

Clueless in Cairo

42:1-38

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.

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."

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. 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. 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."

Introduction — Except for Benjamin, Joseph's brothers were a terrible bunch. The second and third oldest, Simeon and Levi, had committed premeditated genocide in the slaughter of the Shechemites (**Gen. 34**). The oldest son, Reuben, had committed incest with his father's concubines in an attempt to gain power over him (**35:22**). In addition, all ten of the brothers had stripped and beaten Joseph, then tossed him in a pit for the purpose of murdering him. He was saved only when sold as a slave to a passing caravan on its way to Egypt. (**37:12-28**). In addition to all that, Judah, Jacob's fourth son had impregnated his daughter-in-law, Tamar (**Gen. 38**). So by any standard, these men were unfit to bear God's covenant with Abraham—from which would eventually come the Messiah and Redeemer of mankind.

Therefore, Joseph's brothers had to be confronted, recognize their guilt, and truly repent. Their consciences needed to be awakened, leading to genuine repentance. For this to happen, reconciliation with Joseph was an absolute necessity.

I. Hard Times — The drought and the famine it caused was not just restricted to Egypt, but engulfed all the surrounding territory (**41:57**). But because of God's hand on Joseph, who was now the prime minister of Egypt, that nation had for seven years stored enough grain to feed everyone.

As the drought reached its crisis point up in Canaan, something needed to be done to avoid starvation. But Jacob's sons were indecisive and lazy. And so, their father takes them to task, saying, "Why do you look at one another?" (**v. 1**). He then orders them to travel down to Egypt to secure a supply of food, since the word had spread that grain could only be found there.

"But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him" (**v. 4**). Jacob knew the character flaws of his ten older sons and was suspicious about what they had done to Joseph. How could he not be, given all that had happened over the past twenty or so years! So Benjamin stayed home as a sort of insurance policy for the family's future.

II. Greetings and Accusations — So off the ten brothers went, making the trek across the Sinai and down into the Nile Valley. Never

in their wildest imaginations did they think that they were in for a God-arranged appointment with Joseph.

When they finally reached their destination, Jacob's sons were among a mass of desperate and hungry foreigners who had flooded into Egypt just to keep from starving. When they met him, Joseph was totally unrecognizable to his brothers. He was now in his mid-thirties and not the teenager they had last seen. In addition, unlike his Jewish kinsmen, he was beardless and decked-out as an Egyptian aristocrat. Joseph also spoke Egyptian, though he still understood Hebrew. And so, the brothers did what every other needy foreigner did—they "bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground" (**v. 6**) in a gesture of subordination.

Joseph, on the other hand, immediately recognized his brothers. They were bearded Semites who bore a family resemblance, and there were ten of them. But Joseph stayed cool and remained in character, at first dealing with them as he would any refugees wanting to make a deal.

This was a golden opportunity! Joseph's brothers had no idea who he was, but he knew each of them and had a long and precise memory of past offenses. For the brothers, this Egyptian official literally held their lives in his hands. But Joseph had needs of his own; the chief being to discover the condition of his brothers' hearts. Were they the same callous and conniving snakes they had been years before, or had they changed—or were at least were capable of change? So, on the spot, Joseph came up with a brilliant strategy of forceful interrogation.

Keep in mind that the brothers were hard men who had massacred an entire people and even sold their brother into slavery. So Joseph had to be tough, which he certainly was.

"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'" (**vs. 7-11**).

In the midst of his interrogation Joseph realized that the two dreams he had carried for more than twenty years were now coming true. Here was the majority of his family humbly bowing before him. But Joseph also realized that the dreams were not yet fulfilled. That's because they included all eleven brothers, plus his parents as well.

Though he knew it wasn't true, Joseph accused them of espionage: "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land"—the weak places in Egypt's defenses. The brothers strongly denied that, but Joseph pressed harder. They then gave him more details:

"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 (**vs. 12-14**)"

At this point, Joseph really upped the ante by demanding that their youngest brother be produced:

"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" (**vs. 15-17**).

Those three days in jail gave the brothers time for fearful reflection, as they began to see how what was happening somehow related to their own misdeeds. Thus, their consciences began to come alive, which is just what Joseph had in mind. Then, after the three days, he shifted into an even higher gear.

First, he stunned them by referring to God; their God: "Do this and you will live, for I fear God/Elohim" (**v. 18**). Next, Joseph decided that one of the brothers would be held as a hostage, while the other nine would go back for Benjamin. This would also subject the brothers to a past temptation: would they abandon one of their own as they had abandoned Joseph years before?

Joseph's strategy brought an amazing admission of corporate guilt—though they had no idea the prime minister could understand them:

"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” (**vs. 21-22**).

The brothers now experience a strong case of delayed tenderness toward Joseph—who was “hiding” before them in plain sight. Through the conversation, Joseph noted three important details: (1) Reuben had not consented to his sale as a slave. (2) They had all heard his frantic cry for help, which had haunted them for years. (3) They all believed that their current plight was payback for the evil they had done to both Joseph and their father, Jacob. In short, the ten were experiencing what could be called the “grace of guilt.”

This is *good guilt*—restorative guilt—which brings repentance and eventual forgiveness. And while people today do not look positively upon any feelings of guilt—and will do whatever they can to avoid or suppress them—true guilt for actual wrongdoing is one of the Lord’s prime tools for our growth and a means of drawing us to himself. It also happens to be one of the main functions of Scripture:

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (**2 Tim. 3:16-17**).

This means that *if you read the Bible and never feel guilty, you are not reading it properly.*

Joseph’s response to his brothers’ seemingly “private” conversation is wonderful: “They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. Then he turned away from them and wept” (**vs. 23-24**).

After composing himself, there was still more probing Joseph had to do:

“And he returned to them and spoke to them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. 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” (**vs. 24-25**).

Early Church father John Chrysostom accurately reflects on this: “See how Joseph takes every means of putting fear into them so that, on seeing Simeon’s binds, they may reveal whether they manifested any sympathy for their brother. You see, everything he does is to test their attitude out of his wish to discover if they had been like that in dealing with Benjamin. Hence, Joseph also has Simeon bound in front of them to test them carefully and see if they showed any signs of affection for him.”

Joseph then tested his brothers further by putting money in their sacks. Would they decide to give Simeon up for it, as they had once done with Joseph? How would they interpret Joseph’s actions? As a gracious gift? Or as a way to frame them as thieves? The ball is in their court.

III. Fear and Sorrow — The answers came soon. “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?’” (**vs. 26-28**).

This is the first time in the narrative that the brothers mention the Lord. That’s because their sense of raging guilt led them to see God’s hand in their situation. This was not just fear, but godly fear. Joseph’s brothers were finally coming to believe that their many offenses were primarily against God, not just other humans. But, again, this is a form of grace; meant to improve one’s character and outward behavior but, more importantly, to draw the person to the true Source of morals and ethics. As John Newton famously puts it: *’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear.*

When the long journey back to Canaan was over, Jacob’s sons told “all that had happened to them” (cf. **vs. 29-34**)—sort of. To convince their father that Benjamin should be taken to Egypt, they neglected to include certain details: (1) They had been imprisoned for three days. (2) The prime minister threatened to execute them. (4) The discovery of the money in their sacks. As he listen to them, Jacob was silent—but not for long.

“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" (vs. 35-38).

It is now clear that Joseph's approach to his brothers is having its desired effect: not only godly fear, but godly sorrow for one's actions and attitude. While this is far from the end of restoration, it's an all-important step. Paul puts it well in **2 Corinthians 7:10-11**:

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done."

This is precisely what such sorrow will soon produce in Joseph's brothers. Of course, these men will always be flawed. But the initial contact with their still-unrecognized brother was an act of redemptive grace for them. It also sets things up for the next chapter in God's plan for Israel, as Joseph's father and brothers travel down to Egypt for food and to rescue Simeon.

IV. The Process — But for now, what do we take away from this episode in Joseph's life? Put simply, that God demands that you and I recognize our sins, take them seriously, then do whatever is necessary to reverse them and deal with the damage they have caused. This involves a process of several steps—of which some will be downright painful. Overall, what we are talking about is bringing back to life a seared or deadened conscience. And keep in mind that such a conscience can be deadened either in just certain areas or it can be a general condition—which takes us into sociopathic behavior.

Confrontation — The first step in the process is a *confrontation* of some sort with the truth. This can take many forms. Perhaps a life experience jars us to the point that we reevaluate not just what we

have done, but what we have become. Or, the confrontation can come from another person who accurately and appropriately “speaks the truth in love” to us. In extreme cases, this might even involve an intervention of some sort. Third, as already noted, Scripture is designed to confront us. But, of course, for this to happen, we must read God’s Word, interpret it properly, then apply it to ourselves.

Recognition — But whatever form it takes, confrontation must lead to *recognition*, as we begin to understand our true condition and just how dire it have become. A big part of this recognition relates to what Joseph’s brothers come to see: that their misbehavior not only damaged other people but, even more seriously, was an offense against God. This is what David meant when, after being confronted by Nathan, he wrote: “Against you only [God], have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (**Psa 51:4**).

Guilt — Recognition, in turn, leads to a sense of *guilt*. Again, this is not false guilt, based based perhaps on someone’s extra-biblical legalism or ideas of political correctness. Instead, this is real guilt; a breaking of scripturally-defined morals and ethics.

Desire — Step four is a genuine *desire* to put things right, both now and in the far-reaching future. This is not quite full repentance, but the prelude to repentance—which is where the brothers will land as Joseph’s story continues to unfold.

But the final thing we must understand is that human *choice* is at the heart of each of these steps, as well as the overall process itself. You and I have been created in God’s image with the core “software” of mind, will, and feelings. These three control our bodily “hardware.” But because of our natural bent toward denial and self-indulgence, we often balk at choosing correctly—especially if we can get by through role playing, manipulating and/or intimidating the people around us, or flying under the radar. But God is not fooled by any of our ploys and, sooner or later, will call us to account. But He will always provide choices for us to make, and choose we will—either correctly or incorrectly.

C.S. Lewis makes the all-important that you and I are what we choose:

“Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you,

the part of you that chooses into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is...joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.”