. 20) is the return of their youngest brother.

Joseph's wise strategy works brilliantly.

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." (42:21)

For the first time we learn that after Joseph was thrown into the pit he pleaded for mercy, but his cries fell upon deaf ears. Now those cries, buried for twenty years, are reawakened. Brueggemann describes the terrible tyranny of guilt that enslaved these brothers for two decades:

They are bound by their initial act against Joseph. The resulting deception of their father lies at the bottom of everything. The brothers have no room in which to act, no energy for imagination, and no possibility of freedom. They are bound by the power of an unforgiving past, immobilized by guilt, and driven by anxiety. Their guilt and anxiety can surface neither in the presence of the father nor in the presence of Joseph.⁴

Joseph's words unlock their past. Gripped by their corporate guilt, they look at each other and confess their longstanding sin. The process of "recognition" is now beginning for them. They are beginning to decipher God's hand orchestrating events so that each man is receiving back his due.

But the sweet atmosphere of remorse is broken by the firstborn's accusations of blame.

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." (42:22)

This is the first time we learn that Reuben challenged their plan but was not a strong enough leader to prevent it. Now he tries to step out of the circle of responsibility, pointing his finger of blame at his brothers, like an adolescent who cries, "I told you so!" While they are speaking, Joseph is listening to every word. Until this point he probably had blamed Reuben, the firstborn, for what had happened.

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. 26 Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed.(42:23-26)

Until now the narrator has withheld the information that Joseph was speaking Egyptian through an interpreter. This gave the brothers liberty to speak freely about their emotions. As they confess, Joseph is so moved that he must turn away to weep. Waltke commends Joseph's spirit: "As the brothers own up to their crime against him, he does not gloat but weeps (42:24)...Joseph will subsequently weep three more times (43:30; 45:2, 14-15). Joseph's tactics are harsh, but his emotions are tender."⁵ After composing himself, Joseph "selects Simeon because he now realizes the responsibility for selling him into slavery fell upon the second-oldest brother."⁶ He "bound him before their eyes"—another reminder of their guilty past. How different the look in their eyes now from twenty years earlier, as one of their brothers is bound against his will and separated from rest.

But Joseph is still not finished. Now he introduces the final note of guilt from their family history—money.

III. Return Trip Home from Egypt Gen 42:25-38

A. Money discovered en route 42:27-28

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?" (42:27-28)

Joseph sends them home in generosity. They not only have abundant grain for their families, but their traveler's checks are returned! When one of them discovers the money on their way home, their hearts literally "came out of them," leaving them trembling, united by their collective guilt.

With this move Joseph has made it all the more difficult to prove their innocence. If they go back now, they run the risk of not only being suspected as spies, but thieves. And, with Benjamin in tow, the whole family is at risk. On the other hand, what price are they willing to pay for their brother? If they choose to remain at home, Joseph has

made them wealthy. They have every reason not to return to Egypt. With these troubling thoughts running through their minds, the stunned brothers travel home to their waiting father.

B. Joseph's brothers face their father (42:29-34)

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.'" (42:29-34)

The brothers relate the events to their father Jacob but omit their imprisonment and confession, knowing that would have only increased his pain. Brueggemann notes how guilt has harnessed them to their painful past:

As a result, the brothers are excessively concerned for the safety and well-being of their father and Benjamin. Having falsely grieved their father, they must be on continual guard that they do not add to his grief (44:30-34). Because they could not believe the dream, they are forced to treat father Jacob as though he were the last generation who must be kept alive and unharmed for perpetuity. They cannot see themselves as a generation of promise-bearers.⁷

Jacob has no response to these new events. But as the brothers begin unpacking all the silver spills out of each man's sack.

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. (42:35)

Jacob sees the money. It has guilt written all over it. Waltke comments,

Up to this point, Jacob probably found their story credible. The money, however, makes them look guilty, especially since he probably knows that they are not always trustworthy. Does Jacob think they sold Simeon? The money in the sack widens the breach between Jacob and his sons but binds the sons more closely together.⁸

Jacob does not wait for an explanation to indict his sons.

C. Jacob's adamant refusal 42:36-38

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." (42:36)

Jacob, now consumed by the unthinkable, cannot hide his suspicions. He suspects Simeon has suffered the same fate as Joseph, and it is their fault. The thought of taking Benjamin down the same path pushes his grief over the edge. Self-pity consumes the patriarch, robbing him of any faith to see beyond his own needs. At this dark moment, Reuben clumsily attempts to assume leadership.

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." (42:37)

Reuben tries to console his father with the utterly stupid suggestion that the loss of Jacob's two sons could somehow be compensated for by the death of his own two boys, as if his sons were not Jacob's grandsons. Typically, Reuben is well meaning, but lacks the wisdom to lead this family.

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." (42:38)

Jacob will not even consider letting Benjamin return to Egypt. In the patriarch's words, he is the "only son" he has left. If something should happen to him, his life would be meaningless. That is quite a statement to make in the presence of his other sons. To Jacob they are non-sons. It is obvious that twenty years have not changed his penchant for divisive favoritism. As head of the home, he has apparently halted the process of reconciliation. The story seems deadlocked in a power struggle between a

father in Canaan and a son in Egypt. Who in this family will be able to break the paralysis? One thing is certain: if these brothers are ever to be reconciled, it will have to be in spite of, not because of, their father. As for Joseph in Egypt, and Simeon in prison, all they can do is wait.

What can we learn from these opening scenes in the process of reconciliation?

IV. Reflections on Reconciliation

A. Faith to “recognize” God at work

In this story we learn that Joseph’s exaltation in Egypt was designed not just to save a gentile nation from starvation, but ultimately to bring about the reconciliation of Jacob’s family to God and to one another. To bring this about God used drastic “means” to achieve “good” ends. “God, through the famine, initiates the saving process by forcing the family to confront their past and each other.”⁹ This is not the last time God will use a famine to reconnect different parties. In the book of Ruth, famine is the means for redemption (Ruth 1:1); in the parable of the estranged prodigal son it is the spur that causes him to return home to his father (Luke 15:14); and in the book of Acts, God used widespread famine in Judea to unite the Gentiles with their Jewish brothers and sisters (Acts 11:28; see also 2 Cor 8–9).

This indicates how important the work of reconciliation is to God. He will use such severe measures to create the stage where once estranged parties can meet face to face. And just as the threat of death frames the chapter, so also does God often use “death” to bring estranged families together. So the exhortation to us is to open our eyes to the work of God in such times for healing.

When innocent people are forced to leave their homes to escape horrific violence, whether it be in Central America or Syria, and show up at your doorstep, we should not interpret this as a threat, but as an opportunity for the kingdom. In the midst of the Covid crisis, we who have a surplus of vaccines and oxygen should send our money and surplus to those who are being buried by the crisis, like India.

B. Patience knowing it can be a lengthy process

Reconciliation can be a lengthy and complex process. This is especially true when one party has suffered abuse. It’s not simply a matter of forgive and forget. Before Joseph is willing to let his guard down, he has to determine if his brothers are trustworthy. It is essential that Joseph’s brothers taste the fruit of their own deeds by

being placed into the same circumstances into which they had placed Joseph. These also are “severe” measures imposed by Joseph, but they are ultimately designed for his brothers’ transformation. Every detail in the story—the accusation of being “violators,” their time in prison, the binding of Simeon, and the returned money—reawakens their conscience to such an extent that they “recognize” the powerful hand of God orchestrating events. Finally, as they can no longer bear the weight of their guilt, they “come to their senses” (Luke 15:17) and openly confess their sin “unknowingly” before the very brother they wronged. Their open confession of guilt, and newfound empathy for their brother, begins to unite them as brothers. This could not happen overnight. It takes time for God to orchestrate life so that the guilty parties might walk in the shoes of those they wronged. This is what creates genuine repentance.

This does not imply that we should not take immediate action to seek forgiveness when we have wronged others (Matt 5:24; Eph 4:3). It does suggest, however, that we should not impose repentance and reconciliation on those who have wronged us without the sensitive leading of the Holy Spirit to prepare the way. So our text not only calls for faith, it reminds us to be patient and allow God to prepare the stage. Finally, our text inspires us with courage to be part of the process.

C. Courage to be part of the process

I find it amazing that Joseph’s wisdom is so refined he seems able to do things that only God can do. Who but God would have the insight and authority to orchestrate life in such a way as to “test” and “refine” the hearts of men? In this he serves as a type of Christ, who also would be rejected by his family, betrayed for silver, and given over to death on a cross. And yet, because of God’s faithfulness, Jesus, like Joseph, would survive the pit and be exalted first among the kingdom of the Gentiles, in the ultimate hope that one day he would also reconcile his own family, the Jews. It was the recognition of this pattern of reconciliation that gave Paul the courage to go to Gentile nations with the gospel. For he says, “Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” (Rom 11:13-15). Paul went to the Gentiles, knowing that his work was orchestrated by God to make the Jews jealous and to reconcile them back to God.

And now God gives us this same ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-21), to tell the world that he has not counted their trespasses against them. And in sharing Christ with the world we do so not just in the hope of individual conversions among the nations, but in the hope of one family, Jew and Gentile, fully reconciled by our Savior. Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God. Amen

¹ Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 550.

² Waltke, *Genesis*, 543.

³ Waltke, *Genesis*, 546.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (INT; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 337.

⁵ Waltke, *Genesis*, 543-44.

⁶ Waltke, *Genesis*, 547.

⁷ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 337-38.

⁸ Waltke, *Genesis*, 549.

⁹ Waltke, *Genesis*, 549.