

Troubled Souls in Testing Trials

Genesis 42

Introduction 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 new born 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.

Note: The structure here is in seven scenes making up a four-fold chiasm.

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)

This is Mother's Day. Most messages preached today will be sweet and soothing. But this is the text today for us. 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.

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, a son and brother in this family who had been sold into slavery and eventually promoted to the vice-regency through his God-given skills and gifts, into charge of collecting and distributing the grain. 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)**

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 calloused and hardened hearts.

He accuses them of being spies. They are here pretending to buy food. But they have actually come to see the affect 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. 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? They are not spies. They 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. 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)

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)**

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. 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.26-33)**

I am sure their hearts were heavy with many troubling concerns. What would father say? Will Reuben 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. 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. 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. 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.

Lessons

In conclusion, consider two important things that 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 fullness of joy.

