

Genesis 42 — The Grace of Guilt

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None of us like that guilty feeling. Sometimes people are take drastic measures to make that feeling go away. One of the more humorous ways this happens is when people feel guilty for cheating the government. The U.S. treasury has three gift funds. One them is called the Conscience Fund. If you successfully cheated the government, you can give a gift to this fund to ease your conscience. The fund was first created in 1811 and since then it received \$5.7 million in anonymous contributions. That is a lot of guilt.

Donations to the fund vary in size. A 9-cent donation was made by a man in Massachusetts when he felt guilty for reusing a 3-cent stamp twice. One man in Jersey City sent in donations of \$40,000 in several installments. Most gifts to the conscience fund are anonymous. They are often given through pastors who receive deathbed confessions. Those dying want to make things right before they take their final breath. By the way, if any of you would like to make a deathbed donations to the Conscience Fund through your pastor, I am glad to help. I only charge a 10 percent handling fee. To ease my conscience, I put all the money in my children's college fund.

Probably the most famous contribution to the Conscience Fund was accompanied with a letter that read, "Dear IRS, I have not been able to sleep because I cheated on last year's income tax. Enclosed is a cashier's check for \$1,000. If I still can't sleep, I will send you the balance of what I owe."¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscience_Fund

While I suspect none of us have written a check to the Conscience Fund, all of us have experienced that nagging feeling of guilt over words we said, things we did or people we hurt. All of us know what it feels like to have a guilty conscience that won't go away.

If you search the Internet or turn to popular psychology, many articles tell us guilt is a problem. We need to beat it by constantly saying positive affirmations to ourselves. We need to learn to ignore guilt. It serves no purpose. We need to make it go away.

Today, we will see something different. Guilt is a gift. It is a gracious gift of God that is used by the Holy Spirit to leads us to repentance over our sin before God, and God uses it to restore relationships.

If you were with us for the last few weeks, you know we are studying Genesis and the life of Joseph. Joseph's life was a roller coaster. At first, everything went wrong. He was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. While working as a slave for a man named Potiphar, Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and she tried forcing herself on him. When he said, "No!" and chose purity instead of adultery, she falsely accused him of rape. He landed in jail for a crime he didn't commit. Just when it seemed like life couldn't get worse, he served a high-profile prisoner that worked for Pharaoh. He was Pharaoh's cup bearer. Joseph cared for his needs and, with God's help, interpreted his dream. When the cup bearer was released from prison, he forgot about Joseph for two years. Joseph's hopes for release were destroyed.

Last week, Joseph's life changed. It happened in one day. Pharaoh couldn't find anyone to interpret his nightmares of skinny cannibal cows and skinny cannibal corn. At that moment, the cup bearer remembered Joseph. Joseph was called upon to interpret the dream. After Joseph gave God's interpretation of the dream, Pharaoh instantly moved him from the dungeon to the throne room and made him second in command of Egypt. He went from living like a troll in a dungeon to the second most powerful man on the planet, in one day.

Even though Joseph was the second most powerful man on the planet, and it seemed like everything was perfect in his life for the next eight-nine years, there was still a problem — the broken relationship with his family. Not only was Joseph separated from his family but his brothers were still carrying the guilt of what they did to him. Today begins the story of how God puts together a broken family. We will see how God used the gracious gift of guilt to help this family face its past and come back together.

Let's jump into Genesis 42 where we will learn some lessons on how guilt affects our lives and how God uses it for good.

When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" 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." So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan. Genesis 42:1–5 (ESV)

It was approximately 22 years since Joseph was sold into slavery. For the last 22 years, every time travelers came from the land of Egypt and visited the

home of Jacob and his sons, the sons held their breath as the traveler shared about life in Egypt around the campfire. They knew it was a slim possibility, but in the back of their minds they were haunted by the thought of a traveler saying they met a slave in Egypt that called Jacob and his family home. If that happened, the cover on their 22-year lie would be blown open. For 22 years they laid in bed hoping and praying that Joseph would not earn his freedom and come home. Can you imagine how hard it was for 10 brother to keep a lie for 22 years?

For 22 years they saw their father going into his tent picking up that blood-stained coat of many colors, which was the last thing he had from his son's life. As he grieved Joseph's disappearance repeatedly, big tears rolled down his cheeks as he sobbed. Every time his sons saw him mourning Joseph's death they knew the truth. They knew Joseph was alive and where Dad could find him.

They managed their lie for 22 years until the famine forced them to face it. There was no food anywhere. Dad heard there was food in Egypt. For some reason, whenever father Jacob talked about the food in Egypt, his sons changed the subject. His sons kept looking at one another whenever Egypt was mentioned because it obviously made them uncomfortable. Finally, when the entire family was down to 5 percent fat, Jacob couldn't stand it any more. "Why do you guys keep looking at each other? Go down to Egypt and buy food so we won't die."

Do you think that after his sons lived a lie for 22 years, Jacob began to suspect he didn't have all the truth? I think he knew something was up but he couldn't put his finger on it.

I think this was apparent when he said the one son not heading to Egypt for food was Benjamin. We can see that when we look at the Hebrew word Jacob used for his reason to keep Benjamin behind. It was not because Benjamin was too young to travel. He was approximately 24. Jacob said he feared *harm* might happen to him. This word harm could also be translated as *mischief*. He feared something mysterious would happen to Benjamin on the trip and he wouldn't get the truth.

There is a great point of practical application in this.

Application: If we don't confess the sin of our past, the guilt of our sin will affect all our relationships.

No matter how much we think we can manage our guilt, no matter how much we think we can keep it compartmentalized, whenever the subject of our Egypt comes up in conversation, people will feel the conversation go flat and know something is wrong. If we don't confess our sin, and we try to hide our sin people around us will still be able to feel something is wrong.

This morning, if you are like Joseph's brothers, and there are people in your life you sinned against but you haven't tried to make things right, know others will feel it. If you have sinned against your spouse by the things you look at on the television or the Internet, you can't hide your guilt. Your spouse will feel your guilt. If, in frustration, you are a wife that joins other ladies in husband

bashing at the local coffee shop, your husband will start to feel it. He will know something is wrong.

I urge you to repent. Confess your sin to the person you hurt.

Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. 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." And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. 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." They said to him, "No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies." Genesis 42:6–11 (ESV)

As I was thinking about this, it occurred to me that Joseph's brothers were not the only ones wrestling with the pain from 22 years before when Joseph was sold as a 17-year-old into slavery. For the last nine years of his life, Joseph was the second most powerful man on the planet. At any time, he could have sent an entire Egyptian army to search for his brothers and father if he wanted to restore the relationship. When the famine came on the land, at any time he could have sent a caravan of supplies to the land of Canaan in search of his family members to help them survive the desperate times. He didn't.

The pain of his past was so hurtful that he left it alone. He never faced it and never in compassion used his power to help his family.

Some Bible commentators say Joseph had already processed his grief and was in complete control of this situation when his brothers unexpectedly showed up in his office asking for food. Talk about this in your Life Groups. I know some of you will not agree with me. That is OK.

I think the wounds of Joseph's past were so painful that when his brothers showed up asking for food, in that moment he was emotionally overwhelmed. I think the reason he was harsh with them was because he was also dealing with the pain of his past. That doesn't mean Joseph didn't love his family. It is very hard when someone in your past hurts you to not pick up the relationship up in the same emotional state you left off. If you don't understand this, it is probably because you were never deeply hurt.

If you have seen the movie Unbroken you know what I am talking about when it comes to forgiving those who hurt you. Louie Zamperini struggled to forgive the Bird. Like many of you, I have people in my life that hurt me and my family. Even though some of those painful relationship go back over a decade, I suspect that if they showed up unexpectedly in my office, my heart would be pounding through my chest. The things they said and how they hurt my family were too painful. I think that was Joseph in that moment.

It was also especially hard for him when his brothers said they were honest men. Joseph knew the truth. He knew Reuben was guilty of incest. He knew Simeon and Levi were mass murders of the Shechemites. The last words he heard from them was their laughter as they sold him into slavery. They may not have been spies but they were not honest men.

Application: When facing people that sinned against us in the past, ask God for grace to control our emotions.

I see this many times in marriage counseling. Sometimes couples can't have a civil conversation because as soon as someone slightly offends the other

spouse, it immediately taps into the pain of the past and things spin out of control. I want to blow a whistle like a referee and say to them, "Let's deal with one issue at a time. I know there is a lot of history here. I know it is hard but ask God to give you grace to not respond from anger in the past when you are in the present."

He said to them, "No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see." 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." But Joseph said to them, "It is as I said to you. You are spies. By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. 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." And he put them all together in custody for three days. On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: 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, and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they did so. Genesis 42:12–20 (ESV)

After Joseph accused them of being spies, I love the way they described their family. They were 12 brothers. The youngest was at home with Dad and one was no more. What happened to him? Was he abducted by aliens? They claim to have no idea what happened to him.

Here is the interesting part. After 22 years, don't you think they would call themselves the 11 brothers, not the 12 brothers with one missing? This shows us that for 22 years they never forgot him. For 22 years, while they had their father thinking he was dead, they were ever mindful that he was alive.

Joseph decided to be harsh with them and to test them. I think Joseph put them through hard times to see their character. He wanted to see if they changed.

At first, he put them in prison for three days and initially said only one of them could return. Then, after three days, he changed his mind and decided to keep only one of them in prison and let the rest of them return.

Why did Joseph change his mind? I think that after three days he had a change of heart because God used the gracious tool of guilt. His brothers' families were starving. Allowing only one man to carry food back would not work. They needed more men to carry more provisions for their families to live. God, in his grace, left Joseph feeling guilty for overreacting in his moment of anger. While it was still appropriate to test his brothers' character, his anger would have led their families to starve in the test.

Application: God graciously leaves us feeling guilty for overreacting in anger.

Each of us have situations in life where our tempers flare. Maybe it was at your children. When my kids were younger, I found it easy to overpunish them in frustration. Later, I still needed to punish them but not in a harsh overreactive way. Maybe you were in a meeting and you became upset. In anger the words you said to others were harsh and overstated. There was no love or kindness involved. It is not that your point wasn't true, but the harshness of the way you made your point was overdone. God graciously uses guilt to lead you to repentance. Maybe in your marriage when it is late and you are tired you find yourself out of frustration saying some of the most unloving things.

God in his grace will often convict us of guilt the next day and he uses guilt as a tool to prompt us to make things right. God uses guilt to lead us to repentance. Joseph's repentance allowed his extended family to live. When God

convicts you of overstating something or overreacting about something, realize our repentance is usually what God uses to restore and strengthen our relationships.

This is why guilt is something we should not ignore. It is God graciously convicting us of sin so we can seek forgiveness from our savior and other people as we make things right.

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." 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." They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. 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. Genesis 42:21–24 (ESV)

This is the center of the chapter. This is the main part of the story. What we find is for 20 years they lived with guilt over what they had done. When they came to Egypt and they were accused of being spies, it felt like God was punishing them for what they did to Joseph because guilt over what they did 22 years before to Joseph still hadn't left their minds. Reuben even threw in a jab for extra measure. "I told you not to sin against Joseph! God is punishing us!"

Sometimes when hard times come into our lives, it just feels like God is punishing us because we have guilt over a lingering issues of sin we haven't faced. Other times, God uses hardship to surface sin we haven't faced. When everything goes completely wrong in Egypt they couldn't help but think that God was trying to get their attention.

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” Hebrews 12:5–6 (ESV)

If we choose to live with unresolved issues of sin, like Joseph’s brothers, out of his love God sometimes gets our attention by disciplining us. Life may fall apart as he is forcing us to face our sin, own our sin and repent of our sin.

Application: If I don’t respond to the grace of guilt with confession and repentance, God may discipline and correct me.

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. Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. 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. 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?” When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, “The man, the lord of the land, spoke roughly to us and took us to be spies of the land. But we said to him, ‘We are honest men; we have never been spies. 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.’ 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. 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.’” 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. 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.” 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.” 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.” Genesis 42:25–38 (ESV)

At this point, their father, Jacob, was noticing a pattern. Joseph didn’t come home but the brothers’ bags were filled with cash. Now Simeon didn’t come

home and the brothers' bags were filled with cash. I think Jacob suspected they were selling one another for cash.

Notice that when the money showed up in their sacks, they didn't think the money was a gift. They immediately thought God was fighting against them for their sin against Joseph 22 years prior. They were trembling in fear.

They knew Joseph promised to test their honesty. What is the best way to test somebody's honesty? Give them cash they don't deserve and see if they take it and run or pay it back. All they needed to do was pay back the money.

Instead, they were filled with fear because they were wracked with guilt. Have you ever had that happen to you? You sinned in a big way and you were filled with guilt over what you have done and the phone rings. You jump out of your skin because you are afraid your sin was discovered.

This is exactly what happens with Joseph's brothers. What was meant as a simple test, led to a nightmare because of their lingering guilt.

Application: The guilt of our past doesn't go away with time and distance. It only goes away with confession and repentance.

It didn't matter how far away they were from Egypt when they opened their sacks of grain. It didn't matter that their sin against Joseph was 22 years old before this moment. Time and distance doesn't take away guilt. Only confession and repentance take it away.

You can move to a different city. You can take a different job. You can get a different spouse. You can change everything about yourself but the one thing

that we can't change is our guilt. The only way to get rid of the guilt is to confess it and repent of it.

In Psalm 32 David talked about what it was like after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had Uriah, her husband, murdered.

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah Psalm 32:3–4 (ESV)

For two years David's bones wasted away. He was in literal pain. Joseph's brothers felt like that for 22 years. No amount of time or space would take that away. It only goes away by confession and repentance.

Conclusion

Nobody likes feelings of guilt but guilt is not something to ignore, it is a gift from God that God uses as a tool in our lives to lead us to repentance. Guilt graciously led Joseph to repent of words he said in anger that almost destroyed his family. Guilt over the sin of the past was forcing Joseph's brother to face their sin, and not continue ignoring it like they did for the last 22 years.

Maybe this morning, as we looked at the story of Joseph, God kept surfacing to your mind something over which you felt guilt. Maybe it was sin from years before that you haven't tried to make right with God or with others. Maybe it was rash words said in anger over which you need to repent. Don't ignore that guilt. Listen to that guilt. It is grace from God designed to lead us to repentance and restoration of relationships. The hard part of the guilt of our sin is what it did to our relationship with God. Jesus died on the cross to take our guilt away. The easier part is our guilt leading us to confess our sin to one another.



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