

## Genesis 42:17-38 Facing up to our past

### Introduction

We live in a world so full of activity, surrounded in many places by constant noise, twenty-four hour television with hundreds of channels to choose from, but arguably fewer programmes worth watching! Once upon a time on the few BBC channels we possessed indicated it was bed time by putting up the test card and music playing until nine am the next day. How quaint is that! Once upon a time the boss could only speak to you at work; then telephones appeared and became common in the last century. In an increasingly mobile age people wanted to keep in touch and heavy objects the size of bricks began to appear as portable communication devices and the mobile phone was born. Now if you have the finances and the desire you can keep in touch from virtually every corner of the globe due to recent technological advances. Is that always a good thing? In a time of economic recession there are many unemployed or underemployed people who wish to work full-time, but in an increasing number of professions and positions the hours worked have increased significantly with precious little to show for the extra efforts expended. At the end of the day exhaustion is a common experience for many working people. Many people can rush from one activity to another allowing little time to think. However, in the sovereign purposes of God we all have time out to stop and reflect on what has been happening in our lives. For some people major illness overshadows the best-laid plans; in other cases unexpected redundancy from a valued occupation provides unwanted spare time- but for all of us days off or holidays can provide that valuable time to stop and reflect on how life is going for us.

In Genesis 42 there are a number of moments in the lives of these ten brothers when they are forced by circumstances to take stock of how their lives had been progressing, in particular to confront the evil act they had carried out years earlier on their teenage brother. Genesis 42 begins as a famine begins to take hold and their father requests that they travel to Egypt in search of food supplies. *Why do you just keep looking at each other?* (Genesis 42:1) was the father's question that they would not answer. The silence was deafening, but not for too much longer. God would be at work in their lives to ensure that their consciences would force them to confront their evil ways. They did not have a clue that little brother Joseph would play the key role in their rehabilitation. The very mention of the word 'Egypt' was a trigger that brought feelings of guilt to their consciences. The pressing nature of the famine required their journey to redemption, but it would be a difficult one for them to tread. In our lives too addressing the issues with which we struggle can also be complicated and prolonged.

### 1. Time for Reflection (Genesis 42:17)

<sup>17</sup>*And he put them all in custody for three days.* The country of Egypt would have been totally unfamiliar to them. The language and customs so different, yet with so many people coming from Canaan and other places in search of food it would have been fairly easy to find the nearest warehouse at which food could be purchased. They would have known that it would have been a slow process taking time to make their purchases before heading home. However, in the providence of God the Prime Minister of Egypt was present at that very distribution centre and who, most surprisingly, had taken a real interest in their family and circumstances. They had been accused of being spies, but in a moment of rare honesty they told the truth about their family history with the following statement in Genesis 42:13: *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.* It is not a surprise that no names are mentioned as the official could hardly have been expected to want their names given how many people he met every day in his travels around the country. Under the circumstances it would have been no

surprise had they omitted to mention Joseph and simply referred to Benjamin at home. Yet their honesty here in admitting to both his and Benjamin's existence provided a start for the conversations that would follow. It is important to note that the pattern of events that followed bore a remarkable similarity to Joseph's own experience as a teenager at their hands. He was falsely accused of spying on his brothers with a view to giving unfavourable reports on their activities and as a result was incarcerated in a pit for an unspecified timescale (Genesis 37:24). They had threatened to kill him and that possibility hung over his head while he was imprisoned near their camp. Now Joseph, the unknown Egyptian official, had put them in jail on charges of espionage against the country of Egypt. There had to be at least a theoretical possibility that if the official truly believed they were spies that a death sentence might be imposed upon them. They did not know Joseph had no intention of harming them. In fact he was planned their redemption, but this was only possible if they were repentant for their sins of the past. He told them that nine of the ten brothers would remain in prison while the one released had to go back to Canaan and bring Benjamin to see him as proof that their story was correct. The time in jail was officially to allow them to 'choose' which of their number should go free. Three full days with nothing else to do was a lot of thinking time, but undoubtedly there were conversations that took place in the prison that had been avoided for years. Now they were starting the process of confronting the past which would become more painful before the healing process could begin.

Time alone with God is at a premium with the vast majority of us as Western Christians. It has been suggested that one of the reasons for so much of the shallowness of modern church life is that there is so little investment of personal quiet time with God. One of the major Christian thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century was A.W. Tozer. Writing a series of messages on this subject in the late 1940s, the author addressed this missing aspect of the life of many Christians of his day. He indicated that the absence of quality personal time set aside with God so dear to the saints of old, has now no place in our total religious picture. It is too slow, too common. We now demand glamour and fast-flowing dramatic action. A generation of Christians reared among push buttons and automatic machines is impatient of slower and less direct methods of reaching their goals. We have been trying to apply machine age methods to our relations with God. We read our chapter [of the Bible], have our short devotions and rush away, hoping to make up for our deep inward bankruptcy by attending another gospel meeting or listening to another thrilling story told by a religious adventurer lately returned from afar. The tragic results of this spirit are all about us. Shallow lives, hollow religious philosophies, the preponderance of the element of fun in gospel meetings, the glorification of men, trust in religious externalities, quasi-religious fellowships, salesmanship methods, the mistaking of dynamic personality for the power of the Spirit: these and such as these are the symptoms of an evil disease, a deep and serious malady of the soul. [A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 1948, pp. 69-70]. Jesus routinely blocked out time alone with God between His ministry engagements and taught His disciples to do the same. For example, Mark 6:30-32: *The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught.* <sup>31</sup> *Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them, 'Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'* <sup>32</sup> *So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.* Paul, the learned scholar after his conversion, spent a significant amount of time alone with the Lord, prior to his public ministry, as he recounted in his autobiographical references in the letter to the churches in Galatia: <sup>15</sup> *But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased* <sup>16</sup> *to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.* <sup>17</sup> *I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.* <sup>18</sup> *Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days* (Galatians 1:15-18). There are many examples from church history of how the unplanned time alone with God was extraordinarily productive in lives of key figures. Martin Luther, in order to prevent his capture and execution by the Roman Catholic authorities was hidden in Wartburg Castle for a year. Yet that year was taken up with translating the Bible into German so the

ordinary people could read the Bible in their own language; a key factor in the success of the German Protestant Reformation. John Bunyan, a tradesman and Baptist lay-pastor, was imprisoned in Bedford jail for twelve years, because he refused to give up unlicensed preaching –that is open-air preaching and in Baptist meeting houses which were not granted licences to hold Christian services by the Anglican dominated Government. At any time had he agreed to cease preaching he could have been freed; His first wife died while he was in prison and the care of his young family was a real issue. It must have been a real temptation to give in. Yet it was in prison that he wrote his conversion story, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, amongst other books that would make him famous throughout the English-speaking world. *Pilgrim's Progress* was the second best-selling book in the English language after the Bible. His time in prison enabled him to reach more people with the Gospel than he ever could have done outside it. Many of Paul's letters in the New Testament were composed behind bars. For other Christians times of ill-health are used by God to bring them closer to Himself. Harry Brash-Bonsall, then a dynamic and energetic pastor in Canada, later the founder of Birmingham Bible Institute, slipped and fell on the steps outside a parishioner's home. He felt sore but thought little of it at first, but over seven months spent in hospital and three months on his back in bed were a painful trial to this activist young minister. However, it was in those difficult years that his (later he and his wife Doris together) extraordinary prayer ministry began (Ruth McGavin, *Running for Revival*, pp.76-79). After allowing them three whole days to reflect on their predicament, Joseph summoned these now frightened men to meet him again. Had their time of solitude been productive?

## 2. Time for Reason (Genesis 42:18-23)

(a)Joseph proposes a plan of action (Genesis 42:18-20) <sup>18</sup> *On the third day, Joseph said to them, 'Do this and you will live, for I fear God: <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. The brothers presumably had an answer as to which one of them should go back home to report to their father. However, before they could answer Joseph had switched round the proposal to nine returning home and one being left behind. He challenged them about their honesty and integrity, but acknowledged that under his original plan one person could not have carried sufficient grain to have made the trip worthwhile for the family left behind in Canaan. Therefore it made sense for a reversal of the numbers. The issue at stake was their characters. This might have been a harder choice picking one to stay rather than one to go home. Could they easily discard another brother? Joseph was putting them through what he had gone through all those years earlier –or as closely as he could to force them to come to terms with their sinful conduct. Did they debate the choice? Did Simeon volunteer? We will never know the answer to that question, but this process through which the brothers were passing was part of God's plan for their redemption. Like their father Jacob before them they were incredibly reluctant to surrender their lives to God. All of these men were guilty and deserving of punishment for their sins, but Joseph, like our heavenly Father, wanted to see their lives transformed. This process would inevitably be difficult. It could not be any other way because of the scale of wrongdoing in which they had participated. Two brothers Simeon and Levi were murderers; Both Reuben and Judah had committed serious sexual sins against people in the family circle. Who knows what others might have done – apart from their sin against Joseph. These men had been brought up in their impressionable years in Laban's extended household that was far from the God of Israel. Joseph and Benjamin, by contrast had known a father who had now surrendered his life to God. Joseph's

motivation here was key: *Do this and you will live, for I fear God* (Genesis 42:18). It is the bedrock on which our life choices and patterns of behaviour should be based.

(b) **Joseph's plan discussed** (Genesis 42:21-23) <sup>21</sup> *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 on us.'* <sup>22</sup> *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.'* <sup>23</sup> *They did not realise that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter.* How many years had passed between the injustice committed against Joseph and this first step to coming to terms with their sin? The exact figure is unimportant –but it is many long years. We have to acknowledge the painful truth that sometimes it takes years, rather than weeks or months, for people to be willing to put right their contribution to events in the past. In a number of cases, for example, where police advertise historic unsolved crimes and gain the evidence they need, it comes from someone who was close to the criminal at the time, but now has come to see the error of their ways and wants to do something to bring closure in the case. Something triggers off a signal in the human conscience that may have appeared dormant for far too long, but what is important is that the underlying problem had not gone away. Maybe you are praying for someone who has issues they need to address, keep on praying that God will bring about some circumstance in their life to lead them to repentance. All of us at times have had issues where we have stopped to say sorry to someone because we ourselves had crossed a line inappropriately. Charles Colson, famous for his part in the Watergate scandal under US President Richard Nixon, had one sin that particularly troubled him, but not from his political career. It was while serving as a newly appointed marine lieutenant, leading a platoon of forty soldiers on a training mission on Vieques Island, Puerto Rico. The men were exhausted and sweaty in the heat. On the second day of their exercises an elderly Puerto Rican man came towards them with a scrawny donkey laden with ice-filled sacks of cold drinks. The men rushed over eager to purchase a drink. Colson intervened pointing out that the man was technically trespassing on US Government property and ordered the confiscation of his goods. The men did so and consumed for free all the drinks they would gladly have paid for –the 'prisoner' was released but his means of earning a livelihood and possibly his savings all gone. That decision haunted Colson through out his life. He called it 'the sin for which I feel the greatest contrition' (Charles W. Colson, *Loving God*, pp. 99-102). If we proclaim a Gospel of genuine grace- it can at times be costly; it is never cheap grace that costs nothing to offer or receive. In a world of broken relationships the Gospel is about transformation and healing and restoration to spiritual wholeness with God and with other people –as far as that is possible in a sinful world. The message from God in the Gospel was express this way from God through Isaiah: '*Come now, let us settle the matter,*' says the Lord. '*Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool* (Isaiah 1:18). No-one in this life is potentially beyond hope. The question is always whether someone will take the opportunities for repentance when prompted by their conscience or not. As Christians we recognise the power of prayer for people who may not be praying for themselves –even if it takes years before we get a response.

### 3. **Time for Repentance** (Genesis 42:24-38)

(a) **The cost to Joseph** (Genesis 42:24-26) <sup>24</sup> *He turned away from them and began to weep, but then came back and spoke to them again. He had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes.* <sup>25</sup> *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,* <sup>26</sup> *they loaded their grain on their donkeys and left.* The side of Christian ministry in which all faithful Christians are engaged to some degree or other that can be forgotten is that the basis of pastoral care is a

love for people. Because it matters to God and therefore to us (in that order!) we want the best for others, but when others have treated us harshly or worse it can take a Holy Spirit inspired empowerment to keep on wanting God to work in that persons (or people's) life for good. There are those alive today who have suffered abuse of one kind or another within their immediate family circle where there ought to have been a place of safety, love and acceptance. Yet the opposite has sometimes proven to have been the case. In this scene, from the ten brothers' perspective, Joseph's action of ordering the binding and imprisonment of Simeon must have appeared harsh and unjust. They couldn't see the fuller picture or grasp the motivation of the Egyptian official. God's love and His discipline can be misunderstood at times by His children (see Hebrews 12:4-11). Hebrews 12:10-11 states that human fathers *disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.* <sup>11</sup> **No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.** The sin of the brothers had prevented Joseph from seeing his father with whom he had a very close relationship –which was a live issue for Joseph. The pleasure of marriage and children did not take away that pain. Assuming he lived in the Egyptian capital Memphis, approximately ten miles south of the modern city of Cairo and Jacob was still living at Hebron (Genesis 35:27) there was a distance of around 250 miles between them. We could manage that by car or train for a weekend away to see friends or family, but in that era it was a vast distance for all but the seasoned merchant adventurer or soldier. Joseph wept because resolving this issue meant so much to him. He took no pleasure in Simeon's imprisonment, but it was the only way to bring his whole family to address the unspoken issue that had overshadowed them all for years. The return of their money was an act of practical generosity as Joseph knew how long the famine would last and their money would have run out, as happened to most Egyptians a few years later (Genesis 47:15). Our heavenly Father loves His children we must never forget that. The human situations through which we pass do not negate that. The question that might be helpful to ask is this: what does God want me / us to learn from this experience or situation? How might God be glorified through the circumstances in which we find ourselves? The answers may not be what we expected but it opens our minds to the possibility that we had not considered a perspective that might turn out to be in line with God's purposes. Isaiah 55:8-9: *'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord.* <sup>9</sup> *'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.*

(b) **The Concern of the brothers** (Genesis 42:27-28) <sup>27</sup>*At the place where they stopped for the night one of them opened his sack to get feed for his donkey, and he saw his silver in the mouth of his sack.* <sup>28</sup> *'My silver has been returned,' he said to his brothers. 'Here it is in my sack.'* *Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, 'What is this that God has done to us?'* What does it take for you and me to invite God's perspective on our lives and circumstances? A year earlier or ten, I don't think the brothers would have even though let alone asked this question upon finding their money returned to their sacks. They, like many people today, would have thought it was the responsibility of the shop-keeper / trader to ensure that the correct sum of money was retained from the financial transaction. When a person's conscience is awakened they start to ask themselves –and sometimes other people too- the right questions. It is a further step along the way to get to the right answers, but when people ask the wrong questions they inevitably will miss the correct answer. This situation is still far from resolved but it is very possible that this was the first time in years that these brothers used God's name and made reference to His person with genuine convictions. There are plenty of people today who will use God's name in conversation or refer to 'acts of God' but have no interest in finding out what He thinks about their lives or circumstances, let alone their personal accountability for their actions to God. However, we can pray for them that circumstances may arise that they begin within themselves to ask questions about God and

how He might be involved in some way in their lives. For the first time these brothers had a conscience about money that they didn't think belonged to them. It hadn't bothered them years earlier taking twenty shekels of silver for little brother Joseph (Genesis 37:28); now money for food was an issue. If the brother in question opening the sack was Levi then it would have been extraordinary. He and Simeon were not only murderers, but maliciously cruel to animals when they were in bad moods (Genesis 49:5-7). When God converts a person, He converts the whole person whose life post-conversion will show evidence of transformation. There are people you and I know whose hearts appear hardened against the Lord and apparently closed to spiritual conversations with His people. Keep on praying! If God could break through to hardened men like these He can equally touch the lives of people you and I are praying for and want to see brought to faith or Christ or restored to professing and living for Christ.

(c) **The conversation with Jacob** (Genesis 42:29-38) <sup>29</sup> *When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them. They said,* <sup>30</sup> *'The man who is lord over the land spoke harshly to us and treated us as though we were spying on the land.'* <sup>31</sup> *But we said to him, "We are honest men; we are not spies."* <sup>32</sup> *We were twelve brothers, sons of one father. One is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in Canaan."* <sup>33</sup> *'Then the man who is lord over the land said to us, "This is how I will know whether you are honest men: leave one of your brothers here with me, and take food for your starving households and go."* <sup>34</sup> *But bring your youngest brother to me so I will know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will give your brother back to you, and you can trade in the land.'* <sup>35</sup> *As they were emptying their sacks, there in each man's sack was his pouch of silver! When they and their father saw the money pouches, they were frightened.* <sup>36</sup> *Their father Jacob said to them, 'You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. **Everything is against me!**'* <sup>37</sup> *Then Reuben said to his father, 'You may put both of my sons to death if I do not bring him back to you. Entrust him to my care, and I will bring him back.'* <sup>38</sup> *But Jacob said, 'My son will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left. If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my grey head down to the grave in sorrow.'* The next conversation to be had is with old Jacob. They had conned him just as he had done with his father Isaac. Would the abusive family cycle be broken? Who would take the lead in something so courageous? Sadly they were not willing to admit their shameful act with Joseph, so this conversation over many months was incomplete. They deep down, I think, thought Joseph might still be alive and feared coming across him. Jacob 'knew' his eldest son of his favourite Rachel was dead. Transformation would take place, but not overnight. Paul's words in Romans 2:4 are helpful here, words spoken to sinful people in general: *Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience, not realising that **God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*** The brothers reported that they had told the Egyptian official: *But we said to him, "We are honest men; we are not spies.* (Genesis 42:11) The first part of this sentence was rather doubtful even if the latter part was correct. However, they were talking to their father in a proper way about some of the issues facing them –it was a start. How many people, men in particular, refuse to talk about things that really matter in their families? Too many men will talk about the weather, sport and other 'safe' topics, but not what is really important in their lives. The façade of the brothers begins to crack. Reuben, the eldest son in the family, offers two of his own sons as 'hostages' should Benjamin not come back –if he had gone to Egypt. God is at work in their lives which though unknown to Joseph was most encouraging. There was, though, a need for patience to ensure the necessary time was given to address all the issues that needed attention. May God help us to do what is right if we have things to attend to, together with the patience to keep on praying for others who need to sort out things in their lives, for Jesus' sake, Amen.