

Genesis 42:1-44:16 & Lord's Day 5 >> Joseph 4: Haunted

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You probably know what I mean when I refer to "Murphy's Law:"

*If anything can go wrong,
it will.*

Sometimes it's expanded and goes like this:

*If anything can go wrong,
it will go wrong
at the worst possible time
and in the worst possible way,
and it will be all your fault,
and everyone will know it.¹*

Murphy's Law has been around for a long time, but it's perhaps not quite as old as the story of Joseph's brothers, otherwise I imagine they'd probably have referred to it! *Nothing* is going their way in our reading today; in fact, at each turn, they are dealt reversals.

That would be bad enough on its own, but with each reversal, the brothers look at each other and say that it's their own fault that these things are happening. They have tried suppressing their memories of plotting their younger brother Joseph's death, but as they feel the screws tightening on them by this ruthless Egyptian prime minister, they see a connection from their heinous actions years ago to the pain they're experiencing now.

We don't feel guilty when the toast falls on the floor, peanut butter and jam side down (that's Murphy's Law). But Joseph's brothers' guilt pangs increase with each reversal they're dealt in Egypt. As the brothers begin to work through the guilt they experience from their past, I pray you may be able to, as well.

Guilty in Egypt

There are several places in our reading where it's obvious Joseph's brothers are feeling pretty guilty. I wonder if a not-so-obvious indicator of their guilt appears right at the start where Jacob says to his sons: "Why do you just keep looking at each other? I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us..." (42:1-2). Surely this isn't news to the brothers! They read the same newspapers and visit the same financial websites as their father. They, too, must have heard that there is food in Egypt, yet they do diddly-squat about it.

I wonder if over the years and years of observing firsthand their father's grief over the loss of his favourite son Joseph whether the name *Egypt* itself has become like a bad word for

¹ For more on Murphy's Law, I recommend these two websites, the latter one being particularly fun: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murphy's_law and www.murphys-laws.com/murphy/murphy-laws.html.

them. The brothers know that that's where the foreigners were heading when they sold Joseph to them (*cf.* 37:25). After that event, whenever they heard the name of the country of Egypt, they must have thought of Joseph. And as they saw how the grief of their father refused to subside, their guilt over the whole business became greater and greater. Just the pronunciation of *Egypt* is enough to make them stare at their feet in regret.

Now they hear that there's grain you-know-where. But they don't want to talk about it because, you understand, the grain is over you-know-where. Their father has no problem talking about you-know-where, but that word doesn't come anywhere near their lips.² Has you-know-where become tightly associated with guilt for the brothers?

Regardless of how they feel about the country of Egypt in general, Jacob finally convinces his boys to pack up and head out there: "Unknowingly and ironically, he tells them to go to Joseph just as he once sent Joseph to them (*cf.* 37:13-14)!"³ Joseph, remember, is the one who accurately predicted Pharaoh's dreams of seven plentiful years followed by seven pathetic years. He is now in charge of the storehouses of Egypt that are distributing the bumper crops that had been preserved during the seven good growing years. He is the man to see if you need food.

And so Jacob's sons go see Joseph.

"As soon as Joseph [sees] his brothers, he recognize[s] them..." but "they [do] not recognize him" (42:7, 8). ...And Joseph keeps it that way. In fact, Joseph really puts the screws to his brothers in accusing them of espionage (*cf.* 42:9),⁴ and the brothers begin to experience distress like they once put Joseph through. It doesn't take long for them to make the connection: "'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 on us.' Reuben [replies], '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'" (42:21-22).

After three nights in a dungeon – mindful, perhaps, of the cistern into which the brothers threw Joseph – the cruel prime minister finally allows the brothers to return home (minus Simeon, whose being held as collateral until they produce Benjamin).

But even en-route home, the brothers again recognize that they are being punished when one of them finds the silver he used to pay for his grain back at the top of his sack. Does it look just a little too much like the silver they received when they sold Joseph as a slave to those foreigners years ago?⁵ "What is this that God has done to us?" they moan (42:28).

² Even in the second conversation about going to Egypt in Gen 43, the brothers avoid using the name of the country. None of my resources on this part of the Bible note this. Either I've made a profound discovery or I'm completely out to lunch! ☺

³ Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis" in *New Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 1; L.E. Keck, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 627.

⁴ It seems that Joseph is accusing the brothers of doing precisely what they hated Joseph for doing in the past: The first thing we learn about Joseph is that "he brought their father a bad report about them" (37:2). Joseph had been checking up on his brothers and the proceeded to tattle on them to dear old Dad. The brothers, in fact, hatched their plan to get rid of the brat when their father sent Joseph to check on them – to spy on them from their point of view – once again (*cf.* 37:13-14, 18-20). Now the tables are turned and Joseph is accusing his brothers of spying!

⁵ On this connection, see Fretheim, 629, as well as Harvey A. Smit, *The Genesis Message: A New Look at the Old Stories* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1999), 86.

When it's revealed that *all* of the brothers have had their silver returned, they are "frightened" (42:35). That's actually like calling the Grand Canyon a ditch; the original Hebrew behind *frightened* reveals that they're scared out of their wits.⁶

To their father, Jacob, the brothers appear to be thieves. ...Either that, or Jacob perhaps wonders whether they got the silver from selling Simeon – Is that really why he hasn't returned with the others? And if they are capable of doing that to Simeon, could they have done the same to Joseph all those years ago??⁷ The brothers claim to be "honest men" (42:11), but I suspect Jacob is seriously beginning to have some doubts about that. "The money in the sack widens the breach between Jacob and his [non-favoured] sons..."⁸ "You have deprived me of my children," Jacob laments. "Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!" (42:36).

You have to admit that things seem to go better the second time the brothers go to you-know-where, but it only seems that way. Before they get very far with a second supply of grain, the discovery is made of Joseph's silver cup in Benjamin's sack of grain. They turn around and once more appear in the presence of the prime minister.

"What can we say to my lord?" Judah [replies]. "What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt" (44:16). Judah is not referring to being guilty of stealing Joseph's cup; he's just claimed to be innocent of that. No, he's referring to the guilt that has been haunting the brothers.

Hope in Egypt

The Egyptian prime minister sure appears cruel, but he brings back to the foreground the guilt that the brothers have been trying so hard all these years to suppress. Perhaps that's the prime minister's intention all along. Joseph, remember, has been characterized as "discerning and wise" (41:39). When he sees his brothers for the first time since they sold him as a slave, "he remember[s] his dreams about them" (42:9). I think Joseph discerns how "the brothers need to pass through an ordeal in order to bring their memories and guilt to the surface, where it can be dealt with adequately, before reconciliation can truly take place..."⁹ Joseph sets out to see not only whether the brothers experience guilt for what they did to him, but also to perceive whether that guilt had changed them at all for the better.

Consider especially the evidence he plants in Benjamin's sack of grain. Who is Benjamin? He is Joseph's only full-sibling – same father (Jacob) and same mother (Rachel). He is also the new "favourite" of father Jacob (*cf.* 42:36, 38; 44:30-31).¹⁰ Joseph's steward says, "Whoever is found to have [the silver cup] will become my slave; the rest of you will be free..."

⁶ J. Swanson's definition for אָרַי in *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (accessed via Libronix), refers to being "in a state of feeling great distress, and deep concern of pain or unfavourable circumstance."

⁷ Smit, 86, argues that Jacob indeed figures out the crime the brothers committed against Joseph.

⁸ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 549.

⁹ Fretheim, 630.

¹⁰ As part of the test, Joseph plays favourites with Benjamin (*cf.* 43:34) to see how the brothers are now responding to favouritism. The brothers pass this part of the test, too.

(44:10). And when the silver cup is found in Benjamin's sack, the brothers have the opportunity to do the exact same thing to him as they did to Joseph years before. They can ditch little brother Benjamin and be on their merry way, just as they did long ago to little brother Joseph. Joseph's strategy is meant to answer the question: "Will the brothers betray a second of Rachel's children, or have they changed?"

"Behind this lies a deeper question. Until now, the promise of God [has] been passed on to one child. Are all twelve [brothers] now worthy to share in the promise? Or, will it be limited again, this time to Joseph's line?"¹¹ Through the actions of Joseph, God is beginning to soften the calloused hearts of these brothers. There is hope.

I don't think Joseph's actions are vindictive. He wouldn't repeatedly weep (*cf.* 42:24; 43:30; 45:2, 14-15) if he was acting solely out of bitterness and revenge. No, Joseph desires to save his family – not only physically with the grain, but also emotionally and spiritually through reconciliation.¹² But to get to that point, the brothers are going to be haunted by their guilt.

Guilty Today

Who here has never been haunted by guilt, by something you've done in the past that you now live to regret? You try to push it out of your mind, but it comes back – sort of like Murphy's Law, at the worst of times. And that says nothing of the wrong things we've done today or will still do today that we'll later regret. Sin is pervasive, isn't it? The catechism bluntly reminds us how "we increase our guilt every day" (Lord's Day 5 Q&A 13).

Like trauma, guilt exists in our lives in the present tense. Trauma from one's past – no matter how long ago – still feels as though it is being lived in the present from the point of view of the person who went through the trauma, invasively intruding on the person's life years later.¹³ Things from the past that haunt us often continue to do so as though they happened just this past week. And the sort of things that haunt us are often closely connected with guilt.

Guilt causes us to do some pretty interesting things. The Canada Revenue Agency once received a letter with a cheque. The letter went something like this: "Dear sir, I haven't been able to sleep because last year when I [filed] my income tax ... I deliberately misrepresented my income. I am enclosing a cheque for \$150... If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."¹⁴

More seriously, I can't help but wonder about those Palm Sunday crowds. On Paul Sunday they're shouting "Hosanna;" on Good Friday they're shouting "Crucify Him!" What happened when they got home later on Friday? Did a man's wife ask, "Hi Sweetheart, how was your day?" "Oh, it was interesting. I just helped condemn a man to an excruciating death. So, what's for supper, Honey?"

Did anybody wake up Saturday morning and ask themselves, *What have I just done?!* Did anyone in those Palm Sunday and Good Friday crowds later lose sleep over how easily they

¹¹ Smit, 87.

¹² See Waltke, 546.

¹³ See, for example, Peter Goetz, "Trauma and Its Aftermath" (www.petergoetzmft.com/articles/aftermath.html).

¹⁴ Told by Charles R. Swindoll in *Joseph: A Man of Integrity and Forgiveness* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 123. (Swindoll's version involves the Bureau of Internal Revenue, not the CRA.)

went from adoring Jesus at the beginning of the week to condemning Him to die just a few days later?

Hope Today

Even though we're in the middle of the story of the exchanges between Joseph and his brothers, I think we can already find at least three insights here to begin addressing things from your past that continue to haunt you.

1. For starters, the brothers own up to what they've done in the past. They put a name and face to it: "Surely we are being punished because of our brother" (42:21).

There. Now it's out in the open.

It's really true that **confession** is the first step to reconciliation. That's why we regularly have a time of confession in our worship services that comes before the assurance that God makes it possible for us to be reconciled to Him. By confessing first, we acknowledge how much we need the assurance of God's pardoning grace through Jesus Christ and His blood shed on the cross. Confession gets the problem, the trouble, the guilt out in the open.

I've experienced this myself when I've done something sinful to my family. Maybe Monica or the kids didn't even know about it, but my guilty conscience bothers me until I finally, boldly come out and confess. Now it's no longer a secret, and much of its control over me is weakened. And now there can be true reconciliation. Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness is overcome (*cf.* Jn 1:5). It's a blessing to experience that in community with other people.

2. Another insight I see is how they draw God into the picture: "What is this that *God* has done to us?" (42:28). They see the reversals being dealt to them not as bad luck or karma; somehow they **recognize God's hand** in it all. In fact, "this is the first time the brothers mention God; their aroused consciences see God at work behind their crime and punishment."¹⁵

Have you taken your guilt to God?

Have you brought it to the cross?

Our guilt and the sin all tangled up in it is a heavy burden to drag through our lives. Thinking again of the catechism, not even the strongest of us who hit the gym regularly "can bear the weight of God's eternal anger against sin... [We need] One who is truly human and truly righteous... that is, One who is also truly God" (Lord's Day 5; Q&A 14-15). We need Jesus to rescue us, to heal us.

Don't try to hide from God the guilt that haunts you. Ultimate healing – a process, no doubt – will nevertheless come from Him.

3. Finally, consider the very fact that they don't send Benjamin back with the steward to the Egyptian prime minister while the rest hightail it back to Canaan. Years ago in their anger and hatred and bitterness, they ditch their little brother, the older of Rachel's two children, the

¹⁵ Waltke, 549. Swindoll, 96, adds that this is the only verbal acknowledgement of sin (let alone guilt) in the entire book of Genesis.

one favoured by their father Jacob. Now “they obviously intend to treat Rachel’s younger son, Benjamin, quite differently from the way in which they had formerly treated the elder son.”¹⁶

There’s a word for that: **Progress**.

The past that haunts them has begun producing something good, changing them for the better.

The same is true for Joseph. When we first meet him in Genesis, he appears to be a spoiled brat with a big mouth. Perhaps he lives with his own regret and guilt, recalling the times he enjoyed making his brothers’ lives miserable. But now, as we already mentioned, he has become “discerning and wise” (41:39). Joseph, too, by God’s grace and the leading of the Holy Spirit, has been making progress; he, too, has been growing in a direction needed for reconciliation with his family.

As we confess our guilt to each other and to God, let’s also keep our eyes open for ways the Holy Spirit might take bad things from our past and do something good with them.

Maybe it’s a lesson or two (dozen!) learned.

Maybe it’s a fresh opportunity to make peace with someone.

Maybe it’s an experience of desperately needing and sensing God’s presence.

We can give thanks for, even celebrate these things, for they are indicators of how God’s Holy Spirit is working in us, transforming us to being more like Jesus.

As our story of Joseph and his brothers continues, we’ll come to see that Joseph’s actions will eventually set this family free of the brokenness and guilt that haunts it. In this way, Joseph foreshadows Jesus: He, in the fullest way possible, transforms our guilt into freedom.

It’s time you begin bringing your guilt to Him. I invite you to begin with this prayer...

Sung prayer of response: “My Faith Looks Up to Thee” (*Psalter Hymnal* 262), which begins with:

*My faith looks up to Thee,
Thou Lamb of Calvary, Saviour divine!
Now hear me while I pray,
take all my guilt away.
O let me from this day be wholly Thine!*

(Words by Ray Palmer. Public domain.)

¹⁶ Ibid., 558. Waltke is here quoting G. vonRad, *Genesis* (J.H. Marks, trans.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 397. See also Swindoll, 115.