

“Reconciliation Begins”
(Genesis 41:53-42:38)

Last week, we saw how the Lord brought all the elements that we have seen together to elevate Joseph to second in command over all of Egypt. In His perfect timing, the Lord gave Pharaoh a dream in which He showed Pharaoh what He was intending to do over the next fourteen years. At first, Pharaoh didn't understand the dream, because neither his wise men nor magicians were able to explain it to him. But finally the chief cupbearer admitted his sin and told Pharaoh about how Joseph had been able to interpret his and the chief baker's dream. Pharaoh called for Joseph, Joseph interpreted his dream, and then Pharaoh made him second in command over all of Egypt. The last thing we saw was how the Lord blessed Joseph. He not only gave him the wisdom to store up the excess grain for the coming years of famine, but He also blessed Joseph with a wife and two children. The one who had been barren, who had everything taken away from him unjustly by his brothers, was now full. Joseph was more than compensated for the several years he had spent as a slave and as a prisoner.

But tonight we see the years of famine come and with them the beginning of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers. First, we will see the famine bring Joseph's brothers into Egypt, second, Joseph's testing of his brothers, and finally, the Lord's testing of Jacob.

First, let's see how the famine brought Joseph's brothers down into Egypt. After the seven years of abundance had ended, the seven years of famine began. Since no one else had been warned about this famine – including, notice, Jacob's household – only the Egyptians were ready for it, and they were ready only because it was the Lord's plan to bring His people into Egypt. The famine was throughout all the lands. Only in Egypt was there bread. So when the Egyptians were hungry and cried out to Pharaoh, he told them to go to Joseph, who opened the storehouses and began selling grain to the Egyptians. Many others also came, from all over the earth, to buy grain from Joseph. Notice the Lord's hand at work again by placing Joseph over the foreign trade. He knew – because He had planned it – that Jacob would send his sons into Egypt for food. Joseph, certainly by this time, must also have known that sooner or later they would come, because the famine had spread throughout the world. And that's exactly what we see happen next. When Jacob heard that there was food in Egypt, he sent ten of his sons to get some for his household, but notice that he didn't send Benjamin, because he was the only remaining son of his dear wife Rachel.

It's hard to resist drawing a spiritual analogy from this passage with regard to our own situation today. In a certain sense, we are like Egypt, in that we have an abundance of spiritual food. The Lord has blessed us with His Gospel and a wonderful understanding of its riches. But yet there are those in the world around us who are experiencing a great famine, even those in the church. Many of the things that are preached and taught in the church today simply aren't true. Often we tend to think that the Christian television is getting the Word out, but it's very questionable whether or not there's enough truth on Christian television to lead a person to Christ. The people of the world are starving and dying for lack of knowledge. If they are to survive, they need to

know where the food is. But how are they going to find out? The only ones who can tell them are those who have this treasure. We must do it. Love to our neighbor dictates that we must, if we are to honor the Lord in this life. May the Lord encourage us to be the means to their survival, even as Joseph – a type and picture of Christ – was, as he opened the storehouses of Egypt and gave the people the food they needed to live.

Now when the brothers arrived in Egypt, they immediately went to Joseph and bowed down before him. You can imagine how he must have felt when he saw his brothers doing this. This is what the Lord had revealed to him in his dream so many years ago, and not it was finally coming to pass. When he saw them, he recognized them immediately, but he disguised himself so that they wouldn't know who he was. Then he began to speak harshly to them, asking them where they came from. I don't think we should understand from this or the events that follow that Joseph was taking revenge on his brothers. It's much more likely that he was trying their hearts to see if they had repented of what they had done to him or not. If they had, he could safely tell them who he was. But if they hadn't, they might turn against him and end up ruining themselves and their father's household. The only way to find out would be to probe them for information, which is what he now does. This is the second thing I want us to see, Joseph's testing of his brothers.

First, he accused them of being spies. He couldn't accuse them of their crimes against him without giving himself away. He probably did this so that they would try to prove their innocence, and in doing so, he could find out more about how his father and his brother Benjamin were doing, without revealing himself. They said they weren't spies, but brothers. They went on to tell him that there were once twelve brothers in all, but that one was with their father and the other was no more. Notice they said that one was no more, in other words, that one was dead, the same thing they had told their father. They certainly wouldn't have wanted to tell this man that they had sold their brother as a slave in Egypt, because he might want to do the same to them. But Joseph knew the truth, and perhaps Joseph understood what they were thinking, and so he continued to test them. Could he really trust them? Why wasn't Benjamin with them? What if they had killed Benjamin, as they had once wanted to kill him. After all, Benjamin was now the only remaining son of his father's beloved Rachel. This was the reason they hated Joseph in the first place. This was also why Jacob didn't want Benjamin to go with them. Joseph didn't trust them. Perhaps even Jacob didn't trust them, because as far as he knew Joseph had been killed when he was with them. There was only one way to find out – Benjamin would have to come to Egypt. So he said to them, "By this you will be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here." His plan was to send one of the brothers, while he kept the others in prison. And so he put them all in prison for three days. But at the end of that time, he told them that because he too feared the Lord, one of them would stay with him, while the others went back to get their brother. If they could return with this youngest brother, he would believe them. Otherwise, they were spies. Now when his brothers heard this, they immediately began to assume that the hand of God was against them, even though they will find out later that God was really working this together for their good. Sometimes God appears to be frowning at us, when He, in fact, has a blessing just around the corner. They said, "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" (v. 21). It's interesting that when they were committing that crime, they weren't concerned about it at all. But now that they had done it, their conscience was convicting them for it, even these many years after it happened. This is why the Lord gave us a conscience: to tell us when we have sinned and to bring us to repentance. And until we deal with our sins in a biblical way by asking the forgiveness of those we have offended or by making right our wrongs, it won't leave us alone, at least it won't if we haven't seared it by continually resisting it. We need to learn to listen more to this voice of conscience as it seeks to lead us to repentance, and not try to quiet it with excuses. The only one there who had any comfort in this situation at all was Reuben. The reason he did was that he had tried to help Joseph by convincing his brothers to release him. He said, "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood" (v. 22). Let this be a reminder to us that when we are tempted to sin, that it will be a great comfort to us later if we do what is right, rather than giving into that temptation.

Now when Joseph heard what they were saying, he was so overcome, he turned away and wept. Perhaps he felt their pain and the anguish of their dilemma, having sinned and now thinking that the consequences of that sin were coming upon them. It could also have been because Joseph never knew that his oldest brother Reuben had stood up for him and tried to deliver him from his other brothers. This may be why when he chose one of the brothers to keep in prison, he didn't choose the eldest – Reuben – but the second oldest – Simeon – to bear the blame for his brothers, while he sent the others away with food to bring back Benjamin. But for whatever reason, when Joseph composed himself and returned, he had Simeon bound before their eyes. Then he gave the order for their sacks to be filled, for provisions to be given to them, and also – secretly – for their money to be returned to them. But he still didn't reveal himself to them, because he first wanted to find out more about their sincerity.

After they loaded their donkeys, they left. But when the brothers reached the lodging place for the night, one of them opened his bag to give his donkey fodder and he found his money. Joseph had returned it. They didn't realize it yet, but he had actually given each brother his money back. But why did he? It might have been that he wanted to take care of them without it costing them anything. After all, he was now a prince in Egypt. He had everything he needed and far more. He could very easily take care of them now, even as he will when they finally come down into Egypt to live. In this sense, he is a picture of Jesus Christ, our elder brother, who out of His infinite resources has promised to give us eternal life without cost and to sustain us with the riches of heaven throughout eternity, if we will only trust in Him. It could also have been because Joseph wanted his brothers to think more about their crime. This was certainly the effect it had on them. When they saw their money, their hearts sank. They again thought that God was punishing them for what they had done. They said, "What is this that God has done to us?" They didn't know that He had a great blessing for them just around the corner. This is often what happens when things we don't understand happen to us. Sometimes we wonder whether the Lord is disciplining us for some sin we have committed, or whether He is simply testing us and stretching us through some persecution of the enemy to make us grow stronger and more like Christ. Either way, if we are the Lord's, we can know that He will work it together for our good. The end result in either case is that we

will grow more like the Lord, if we submit to Him in each case, and seek to continue in His ways. And so we shouldn't lose heart, but look continually to Him and trust.

Well, we've seen the famine bring Joseph's brothers into Egypt, and Joseph test his brothers. Finally, let's see how the Lord tests Jacob. When the brothers returned home, they told their father everything that had happened, and understandably, he was very concerned. He thought that somehow his sons had provoked the Egyptians. He had no way of knowing that these things happened because his son Joseph was alive and was testing the sincerity of his brothers. Again, it may have been that he didn't trust his sons since the time Joseph had died while in their care. This conviction was strengthened even more when each of the brothers emptied their sacks and found their money was also returned. They were all dismayed. But Jacob wrongfully concluded that Simeon was dead now, just like Joseph. He certainly didn't want Benjamin to die as well, so he refused to let him go. If anything happened to him, he would surely die from grief. He even refused when Reuben offered his two sons to him as surety, saying that he could put them both to death if he didn't return safely with Benjamin. In his mind, everything had turned against him. Actually, as far as trusting God and His good Providence to him, he had failed. He thought that two of his sons were dead, and the one he loved the most was in danger of being next, when in fact all of them were alive and his redemption from this famine was just around the corner. Sometimes, perhaps very often, we misread the hand of Providence. We often wrongly conclude that things such as slander, or persecution, or sickness, or financial difficulty, or conflicts in our relationships, or whatever difficult thing we have to face, are all against us, when in fact, the Lord is working them all together for our good. The Lord tells us that He chastens every son He receives; He disciplines all whom He loves (Heb. 12:6). He corrects and humbles us so that He can break our pride and bring us to repentance. He does so that we might share His holiness (v. 10). When we are Christ's, we should never be discouraged. We should never look for another refuge, but trust in the One who said He would never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5), because He will work everything together for good (Rom. 8:28).

When Joseph's brothers came to Egypt, it was the beginning of their reconciliation. God had sent Joseph ahead of them to prepare a place for them. But now through these circumstances, the brothers will eventually admit their crime and be reconciled to Joseph. The Spirit of the Lord was in Joseph, working through him to bring about reconciliation among His people. He will eventually revive the spirit of Jacob, so that his faith in the Lord will be renewed. Next time we will see that the Lord in His Providence will force them to go back into Egypt, this time with Benjamin, in order to complete this process of reconciliation. Amen.