

Joseph Tests His Brothers

Lesson Scope: Genesis 42 to 44

References in brackets refer to chapters 42 to 44 unless otherwise noted

Lesson Focus

As Joseph oversaw the distribution of grain, did he wonder if his brothers would ever appear in the ever-widening stream of foreign purchasers? Did the throngs of people who bowed in his honor remind him of his youthful dreams? Whatever his personal thoughts were in his new role, we can be fairly confident that he still keenly felt the yearnings and memories common to foreigners and the displaced.

As God revealed His sovereign purposes for Joseph, He had not forgotten Joseph's brothers. From heaven He beheld their dark secrets and the ongoing immorality of their conduct. He continued to arrange circumstances in their lives as well, to bring them back to Himself. We can see by their care of Benjamin and respect for Jacob that their hearts were mellowing as time elapsed. But the truth had not come out; issues remained unresolved in Jacob's family.

God lights the candle of each man's conscience. Through the sovereign arrangement of circumstances, He disturbs the guilty conscience and leads the responsive to repentance.

We likely have all tried to imagine ourselves in Joseph's shoes, and his conduct in this lesson holds many lessons for us. However, to understand this lesson, perhaps we ought to consider ourselves as the evil brothers of Joseph. As you prepare this lesson, consider how God has worked in your own life, using circumstances, events, and people in ways that were painful and humiliating yet, when seen in retrospect, clearly redemptive.

Joseph's example typifies the heart of God in dealing with rebellious man. God uses an extensive array of tools to accomplish His purposes. One of those purposes is redemption and restoration, a part of the work that He shares with man. We all can be Josephs in our day. "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18).

The work of redemption is painful and emotional, taking a toll on the one who oversees the process. Let us not shrink from that, but consider the eternal destinies of souls at stake. Because God is good, He cannot abide

evil. Yet He would rather destroy evil through confession and redemption than through serving justice for crimes committed.

Lesson Aim: To see how God deals with people to bring them to repentance.

Theme Verse: [Proverbs 28:13](#). He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.

Lesson Text

Confronted

[Genesis 42:6-17](#)

And Joseph *was* the governor over the land, *and he it was* that sold to all the people of the land: and Joseph's brethren came, and bowed down themselves before him *with* their faces to the earth. ⁷ And Joseph saw his brethren, and he knew them, but made himself strange unto them, and spake roughly unto them; and he said unto them, Whence come ye? And they said, From the land of Canaan to buy food. ⁸ And Joseph knew his brethren, but they knew not him. ⁹ And Joseph remembered the dreams which he dreamed of them, and said unto them, Ye *are* spies; to see the nakedness of the land ye are come. ¹⁰ And they said unto him, Nay, my lord, but to buy food are thy servants come. ¹¹ We *are* all one man's sons; we *are* true *men*, thy servants are no spies. ¹² And he said unto them, Nay, but to see the nakedness of the land ye are come. ¹³ And they said, Thy servants *are* twelve brethren, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and, behold, the youngest *is* this day with our father, and one *is* not. ¹⁴ And Joseph said unto them, That *is it* that I spake unto you, saying, Ye *are* spies: ¹⁵ Hereby ye shall be proved: By the life of Pharaoh ye shall not go forth hence, except your youngest brother come hither. ¹⁶ Send one of you, and let him fetch your brother, and ye shall be kept in prison, that your words may be proved, whether *there be any* truth in you: or else by the life of Pharaoh surely ye *are* spies. ¹⁷ And he put them all together into ward three days.

Confounded

[Genesis 42:21-22](#)

And they said one to another, We *are* verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us. ²² And Reuben answered them, saying, Spake I not unto you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and ye would not hear? therefore, behold, also his blood is required.

Genesis 44:14-17

And Judah and his brethren came to Joseph's house; for he *was* yet there: and they fell before him on the ground. ¹⁵ And Joseph said unto them, What deed *is* this that ye have done? wot ye not that such a man as I can certainly divine? ¹⁶ And Judah said, What shall we say unto my lord? what shall we speak? or how shall we clear ourselves? God hath found out the iniquity of thy servants: behold, we *are* my lord's servants, both we, and *he* also with whom the cup is found. ¹⁷ And he said, God forbid that I should do so: *but* the man in whose hand the cup is found, he shall be my servant; and as for you, get you up in peace unto your father.

Contrite

Genesis 44:18-23

Then Judah came near unto him, and said, Oh my lord, let thy servant, I pray thee, speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not thine anger burn against thy servant: for thou *art* even as Pharaoh. ¹⁹ My lord asked his servants, saying, Have ye a father, or a brother? ²⁰ And we said unto my lord, We have a father, an old man, and a child of his old age, a little one; and his brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother, and his father loveth him. ²¹ And thou saidst unto thy servants, Bring him down unto me, that I may set mine eyes upon him. ²² And we said unto my lord, The lad cannot leave his father: for *if* he should leave his father, *his father* would die. ²³ And thou saidst unto thy servants, Except your youngest brother come down with you, ye shall see my face no more.

Genesis 44:33-34

Now therefore, I pray thee, let thy servant abide instead of the lad a bondman to my lord; and let the lad go up with his brethren. ³⁴ For how shall I go up to my father, and the lad *be* not with me? lest peradventure I see the evil that shall come on my father.

Questions for Study

Confronted

1. What can we learn about Joseph's brothers in 42:13?
2. List several options Joseph had in this situation.
3. What are some reasons why Joseph acted as he did?

Confounded

4. How was Joseph's confrontation effective?
5. How does 42:17 illustrate God's working with guilty men?
6. How does 44:16 illustrate the state that precedes repentance?

Contrite

7. What did the test of Joseph's cup in Benjamin's sack reveal?

8. From Joseph's example, discuss challenges of ministering to needs of repentance and reconciliation.

Analyzing the Passage

As the years passed and perhaps under the pressures of famine when the situation became increasingly dire, the brothers reformed and became better men. Judah especially acquitted himself well in his eloquent plea on behalf of his father and in his offer to serve as slave in Benjamin's stead. However, those men had not acknowledged their sin.

Joseph illustrated the heart of God through every encounter with his brothers. He had no culpability in the breached relationship, and he possessed absolute authority over them. Likely no law in Egypt would have prevented him from taking revenge. He was within his rights to mete out justice to them. But he did not. Yet neither did he overlook their sin. He immediately proceeded to reach the core of the matter, before they knew his identity. By temporarily concealing his identity, Joseph gave time for the situation to unfold in a manner that might conclude with authentic repentance. For had the brothers realized the identity of the regent before whom they bowed, they would have been under even greater pressure and their resulting confession may not have been unquestionably genuine.

Principles and Applications

Confronted

1. God arranges circumstances to help man understand and acknowledge his need (42:6-7, 12). Man tends to comprehend his physical and material needs more clearly than his spiritual needs. The famine was more of a crisis in the minds of Joseph's brothers than their hidden sin was. With the guidance of spiritual mentors and the conscience, such disturbances as natural disasters, diseases, and someone's death can make men realize that their deepest problems are crises of the spirit rather than tangible or affecting the body. As we assist in relieving these natural crises of life, we should be alert to the greater purposes that God can accomplish as He draws men to Himself.

2. God has ways of stopping people to give time for their consciences to work (42:15-17). God gives people the privilege of choice, and the conscience is a quiet guide. So many times, the privilege of choice sets a course for ruin, and sinful men and women deal with their troubled con-

sciences by constant activity. God's ways of stopping us demonstrate His love and His willingness to intervene in humanity's blind rush to destruction.

Confounded

3. God works through the conscience to help man understand the cause of guilt (42:21-22). The brothers felt a distress more direct and keen than the discomfort of humble shepherds in the presence of supreme power. God-sent guilt reminds us of specific sins and is remedial, prodding us to repent.

4. God places in man's path authorities that must be answered to (44:14-15). Human authority helps us to comprehend our responsibility to divine authority. We tend to dislike authority, but we do this to our own detriment, as God uses it in various ways. Joseph demonstrated that God can use human authority to address both physical and spiritual needs of men.

5. The purpose of God's moving is to bring man to the end of himself (44:16). Confession and restitution wrench us emotionally, and we foolishly would do almost anything to avoid them. God helps us overcome our reluctance by making it clear that we have no other viable option.

6. God works to help man understand his accountability before Him (44:16). All sin is ultimately against God, and God will be the one who assuredly exposes it. We should consider this a blessing because all sin divides us from God. May we welcome our accountability before God so that we may escape the ultimate shame of admitting, "God hath found out [my] iniquity."

7. God allows circumstances that test a person's commitment (44:17). Promises made and obligations assumed in the heat of emotion may be proven to be nothing more than idle words in the heat of the crisis, when we finally comprehend what we were binding ourselves to. God wants us to understand ourselves as He sees us. A vow that is not paid is worse than a vow not made (Ecclesiastes 5:5).

Contrite

8. God brings man to a realization of his helplessness and hopelessness outside of divine compassion (44:18-23). In our humanity we are needy; in our sin we are lost. We tend to ignore this until we can no longer deny our desperate condition. It is then that we can realize that while we are helpless, God is good. He brings us into extremity to save us rather than to destroy or humiliate us.

9. Complete surrender and genuine openness mark true repentance (44:33, 34). So many times people talk themselves into deeper and deeper trouble. Praise God, there is a way to talk ourselves out of trouble, though it is em-

barrassing and humiliating. We all should learn from Joseph's brothers the pattern of true confession. Hold nothing back. Admit and confess everything without regard to feelings or reputation. The power of the devil is broken through confession.

Important Teachings

1. God arranges circumstances to help man understand and acknowledge his need (42:6-7, 12).
2. God has ways of stopping people to give time for their consciences to work (42:15-17).
3. God works through the conscience to help man understand the cause of guilt (42:21-22).
4. God places in man's path authorities that must be answered to (44:14, 15).
5. The purpose of God's moving is to bring man to the end of himself (44:16).
6. God works to help man understand his accountability before Him (44:16).
7. God allows circumstances that test a person's commitment (44:17).
8. God brings man to a realization of his helplessness and hopelessness outside of divine compassion (44:18-23).
9. Complete surrender and genuine openness mark true repentance (44:33-34).

Answers to Questions

1. What can we learn about Joseph's brothers in 42:13?
They were honest enough to mention the brother they had wronged. But they were willing to repeat their lie. Or else they truly believed he no longer lived, which would indicate that they expected him to die from being sold into slavery, in which case they were as guilty of murder as if they had done the deed by their own hands.
2. List several options Joseph had in this situation.
He could have taken immediate vengeance on his brothers. He could have revealed himself and mocked them for their past abuse. He could have sold them the grain and sent them on their way.
3. What are some reasons why Joseph acted as he did?
He needed time to consider the proper course of action. His deepest desire was to get to the bottom of the issue and resolve it. He would not be able to bless his family to the fullest extent of his ability until

matters were cleared.

4. How was Joseph's confrontation effective?

His brothers seem to have all sensed among themselves that this somehow was a result of their unjust treatment of Joseph. Either the guilt had become part of their personalities, or the situation created an environment where their consciences could testify powerfully against them.

5. How does 42:17 illustrate God's working with guilty men?

God has ways of slowing us down and giving opportunity for reflection and contemplation. Often the means He uses contains some irony or parallelism. Joseph had suffered many years in slavery and imprisonment. Imprisonment was the way to begin driving the lessons home to the brothers.

6. How does 44:16 illustrate the state that precedes repentance?

The brothers were brought to the end of themselves, face to face with the one they had wronged. They made no excuses and had no remaining alternative to bearing the consequences.

7. What did the test of Joseph's cup in Benjamin's sack reveal?

The brothers had mellowed and become better men. They did not resent their father's love for Benjamin as they formerly resented his love of Joseph. They kept the commitment they made to their father and refused to take a loophole that Joseph offered. They loved their father enough to be distressed at his potential bereavement.

8. From Joseph's example, discuss challenges of ministering to needs of repentance and reconciliation.

The work of mediating and restoring is painful to the one who oversees it. Love and compassion must motivate the mediator. Disciplinary action must be remedial rather than retributive in nature. Souls are saved from death, and a cycle of sins is broken (James 5:20).

Summarizing the Lesson

To the credit of the brothers, they passed the tests that Joseph placed before them. While we take our inspiration from Joseph, perhaps most of us would have to admit that too often our conduct has been more similar to the brothers than to Joseph. In those times, may we be mature enough to accept the consequences for the wrongs we have done and make the necessary amends.

Research Guide

1. Read David's confession of sin in Psalm 51.
2. Read the chapter on "Repentance" in *Doctrines of the Bible*.