

Victorious Love

Genesis 42:6-25

SS Lesson for 09/20/2020

Devotional Scripture: 1 John 5:1-5

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: Gen 42:22

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

LOVE THROUGH NOT FAILING ACCUSATIONS (GEN 42:6-17)

Accusations of motives for coming (6-8)

Motives that are against the righteous (Ps 37:12)

Motives of conspiracy (Ps 64:2)

Motives of injustice (Ps 64:6)

Motives of deception and evil (Prov 12:20)

Motives of iniquity and defrauding (Mic 2:1-2)

Accusations of deceptions (9-14)

Deception through lies (Ps 5:6)

Deception through evilness (1 Peter 3:10-12)

Deception will keep one from dwelling in God's house (Ps 101:7)

Deception by wicked men (Ps 43:1)

Deception through empty words (Eph 5:6)

Deception through human philosophy (Col 2:8)

Accusations of lying (15-17)

Lies that come from and influenced by Satan (John 8:44)

Lies that are part of the wicked attempts of the unrighteous (Ex 23:1)

Lies and false matters that should be stayed away from (Ex 23:7)

Lies that are generated against those who follow Jesus (Matt 5:11)

Lies by those who want to destroy Christianity (Matt 26:59-61)

LOVE THROUGH NOT FAILING TESTING (GEN 42:18-25)

Testing of honesty (18-20)

Honesty that comes from God (Prov 16:11)

Honesty that pleases God (1 Chron 29:17)

Honesty that God rewards (Luke 16:10-11)

Honesty that is summed up by the golden rule (Matt 7:12)

Honesty before God and man (Acts 24:16)

Honesty that is trusted (2 Cor 8:19-21)

Testing of brothers repentance (21-23)

Repentance proven by the "changing of one's mind" (Matt 21:28-29)

Repentance that is part of forgiveness (Acts 2:28)

Repentance that is a path to life (Acts 11:18)

Repentance through godly sorrow (2 Cor 7:10-11)

Repentance that God desires (2 Peter 3:9)

Repentance that leads to the truth (2 Tim 2:25)

Testing responded by mercy (24-25)

Mercy that is prompted by love (Ps 89:28-33)

Mercy that comes from serving God's purposes (Acts 13:34-37)

Mercy that endures forever (Ps 106:1)

Mercy that is shown through God's discipline (Prov 3:11-12)

Mercy that comes from God being with us (Jer 30:11)

Mercy that is commanded for Christians (Eph 4:32)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH

Reunion (42:1-7)

Confrontation (42:8-17)

Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

What's the best surprise you ever experienced? The announcement of a forthcoming grandchild? The renewed health of a loved one? A broken relationship repaired? For some, the answer will be an unexpected family reunion. Those who have been deployed for service overseas seem very happy to surprise their loved ones with an early return after a lengthy absence. Sometimes arrangements are made for the returnee to show up unexpectedly at a ball game or other public event where the person's family is in attendance. The looks of astonishment and then unbridled joy are very touching. Though families expect that their loved ones will return eventually, their reactions reveal that the emotions of an anticipated reunion are magnified when that reunion happens without warning. Part of the joy in watching such a reunion is in seeing what happens when there hasn't been time to prepare psychologically for the reunion. And so it was with Joseph.

When the Egyptians began to feel the effects of the predicted famine, they cried out to Pharaoh for relief. Pharaoh sent them to Joseph (Genesis 41:55), whom he had appointed to prepare Egypt for the years of famine. The famine, however, affected lands other than Egypt as well. As a result, "all the world" came to Egypt to buy food (41:57). Joseph's homeland was among those, and Jacob urged his sons to travel to Egypt and purchase food (42:1-2). Exactly how much of the seven-year famine had occurred before the brothers went to Egypt is not clear. Later, when Joseph revealed his identity, he told them that only two of seven total years had passed (45:6). For the first journey to Egypt, Jacob did not permit Benjamin—one of two sons of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel, the other son being Joseph (Genesis 35:24)—to go. Jacob had already lost his favorite son, Joseph; Jacob did not want to risk losing his second favorite, Benjamin (42:3-4). Thus 10 brothers traveled to Egypt without him.

Key Verse: Gen 42:22

And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not speak to you, saying, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us."

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

42:1-5. The famine was widespread; it was in **Canaan** too. So **Jacob** sent **his sons** down to **Egypt** to buy food—all his sons except **Benjamin**, for he did not want to lose Rachel's other son. His refusal to send this lad reveals what Jacob had come to suspect. Joseph's fate had not come to light, but the brothers' characteristics were known to the old man. Perhaps they would **harm** Benjamin as well.

42:6-17. Recognizing his brothers, **Joseph** tested them by accusing them four times of being **spies** (vv. 9, 12, 14, 16). He was handling them roughly (vv. 7, 30), but underneath his severity was affection, as the later reunion makes clear. Ironically the **brothers** were speaking to a person they thought was dead (**one is no more**; v. 13). Their presence in Egypt confirmed the truth of his dreams, but not their fulfillment. Joseph knew that all the family must come to Egypt under his rulership. He demanded that **one** of them bring their little **brother** as proof that they were not **spies**. Retaining them **in prison** was an interesting turn of events, since the brothers had previously put Joseph in a "cistern-prison."

42:18-24. After a three-day custody of the brothers, **Joseph** altered his plan and suggested keeping only **one... in prison** while the other nine returned. He retained **Simeon** (v. 24) while the others returned home to Canaan with **grain**. If they would not return with their **youngest brother**, Simeon would be killed. A taste of retribution began to awaken feelings in the brothers, feelings that Joseph's cries for mercy (v. 21) and Jacob's tears (37:34-35) had failed to awaken. They sensed that having to bring Benjamin back to Egypt against the wishes of their father would be punishment for their having sold Joseph. Since Jacob was still **distressed**, now *they* were in distress. As they spoke, they were unaware that **Joseph** understood **them** for **he was using an interpreter**. Seeing their sense of remorse touched Joseph and **he turned away** and wept (cf. 43:30; 45:2, 14; 50:1, 17).

42:25-28. As a further means of striking the fear of God (cf. vv. 18, 28, 35) into his brothers, **Joseph** had their **silver** (with which they had purchased **grain**) put into their sacks. Whether he meant the money to be

discovered on the way home or at home, its initial shock was effective. The sense of guilt already aroused made the group quickly see the hand of God in the governor's action. So the question, **What is this that God has done to us?** was, as far as it went, a fruitful reaction to trouble. They apparently felt that Joseph would accuse them of theft, which would support his contention that they were spies.

42:29-38. When they arrived home in **Canaan**, the nine brothers told **Jacob** what **had happened**. Jacob, grieved because he thought another son was dead (**Simeon is no more**), refused to let **Benjamin** return. **Reuben**, the eldest, sought to assure **his father** that he would bring Benjamin back. This is ironic since Reuben had failed to prevent the loss of **Joseph** (37:21-22). **But Jacob** refused to let Benjamin go. He said if something happened to his youngest, he would sorrow the rest of his days, just as he had said when he heard of Joseph's "death" (37:35). Joseph's tests were important in God's plan to bless the seed of Abraham. God planned to bring the family to Egypt so that it would grow there into a great nation. But it was necessary that the people who entered Egypt be faithful to the Lord. It was necessary that the brothers be tested before they could participate in God's blessing. Joseph's prodding had to be subtle; the brothers must perceive the hand of God moving against them so that they would acknowledge their crime against Joseph and their previous unbelief in his dreams. But one test was not enough; there must be two.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Love Through Not Failing Accusations (Gen 42:6-17)

- 6 Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the one who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.
- 7 As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he asked. "From the land of Canaan," they replied, "to buy food."
- 8 Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him.
- 9 Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected."
- 10 "No, my lord," they answered. "Your servants have come to buy food."
- 11 We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies."
- 12 "No!" he said to them. "You have come to see where our land is unprotected."
- 13 But they replied, "Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more."
- 14 Joseph said to them, "It is just as I told you: You are spies!
- 15 And this is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here.
- 16 Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!"
- 17 And he put them all in custody for three days.

Accusations of motives for coming (6-8)

Motives that are against the righteous (Ps 37:12)

- 12 The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them;

Motives of conspiracy (Ps 64:2)

- 2 Hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked, from that noisy crowd of evildoers.

Motives of injustice (Ps 64:6)

- 6 They plot injustice and say, "We have devised a perfect plan!" Surely the mind and heart of man are cunning.

Motives of deception and evil (Prov 12:20)

- 20 There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil, but joy for those who promote peace.

Motives of iniquity and defrauding (Mic 2:1-2)

1 Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. 2 They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance.

Accusations of deceptions (9-14)

Deception through lies (Ps 5:6)

6 You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the Lord abhors.

Deception through evilness (1 Peter 3:10-12)

10 For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. 11 He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. 12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

Deception will keep one from dwelling in God's house (Ps 101:7)

7 No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence.

Deception by wicked men (Ps 43:1)

1 Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation; rescue me from deceitful and wicked men.

Deception through empty words (Eph 5:6)

6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

Deception through human philosophy (Col 2:8)

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Accusations of lying (15-17)

Lies that come from and influenced by Satan (John 8:44)

44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Lies that are part of the wicked attempts of the unrighteous (Ex 23:1)

23 "Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.

Lies and false matters that should be stayed away from (Ex 23:7)

7 Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.

Lies that are generated against those who follow Jesus (Matt 5:11)

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Lies by those who want to destroy Christianity (Matt 26:59-61)

59 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. 60 But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward 61 and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"

Love Through Not Failing Testing (Gen 42:18-25)

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 stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households.

20 But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die." This they proceeded to do.

21 They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us."

22 Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood."

23 They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter.

24 He turned away from them and began to weep, but then turned back and spoke to them again. He had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes.

25 Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to put each man's silver back in his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. After this was done for them,

Testing of honesty (18-20)

Honesty that comes from God (Prov 16:11)

11 Honest scales and balances are from the Lord; all the weights in the bag are of his making.

Honesty that pleases God (1 Chron 29:17)

17 I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you.

Honesty that God rewards (Luke 16:10-11)

10 "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. 11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?"

Honesty that is summed up by the golden rule (Matt 7:12)

12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Honesty before God and man (Acts 24:16)

16 So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

Honesty that is trusted (2 Cor 8:19-21)

19 What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. 20 We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. 21 For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.

Testing of brothers repentance (21-23)

Repentance proven by the "changing of one's mind" (Matt 21:28-29)

28 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 29 "I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

Repentance that is part of forgiveness (Acts 2:28)

28 You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.'

Repentance that is a path to life (Acts 11:18)

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Repentance through godly sorrow (2 Cor 7:10-11)

10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

Repentance that God desires (2 Peter 3:9)

9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Repentance that leads to the truth (2 Tim 2:25)

25 Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,

Testing responded by mercy (24-25)

Mercy that is prompted by love (Ps 89:28-33)

28 I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. 29 I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure. 30 "If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, 31 if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, 32 I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; 33 but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness.

Mercy that comes from serving God's purposes (Acts 13:34-37)

34 The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: "I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David." 35 So it is stated elsewhere: "You will not let your Holy One see decay." 36 "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. 37 But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

Mercy that endures forever (Ps 106:1)

106 Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Mercy that is shown through God's discipline (Prov 3:11-12)

11 My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, 12 because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

Mercy that comes from God being with us (Jer 30:11)

11 I am with you and will save you,' declares the Lord. 'Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you but only with justice; I will not let you go entirely unpunished.'

Mercy that is commanded for Christians (Eph 4:32)

32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Reunion (42:1-7)

While the famine was said to be world-wide (41:57), it was particularly intended to be the cause of Jacob's family going down into Egypt where they would remain for more than 400 years:

And God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years" (Genesis 15:13).

The events of chapter 42 are thus the occasion for the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham:

Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, "Why are you staring at one another?" And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die." Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt. But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "I am afraid that harm may befall him." So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also. Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers come and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly. And he said to them, "Where have you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food" (Genesis 42:1-7).

The scene in Canaan is almost amusing. The brothers of Joseph stand in the presence of their father, deeply distressed by the fact that their food supply is nearly depleted, and there is no hope of replenishing it so long as the famine persists. Jacob, aware of the availability of grain in Egypt, prodded his sons into action with the rebuke, "Don't just stand there, go down to Egypt and get some grain."

Jacob's partiality toward the sons of Rachel (which had nearly gotten Joseph killed) is still very obvious. While the other ten sons were sent to Egypt, Benjamin was kept near, under the watchful eye of his father (verse 4). It could not have been because Benjamin was too young, for he had to have been in his twenties by now. At the age of 17 Joseph had been sent a considerable distance from home to check on his brothers (37:2,12). Perhaps the circumstances of Joseph's disappearance were too suspect for Jacob to take another chance by leaving Benjamin in the care of his other brothers.

The ten brothers arrived in Egypt along with many others to buy grain from Joseph. Without realizing they were fulfilling the prophecy of Joseph's two dreams years before (37:6-11), his brothers bowed low before him, expressing the respect due to one of such high office. How tempting for Joseph to ask them to bow just a little lower or perhaps to do so just one more time. How easy it would have been to bask in the honor and power which was now his. But all we are told is that Joseph recognized these men as his brothers, yet his identity was not known to them. More than twenty years, along with a clean-shaven face, Egyptian clothing, customs, and language, precluded any thought that this potentate might be their brother. He had, after all, been sold as a slave.

From verse 7 alone we might be inclined to think that Joseph was being harsh with his brothers out of a spirit of vengeance. Certainly this would be the normal reaction of anyone as mistreated as Joseph had been by his brothers. His severity, however, was a "disguise" (verse 7), an effort to keep his identity a secret. Character, someone has said, is what we are in the dark, and Joseph was keeping his brothers "in the dark" until their character could be determined.

Confrontation (42:8-17)

The key to Joseph's actions is found in the next two verses. Here we gain an appreciation for Joseph's motives and methods in dealing with his brothers:

But Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him. And Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them, and said to them, "You are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land" (Genesis 42:8-9).

Far more is meant by verse 9 than that Joseph merely remembered his dreams about his brothers and recognized their fulfillment in their bowing down to him. All this would have done would have been to puff up his pride. Joseph not only realized the fulfillment of his dreams but also the reason for them. He saw that God had a purpose for placing him in his position of power, and this purpose was for him to function as the family head, protecting and preserving his family. He had great power and prestige, but God had given these to him for a purpose much greater than merely to seek revenge. He saw that leadership involved power, but that it also

brought upon him the weight of responsibility. At times the greatest need is not to be aware of the power at our disposal, but of the purpose for which this power has been given.

I need to digress for just a moment to show how our character affects our understanding and application of the Word of God. It has been observed by saints and sinners for centuries that “you can make the Bible say anything you want.” Like it or not, this is true. Think of what Joseph could have made of his dream. This was a message from God! If he had been dominated by bitterness and hatred, Joseph could have viewed his vision as a mandate from God to make life miserable for his brothers. Hadn’t God revealed to him that his brothers would bow down to him? He could have rubbed their proverbial noses in the dirt and given them a proof text for it, had he wished. It is alarmingly possible for us to justify sinful actions with biblical texts if we choose to, but this will always be at the expense of other clear passages which we have chosen to ignore.

And Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them, and said to them, “You are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land.” Then they said to him, “No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies.” Yet he said to them, “No, but you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land!” But they said, “Your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more” (Genesis 42:9-13).

Joseph’s severity was feigned, not real. He needed to learn more information without his brothers realizing who he was or what he was attempting to accomplish. His harshness was intended to produce fear, for at this point in the lives of his brothers fear produced more facts than faith. In their fear they blurted out the things which Joseph yearned to know. Was his father alive? And how was Benjamin? Desperately trying to talk their way out of the charge that they were spies, they supplied him with facts they would never have given otherwise. Later Jacob would rebuke his sons for what they revealed (43:6). Disclosing the disappearance of one brother and the existence of another in Canaan provided Joseph with the opportunity to test his brothers in the area of their greatest failure.

And Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you, you are spies; by this you will be tested; by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here! Send one of you that he may get your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. But if not, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.” So he put them all together in prison for three days (Genesis 42:14-17).

Joseph narrowed the situation down to two options: either they had come as spies, in which case their story about a younger brother was a mere fabrication, or they were telling the truth. The matter could easily be settled by their producing the younger brother. All of the brothers would be detained except one, who could be dispatched to bring back the proof of their honesty. How cleverly Joseph handled this situation to bring about his desired ends without his brothers seeing his purpose in it all.

Joseph then placed all of the brothers in confinement. I cannot prove it, but my suspicion is that the prison was probably one that we know well—Potiphar’s prison. More significant is that Joseph put them in confinement together (verse 17). More than giving them comfort, as opposed to solitary confinement, it caused them to consider the meaning of what was taking place in their lives. This is more fully seen in their conversation recorded in later verses. Even if not bodily present with his brothers in prison, his heart must have been with them in their confinement. This was not punishment, but it was preparation, just as his confinement had been. It served to intensify their comprehension of the gravity of the situation.

Diminished Demands (42:18-24)

The outcome of Joseph’s dealings with his brothers was considerably less harsh than what was first threatened. He had first maintained that all of the brothers would be held captive while only one was to be sent for Benjamin (verse 16). But now he has reduced his demands considerably.

Now Joseph said to them on the third day, “Do this and live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die.” And they did so. Then they said to one another, “Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us.” And Reuben answered them, saying, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do not sin against the boy’; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood.” They did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them. And he turned away from them and wept. But when he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes (Genesis 42:18-24).

Those three days must have been miserable. They must have been filled with fear and foreboding. Would they ever return to their father? Would they ever regain their freedom? And, most delicate, who would be the one who was released to return to Canaan while the others remained captive? For them, Joseph's experience, which took years, was condensed to days. Joseph's words to them were like the sunrise dispelling the darkness. His words are filled with hope and encouragement, not fear and judgment. "Do this and live," Joseph urged them (verse 18). Life, not death, joy, not misery, was what Joseph desired for his brothers. But certain changes had to occur before this could be their experience. The self-interest and cruelty which had caused them to sell him into slavery must be dealt with. That would not come easily or quickly, but it would come.

Joseph's statement, "I, too, fear God" (verse 18) should have been the cause of much deliberation in the days and months to come. What could this "Egyptian" despot possibly have meant by these words? I understand this statement to be a technical expression reserved for use only by those who had a genuine faith in the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When Abraham stood before Abimelech, trying to explain his deceit in passing off his wife as his sister, he said,

Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place; and they will kill me because of my wife (Genesis 20:11).

The expression "to fear God" was a technical one, I believe, equivalent to our contemporary expression "born again." It was spoken by Joseph to inspire hope and to encourage contemplation of what was taking place. It was only after Joseph had given expression to his faith that his brothers began to recognize the hand of God in their lives through these events.

Another cause for encouragement was the significant decrease in the demands that were made upon these foreigners. While they were initially told that all must remain captive while one would be allowed to return home for Benjamin, now all but one may return to the land of Canaan. They are expected to take life-sustaining grain to their needy families and then to return with their youngest brother. The words "and they did so" (verse 20) seem to indicate that the ten agreed to the terms Joseph laid down and set out to do them, only to be resisted by their father upon their return (cf. verses 36-38).

It is at this point that the brothers began to talk among themselves, unaware that Joseph understood every word. All along he had used an interpreter, giving them the impression that this "Egyptian" could not speak their language. This kept them from even considering that they might know him, let alone that they might be related to him.

The relationship between their present predicament and their treatment of Joseph was too obvious to overlook. Each of them acknowledged that their difficulties were the result of their sin in regard to Joseph. They had pled for mercy and not received it, just as Joseph had cried for help from the pit and they had ignored him. Reuben then reminded them of his warnings and their resistance. Sin always has consequences, and they were beginning to realize how painful these can be.

The heart of Joseph is openly revealed in verse 24. Having overheard the spiritual soul-searching that went on among his brothers, Joseph could contain his emotions no longer. He had to leave their presence, lest by his tears they should discover his identity. Joseph's actions were not those of a man who did not care for his brothers, but of one who cared so much that he resisted the urge to identify himself in order to promote their spiritual well-being.

It was Simeon who was chosen by Joseph to remain behind. Was there any particular reason for this choice? It seems so. In a marginal note, the editors of the Berkeley Version suggest,

With Reuben absent when Joseph was sold down to Egypt, Simeon was the responsible leader, being next to the oldest; hence his being retained.

This, in my opinion, is worthy of consideration.

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/42-proper-use-power-genesis-421-38>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Joseph had settled into life in Egypt, secure in his powerful position. He had married and started a family. He had taken over the responsibility of providing grain for those who had traveled from near and far to Egypt because of the severe famine that had ravaged many countries. It was business as usual for Joseph until he looked up and saw a group of 10 men dressed like he used to be when he lived in Canaan. And then he realized—these were his brothers! They too had come to Egypt to buy grain. That Joseph's motives for acting as he did toward his brothers were not rooted in selfishness or vindictiveness is seen most of all in his tears. He could not control his emotions when he learned that Reuben had actually intended to spare his life. Though the brothers did not know it, the governor of Egypt was already planning how to see his father again and keep his whole family safe. While Joseph was hiding his true identity from his brothers, his declaration that "I fear God" was the truth. The brothers did not realize what a comfort that declaration should have been to them. Joseph's tears revealed his heart for all time.

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

God's Providential Hand - Pharaoh assigned Joseph as governor in Egypt. Joseph immediately instructed the Egyptians to collect grain and food during the country's seven years of plenty in preparation for the coming seven years of famine. Because of God's intervention and Joseph's wise leadership during the time of famine, the nation had a surplus, enabling them to aid surrounding regions. Joseph's brothers, who sold him into slavery, ended up bowing before him, asking for his help. Joseph's story continues to teach profound lessons about love, forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation. The brothers unwittingly ended up on their faces before Joseph just as he prophetically dreamed as a youth. On this occasion, Joseph kept his identity hidden as he asked the brothers several questions concerning their homeland and family, accusing them of spying.

God Requires a Repentant Heart - Even though Joseph immediately recognized his brothers, he prolonged his unveiling. He wanted to see if their perceptions and attitudes about their offense against him had changed, if there was any indication of repentance. The brothers reasoned with Joseph; they were not spying but only had come to purchase food. They were true men from Canaan; their father (Jacob) had 12 sons. One remained with him, and the other one was dead. Joseph demanded they go back home and get Benjamin to prove their honesty. The brothers finally concluded: we are being punished for our mistreatment of Joseph. This indicated that their minds often revisited their cruel act. Before his very eyes, Joseph could see God's work in the life of his brothers. Instead of continuing to be hard and justify their hateful actions, their hearts were being softened.

Confession: the Road to Reconciliation - Sadly, family or friends attempt to mend broken relationships without the offending party admitting they're wrong and without a commitment to respond differently. This usually results in more pain, victimization, disappointment, and no visible evidence of genuine love; therefore, reconciliation is superficial or impossible.