

Joseph Remembers – Joseph Forgives. Genesis 42: 1-25

Introduction adapted from Turning Burdens Into Bridges by C. Philip Green @ SermonCentral.Com

Sometime ago, an ad appeared in a Kansas newspaper, which read: **“We will oil your sewing machine and adjust the tension in your home for only \$1.”** (Leadership, Fall 1986, p.46). Wouldn't that be nice to find a way to adjust the tension in our homes or in any of our relationships? While there are no quick fixes, the tension in our relationships CAN be adjusted but it will take **effort** and most importantly **the ability to forgive as well as be forgiven.**

Speaking of needing some forgiving and healing, today's story finds the tension in Joseph's family resurfacing 22 years after he had lost any hope of repair. Busying himself being the savior of Egypt and surrounding nations, Joseph had almost forgotten how he got there until his ten betraying brothers showed up in the crowd asking for food.

By now I hope you have reread the story of Joseph as it is recounted in Genesis chapters 37-50 and have gotten a more adult understanding – more than you ever got in Sunday school – of the reasons behind his travails in Egypt. Joseph's forced journey and rise to power were all a part of God's plan to get the entirety of Jacob's family down to Egypt where in 400 years' time, they could grow into a nation strong enough to return and occupy the Promised Land.

Let's recap Joseph's story thus far. Being jealous of his privileged status in the family and his dreams of one day all of them bowing down to him, Joseph's brothers first thought of murder, but instead sold him into slavery. They then thought nothing of breaking their father Jacob's heart as they next lied about Joseph's violent death: torn to pieces by a wild animal. But what they had never even dreamed possible, was that first as a slave and then as a prisoner in Egypt, God was with Joseph all along the way and prospered everything he did.

Until one day Pharaoh had a troubling dream of seven fat cows being eaten by seven scrawny cows who looked none the healthier following their meal. When none of his regular soothsayers could interpret the dream, Joseph was brought in. He told Pharaoh the dream had been a message from God, that after Egypt enjoyed seven years of bounteous crops they would need to be ready for seven years of an all consuming famine. Impressed with Joseph's wisdom and godliness, Pharaoh immediately made him second in command over all of Egypt, tasked with the job of preparing the nation for the future. Joseph was 30 years old at the time.

Now nine years later and two years into the famine for which he had wisely prepared, Joseph is not only feeding all of Egypt, but also selling grain to the surrounding nations. That is when his brothers showed up. Though he immediately recognized them, there is no way they would ever recognize this 39-year-old all powerful Egyptian nobleman --

who seemed strangely curious of their family details -- as once being their 17-year-old brother whom they had cruelly tossed into a pit.

As they bowed down to him, faces to the ground, scripture tells us that Joseph ***remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them*** (Genesis 42:6-9).

Now comes the part of his story that I never fully understood until now. At this moment of recognizing and remembering, Joseph had a decision to make: either to seek revenge or restoration.

- He could have immediately brought down his wrath upon them either killing them or making them all slaves – as they had once thought of doing to him. But Joseph was still a godly man in success as he was in his trials, seeking not revenge but restoration of his lost family.
- So he could have chosen to immediately reveal himself to them and get on with the family reunion, but how would he know if they had ever changed from the dishonest and cruel brothers who had so casually thrown him away.
- Thinking quickly, Joseph instead launches an intricate masquerade – somewhat paralleling his own struggles – to see if the ensuing years had brought about any repentance, any change for the better in his brothers.

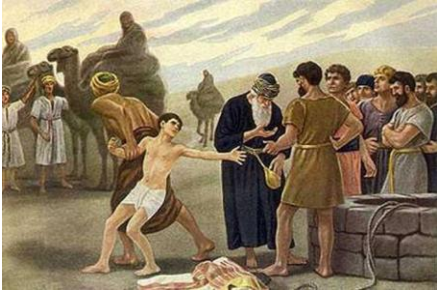
First, he treats them harshly, accusing them of being spies ... as they had once done to him. As he had once begged them, they now respond to him seeking mercy, claiming to be honest men only wishing to buy food for their hungry families; twelve brothers from the same father – though one was “*no more.*” So while they were not yet ready to admit it, their guilt over betraying Joseph had never been far from their thoughts. Joseph then proposes a test. On the surface it is to see if they are spies when in actuality it is to see if these 22 years of guilt had changed the brothers for the better.

Then, he throws them in prison for three days so they could taste a bit of despair before releasing all but Simeon to go home and come back with their youngest brother Benjamin to prove their innocence. Which will be very difficult because, even though Benjamin is now around thirty years old, father Jacob still will not let him travel for fear of losing this last child of his beloved Rachel. Joseph has Simeon bound in front of their eyes, telling the brothers that they would not see their brother or him again if they do not return with their youngest.

The commentators can only guess why Joseph chose to keep Simeon in prison.

1. Since Reuben had tried to save Joseph from the others’ murderous plans perhaps this is how he could show gratitude to his oldest brother.
2. Perhaps Simeon, Leah’s second born, was the most hardened of the brothers, quick to deceive and slaughter innocent people, so some extended months in prison might do him some good (cf Gen. 34).
3. But most importantly, keeping Simeon gave the brothers an opportunity to consider whether to permanently abandon another brother, or to risk returning simply to save him. It was in being forced to leave Simeon behind that the

brothers finally own up to their mutual guilt for abandoning Joseph so many years ago.



They said to one another, 'Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us.' Then Reuben answered them, 'Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.' Genesis 42:21-22.

Little did they know that Joseph was listening every word they spoke.

Back home, learning of Simeon's imprisonment and their money mysteriously reappearing in their bags, while still unknowing of the brothers' guilt, father Jacob concludes that God is punishing him for past misdeeds – *all this has happened to me* (42:36), and adamantly refuses to let Benjamin go on the next trip as had been demanded by the Egyptian noble.

But eventually the food runs out and they must either go back for more grain or abandon Simeon to his fate while they starve. Judah (Leah's 4th born son) offers father Jacob his own life in guaranteeing the safe return of Benjamin. So, grudgingly their father agrees and the brothers fearfully return to Egypt, bringing Benjamin along with a caravan of gifts and double the silver to convince that Egyptian noble of their honesty.

Arriving back in Egypt with Benjamin and being told not to worry, that their mysteriously reappearing money was a gift from God, Simeon is then released and the brothers are now treated as honored guests, mysteriously being seated according to their birth order for a fancy meal in which the nobleman gives Benjamin five times more food than to the older brothers.

Why was such special attention given to Benjamin? Joseph wanted to see if they would again become jealous of their youngest brother and more readily abandon him in the next test.

In the morning, Joseph sends them away, again with their money, and all the grain they can carry, along with his personal drinking cup hidden in Benjamin's sack. After letting them go just a short way, he recaptures them accusing them of the cup's theft. The brothers all boldly swear their innocence by offering if it is found, that the cup's thief could be put to death and the rest of them enslaved for life.

When the cup is found in Benjamin's sack, they tear their own clothing in grief – as they had once torn Joseph's cloak from his person. Then all the

brothers return to Egypt expecting to now live the rest of their life as slaves. But Joseph tells them that, himself being a God fearing man, he intends only to keep Benjamin as a slave and will let the rest of them go free; thus giving them another opportunity to save their own lives at the expense of a brother ... however, this time they refuse to leave.

Admitting their guilt, convinced that God, in this way, was punishing them for their earlier sin against their brother Joseph – still not recognizing that this Egyptian noble is their brother – Judah offers himself to stay in Egypt as a slave for life if only the Egyptian will let Benjamin return home so that their father may not die of grief.



At this point Joseph can no longer continue the masquerade. Convinced of their true repentance for their earlier sins, and that they are changed people, now concerned about further grieving their father, he reveals himself to them. Weeping and sending all the other Egyptians out of the room he calls out to them: ***I am Joseph. Is my father well?***

But his brothers are now so dismayed that they cannot even answer him.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (Genesis 45:4-8)

Then they all hug and weep together so loudly that it can be heard throughout Pharaoh's palace. Joseph then sends everyone home with huge wagonloads of supplies and gifts for the whole family, along with instructions to pack up everybody and everything and return to live in Egypt because there yet remains 5 more years of devastating famine.

Having arrived back home with all the gifts, Benjamin and the strange news that Joseph is not only alive and well but living as a ruler in Egypt and bids them all to come to him, Jacob replies, *'Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die (45:28).*

Thus Jacob's entire family – as earlier prophesied – moves down to Egypt where in 400 years time God will grow them into a nation. There yet remains a little more of Joseph's story which we will get to next week, but this is enough for now.

So today, what lesson can we take for ourselves from this portion of Joseph's story?

God had brought Joseph and his brothers together physically. Now He needed to adjust their tension, bringing them together emotionally as well, so God used a severe famine to do so. You see, when **God wants to bring people together, He often uses adversity.**

A biologist was studying an ant that was carrying a piece of straw. It seemed such a big burden for the ant, but the ant struggled on with that burden. Then the ant came to a crack in the ground that was too wide for it to cross. It stopped for a while, as though pondering the situation, then placed the straw across the crack and walked on over.

That ant's burden became a bridge, and that's what God can do for us if we trust Him to do it. If we want our broken relationships to be restored, then we must... **rely on God to turn our burdens into bridges.**

Trust the Lord to use adversity to bring you together. Whatever you do, don't let your burden become a barrier that separates you from others, and don't use adversity as an excuse to sever your relationships. Instead, trust God to turn your burden into a bridge to those who right now seem so far away.

Do you now find yourself going through a rough time? Then trust the Lord to use this adversity in your life to mend your broken relationships. Rely on God to turn your burden into a bridge of reconciliation you never thought possible before.

This is often how broken relationships are restored, but that's only the first step. For in order for broken relationships to be truly restored, you must not only rely on God, you must also... **recognize your own sin.**

Realize the wrongs you yourself have done that led to the breaks in your relationships. Admit your own shortcomings, because true reconciliation comes only when there is a true confession of your own offenses. That's what Joseph's brothers learned with Joseph's help.

The brothers finally admit their sin, that's what you must do if there is going to be healing in your relationships. In order for true reconciliation to happen there must be a true confession of sin; there must be an open and honest recognition of your own guilt.

But confessing our own sin is hard to do, isn't it? We would rather put ourselves in Joseph's place than admit that we're more like his brothers.

In their book, "Intimate Marriage," Howard and Charlotte Clinebell tell the story of a woman who acquired a lot of wealth and decided to have a book written about her family history. She engaged a well-known author to write the book; and in the course of his research, he discovered that one of her grandfathers had died in the electric chair at Sing Sing prison, a place that houses the worst of criminals in all of New York State.

When he told the woman that he would have to include this in the book, she pleaded with him to say it in a way that would hide the truth. So when the book came out, this is what it said: "One of her grandfathers occupied the chair of applied electricity in one of America's best known institutions. He was very much attached to his position and literally died in the harness." (Harold and Charlotte Clinebell, *Intimate Marriage*, p.93)

It's hard to face the truth, especially when it's the truth about yourself. But until you do, there can be no reconciliation and healing of your relationships.

You see, you can have all the answers in the world, but the answers do you no good if you don't know you have a problem. You need to recognize the problem before you can apply the solution and you need to recognize your own sin before you can pursue the healing of your relationships.

This is the same way we are reconciled to God. The Bible says, "*If we confess our sins, He who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9). We have to first admit our own sinfulness before God and throw ourselves on His mercy. Then, and only then, do we find that God loves us and wants us to be in relationship with Him forever.

Jesus told the story of two men praying on the temple steps. One being a very religious person was thanking God that he was not like all those other sinful people. The other man simply prayed, "**Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.**" Jesus said only "this man went home justified." (Luke 18:9-14).

A right relationship with God begins when you admit your own sinfulness before God, and a right relationship with each other begins in the same way. When your relationships are broken, you have to admit your own faults if you're going to see those relationships made right again.

Somebody wisely said, "**Many reconciliations have broken down because both parties have come prepared to forgive and unprepared to be forgiven.**" The point is: you must come prepared to do both – to forgive AND to be forgiven.

If you want your broken relationships to be restored, then 1st, rely on the Lord to turn your burdens into bridges; 2nd, recognize your own sin. And finally, if you want true healing in your relationships... **repent of your sin.**

Be grieved enough to turn from your sins with God's help. Experience a remorse that actually leads you to change your attitudes and actions.

This portion of Joseph's story is full of sorrow and fear and that's a good thing, because it is leading Joseph's brothers into a real change of attitude and behavior. What we see here is a *godly sorrow which brings repentance*, and that's what it takes to see healing in our relationships (2 Corinthians 7:10). Like Joseph's brothers, you must be sorry enough to turn from your sins.

Some time ago, a pig traveled on a six-hour US Airways flight from Philadelphia to Seattle, and he didn't ride coach.

Two passengers convinced the airline representative that the pig needed to fly with them as a "therapeutic companion pet" – like a seeing-eye dog – so the pig was permitted to sit with them in the first-class cabin of the plane.

Passengers described the 300-pound pig as "enormous, brown, angry, and honking." He was seated in three seats near the front of the plane (with his companions), but the attendants reportedly had difficulty strapping him in: "It became restless after takeoff and sauntered through the cabin." One passenger said, "He kept rubbing his nose on people's legs trying to get them to give him food and stroke him."

When the plane landed, things only got worse. The pig panicked, running up and down through economy class squealing. Many passengers, also screaming, stood on their seats.

It took four attendants to escort the pig out of the airplane, and then he escaped when they reached the terminal. Fortunately, he was later re-captured.

When asked to comment on the story, US Airways spokesman David Castelveter said, "**We can confirm that the pig traveled, and we can confirm that it will never happen again.**" (Associated Press story, Chicago Sun Times, 10-30-2000, p.1-2; www.PreachingToday.com)

That's true repentance – being sorry enough that, with God's help, it will never happen again. It's not enough just to say, "I'm sorry." It's making the commitment to change whatever may have caused damage to the relationship.

True healing in your relationships begin only when, in reliance upon God, you recognize your own sin with a remorse that leads to full repentance.

Are you in a broken relationship today? Then trust the Lord, admit your sin, and change. Gain forgiveness and then forgive. It's that simple, but it is profoundly powerful in restoring broken relationships anywhere – in your home, at work, in the church, or in the community. Try it on one of your broken relationships, and you will be amazed at what God does to “adjust the tension” in that situation.