



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Severe Mercies

#### Genesis 42:1-28

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Today's pop-psychologists and advice gurus often talk about "tough love". The idea is that we often "enable" the poor choices others make by giving them support when we should be cutting them loose so that they can suffer the consequences of their actions and learn from them. "Tough love" has no place in God's economy. God certainly allows us to suffer the consequences of our poor choices. He often teaches us to learn from our mistakes. But God never cuts his people loose. Genesis has been teaching us from the beginning that God never "unplugs" from his Creation. He's always in control, always sustaining, always caring. In God's economy we don't see "tough love"; what we see instead are "severe mercies". God often allows and even providentially ordains hardships in our lives, but he never cuts us loose to face them alone. As we've seen with Joseph, God walks with us through our trials, teaching us and shaping our character, but most importantly, manifesting his own glory both to us and to the world. We've seen this over the course of Joseph's thirteen years in slavery and prison in Egypt. Now, in Genesis 42, we'll see the same principle at work in the rest of Joseph's family as God walks with them through the hardships he has providentially brought about.

At the end of Chapter 41 the storyteller gave us a hint of what's coming when he told us that the seven-year famine for which he prepared Egypt, "was severe over all the earth" and that "all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain". We've been wondering as the story unfolded: What about Jacob and

Joseph's brothers? Judah's story in Chapter 38 made it clear that God hasn't written them off. In fact, the story of the birth of Judah's sons underscored the fact that Judah's line, especially, is going to be important in the story of God's redemption. At some point, these paths have to reconnect; at some point Joseph and his brothers are going to have to meet up again. The famine is God's means to reunite them. It's one of these "severe mercies" through which he manifests himself, blesses his people, and brings the story of redemption one step closer to its fulfilment in Jesus. Look at verses 1-5:

**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.**

"Go down to Egypt and buy grain, that we may live and not die." Now we see how the storylines are converging. And while Jacob, in sending his sons to Egypt wasn't thinking any further than his family's need for food and for physical survival, the storyteller loads that statement, "that we may live and not die," with a deeper meaning as we look at the condition of Jacob's family. They may be on the verge of starvation, but as we look at the picture we've been given of these men, we see that the effects of sin have left them *spiritually* starved. The picture so far has been an ugly one. This is a family that, from the beginning, has been torn apart by Jacob's polygamy and favouritism. These are the brothers who took savage revenge on the men of Shechem and slaughtered them. These

are the men who were ready to murder their brother, Joseph, and who spared him only because they found they could turn a small profit by selling him to slavers instead. And think of Judah, who worshipped Canaanite fertility gods by cavorting with temple prostitutes.

And here we see them again. They have no leader and no initiative. They're starving and all they can do, as Jacob says, is to sit around and dumbly look at each other. Jacob is still failing as a father. He snaps at them in anger and we see that he's still playing favourites. With Joseph, the son of his favourite wife gone, he's now doting on her second son, Benjamin. He barks at his sons to go to Egypt to buy grain—a possibly dangerous, week-long journey—but he insists that Benjamin stay behind and out of danger. This is the covenant family, but it's a mess. Its witness to God is poor—probably almost non-existent. God's people need to be rescued from starvation, yes; but even more importantly, they need to be rescued from their sin.

And so off to Egypt the ten brothers go. As they made the trip, they had to be remembering those Midianite traders to whom they'd sold Joseph twenty years before; they had been on their way to Egypt too. Every step that brought these men closer to Egypt would have reminded them of the great sin they'd committed against their brother and the grief they had caused their father. With every step that brought them closer to Egypt they felt more heavily the weight of guilt as God prepared them to face what they had done. After twenty years some of them might have managed to put the memory of that sin to rest, but now God dredges it up and puts it in the forefront of each of their thoughts.

As it turns out, either Joseph is handling the sale and distribution of grain personally or he's supervising and, recognising his brothers in the crowd, decides to step in and handle their sale himself.

**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."** (Genesis 42:6-7a)

Joseph recognises his brothers, but they don't recognise him. Consider that it's not only been twenty years and that he'd have been dressed in Egyptian finery, but that his brothers would never have dreamed that the brother they sold to be a slave would now be Pharaoh's vizier. They could very well have been expecting that after twenty years, he may well have died. But as they bow down before him, Joseph remembers the dreams he'd had all those years before—the ones that had got him into trouble with these same brothers. And yet he also realises that the dream isn't being completely fulfilled here in the grain market. In the first of his dreams, eleven sheaves of wheat representing his brothers, had bowed before him. Here ten of them were doing just that, but where was Benjamin? Joseph had to be wondering: Are these the same men who threw me down a well and sold me to slavers? Did they do the same to Benjamin?

And so he takes an air of authority with his brothers and puts them on the spot. With the dream in mind, Joseph

knew that God was at work here and just as he had wisely come up with a plan to save Egypt, he now starts working on a plan to save his family. He starts by accusing his brothers of being spies. This isn't far-fetched. A starving army may well have sent a group of spies over the border to scope things out and to see if Egypt was ripe for invasion during the famine. A large family, like Jacob's, might even do the same, probing for a weak spot and then raiding the grain supplies.

And in response they plead with him: "No! We're not spies. We're ten brothers who have come to buy grain for our family." They emphasise that they're brothers, because a family would never risk all its sons on a risky spying adventure. And they stress their honesty. But Joseph knows these men—or at least what they were twenty years before. They were never honest. Think about their deception of the men of Shechem. They convinced the Shechemites to be circumcised and then took advantage of them while they were incapacitated and murdered them all. It's not enough for them to tell Joseph that they're honest; they're going to have to prove it. And so Joseph keeps pressing them harder.

**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.** (Genesis 42:12-17)

The real test of whether or not these men have changed lies in how they treat their brother, Benjamin. And so Joseph hammers at their story until they give up the fact that they have another brother at home. Then Joseph throws them in prison and insists that they prove their story: he'll free one of them so that he can go and fetch Benjamin as proof of their story.

For three days the brothers worry about their fate while they sit in the prison. Those three days gave Joseph time to work out the details of his plan.

**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.** (Genesis 42:18-20)

So instead of nine of them remaining in prison, Joseph tells them that he'll hold only one of them as a hostage while they go to fetch their younger brother. "I fear God", he says. To the Hebrew way of thinking to fear God was seek after righteousness and justice. If the brothers were telling the truth, Joseph doesn't want to be responsible for further burdening their starving families. The brothers accept Joseph's demands. Their families are back in Canaan on the verge of starvation; they need to do whatever they can to get food to them. And yet they start talking amongst themselves. It dawns on them that God is at work here too. Twenty years before they had imprisoned and sold their brother and now God is punishing 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.” 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.** (Genesis 42:21-25)

As Joseph listens to his brothers he realises that something has changed in them. They admit their guilt for what they had done and in that Joseph realises that there’s hope. Proverbs 28:13 tells us:

**Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.**

That seems to be what Joseph is seeing here. Mercy is possible now that his brothers have confessed and expressed remorse for their sins. And so, overcome with emotions of relief, Joseph turns away from them and secretly weeps. But the conversation of the brothers has also revealed something else. Joseph would have assumed that Reuben, being the oldest, might have been the ringleader in their plan to kill him. As the brothers talk, Joseph realises that it was Reuben who saved his life. This may be why Joseph decides to keep Simeon as his hostage. Not only had Simeon had a violent past, but he was the second oldest after Reuben.

With Simeon in custody, Joseph sets his first test in motion. He has his men load his brother’s packs with the grain they’d purchased, but he also instructs them to return their money, secretly hiding it in the sacks of grain.

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?” (Genesis 42:26-28)

Now they’re in *real* trouble, they think. They left Simeon as a hostage so that they could prove their honesty by going home and then returning with Benjamin, but how are they going to return now? When Joseph notices the missing money, he’s naturally going to assume that they stole it! If they don’t go back, Simeon is done for, but if they do go back, they’re all in for it now.

When they get home to their father, they neglect to mention the money. In fact, they neglect to mention a lot. They say nothing about being imprisoned and they put as positive a spin as they can on the whole story. Look at verses 29-34:

**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.”**

Jacob is *not* pleased. Why did they have to go and mention that they had another brother? But the situation gets worse:

**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.** (Genesis 42:35)

Now Joseph is *really* going to think they’re a bunch of thieves! So much for their claims to be honest men. And despite their protests, Jacob is probably suspicious that they’ve sold Simeon into slavery. Where else would this money have come from? The brothers are now going to be even more hesitant to return to Egypt, and Jacob has no desire to risk Benjamin, his favourite son. If this powerful man in Egypt doesn’t arrest the whole lot of them the moment they set foot in Egypt, how does he know his sons won’t sell Benjamin for more money? And yet this was Joseph’s test. Twenty years before, his brothers had sold him for twenty shekels of silver. By hiding the money in their sacks of grain, he’ll find out if they still value silver over family. Will they risk punishment or will they let Simeon sit in jail and possibly face execution if they fail to return? This is the first of Joseph’s tests to see if they’ve truly changed or if they simply regret their past actions because they think God is punishing them.

The first scene of this new act in Genesis comes to a close with Jacob’s painful words to his sons:

**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.”** (Genesis 42:36-38)

Jacob’s sons are beginning to change, but Jacob’s stuck. Despite being afraid of what Joseph will do to them because of the money in their sacks, the brothers are ready to return to Egypt with Benjamin so that they can save Simeon. Hot-headed Reuben even comes up with a rash plan to leave his two sons behind as hostages with Jacob. But Jacob refuses. He doesn’t trust his sons, but more importantly, he doesn’t trust God. In his mourning, we see the old Jacob. The new Israel is gone. He’s thinking about these events from a human perspective. Despite the fact that God walked with him through his exile and in his return to Canaan, Jacob is now living in fear. He’s forgotten the lesson he learned that night when he wrestled with the angel on the banks of the Jabbock. He’s clinging to his son when he should be clinging to God.

The good news is that this isn’t the end of the story. Even though they don’t know it yet, through his severe mercies God has brought the family of Jacob together again. As the brothers made their way to Egypt, God put their sin, long lost in the past, directly in front of them. Through their journey, God prepared them for confrontation. Through his severe mercies, Joseph has put his brothers to the test. And through all of this, God has brought them to the point of repentance. Notice that God never just cuts his people loose. He walks with them so that when the time is right, he can restore them to right relationship—with themselves and, more importantly, with him.

Brothers and sisters, that’s the key point to remember here. God’s purpose is to manifest his glory to the world and to restore his fallen Creation. Through his severe mercies—through this seven-year famine—God reveals his power over kings and nations to the people of mighty Egypt. And through his people, as he heals their broken relationships and overcomes their sin, he makes them vessels of his grace and his blessings—grace and blessing to be poured out on the nations. Here in these few chapters that tell us the story of Jacob’s sons, we see the whole history of Israel. What God does in a small way through the fathers of the nation here, he will do in a much larger way through the nation of Israel itself over the course of her history. Israel’s story reaches its crescendo in the coming of Jesus the Messiah and as God pours out his blessings on the nations through the gift of his Son. But friends, through Jesus, God draws the nations into that same family. Through Jesus the Church grows, no longer encompassing a single nation, but all peoples. And as this new body continues the mission of carrying God’s blessings to the world, God pours out his own Spirit, that we might be filled with power and made holy for the task.

And that brings us back again to this point that God never cuts his people loose. He was with Joseph. He was with Jacob. In Jesus—in Emmanuel, the one who is “God with us”—he became incarnate and took our flesh upon himself that he might be one with us forever. And now in these last days that follow his Ascension to his throne in glory, he has filled us with his own Holy Spirit. Brothers and sisters, *God is with us*. Our trials are never instances of “tough love”; they are “severe mercies”—they’re means of grace through which God never ceases to make himself known and to draw us ever closer to himself.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, thank you for the assurance that you are always with us. Give us grace to see that you are with us even in the darkest pit and teach us to trust you in all things that we might be transformed into vessels of honour, ready to carry your blessings to the world around us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.