

Recognizing Guilt

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- [0 : 0 0] When have things been a matter of life and death for you? When have things been a matter of life and death? Maybe it was a road accident or someone collapsing in a shopping center.
- Maybe you're desperately waiting for the police or the ambulance to arrive. Last Monday, my nephew came over for a visit. He's only two. And we were playing in the front garden.
- And I opened the gate just to get something. And in about three seconds, he'd gotten from the front garden all the way to the middle of Church Road. A car was coming as well. His mother screamed, ran out and got him.
- If someone told me that he was a runner and that you have to watch him at all times, it's a matter of life and death. I wouldn't have been so careless with the gate.
- I recently bought a fishing kayak to get farther out into Port Phillip Bay. It's secondhand. It's pretty cheap. It needs a lot of work. But when it came to the life vest, I spared no expense.
- [1 : 0 3] I bought the best one on the market. Because if my cheap kayak goes under, the quality of my vest will become a matter of life and death. The coronavirus, a global pandemic.
- We're planning now how best to ease ourselves out of lockdown. But our planning might be considered a matter of life and death. See, that is the theme of our passage today.
- Jacob's family are facing their own global pandemic. If you look at the end of chapter 41, just before our passage today. Chapter 41, verse 57. All the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph.
- Why? Because the famine was severe everywhere. The world is starving. It's a matter of life and death. But on another level, we'll see life and death of the spiritual kind.
- Because today, we meet Joseph's idiot brothers. We left them in chapter 37 when they sinned terribly against him. And for 20 years, they've been living a lie about what they did.
- [2 : 1 2] But today, their guilt catches up with them as they're all reunited. And because Joseph is God's man, we can read their sin against Joseph as a sin against God.
- On the surface, life and death due to a global famine. But really, for the brothers, life and death because of their guilt before God. These brothers are terrible sinners.
- They need to be reconciled back to God or else face his judgment. And for the next two weeks, we're going to see. There's a slide which will come up on your screen.
- For the next two weeks, we're going to see that reconciliation with God is spelled with two R's. Reconciliation is recognition of our guilt and repentance of our sin.
- That leads to reconciliation with God. If we don't recognize our guilt, we won't repent of our sin. Pretty obvious sort of stuff.
- [3 : 1 5] But that means we won't be reconciled to God. Today is the first R, recognition. It is a matter of life and death. And so, I've got a handout here.

But you should find one sort of, if I point above my head. The link is probably about there, I think, on your screens. A handout which will help you. And you'll need to have Genesis 42 open.

Let me read from verse 1. When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, Why do you keep looking at each other? He continued, I've heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die.

If there is a global pandemic, a global famine, sorry, finding food is a matter of life and death. Verse 5. So Israel's sons were among those who went to buy grain.

For there was a famine in the land of Canaan also. When the brothers get to Egypt, they meet the minister for agriculture. So in verse 6, practicing good social etiquette, they bow down before him.

[4 : 21] But despite their manners, the Egyptian minister accuses them of something very bad. Verse 9. You are spies. You have come to see where our land is unprotected.

No, my lord. Your servants have come to buy food. We're all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies. And all the way through today, the issue is whether or not we're dealing with honest men.

Verse 15. This is how you will be tested. Surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your younger brother comes here. Send one of your number to get your brother.

The rest of you will be kept in prison. Why? So that your words may be tested. To see if you are telling the truth. If you are honest men or if you're spies.

I don't know if you've ever been accused of a crime. If you've ever been locked in jail for something you didn't do. Once years ago, I was detained by the Secret Service when I was at the White House.

[5 : 25] It wasn't very serious. It was the George W. Bush years. So don't worry. But in verse 18 to 20, he says, do this and you will live.

This time, one brother stays in custody while the rest takes grain back to the family. Verse 20. But you must bring your youngest brother to me so that your words may be verified and that you may not die.

Keep going. Verse 25 to 27. It's the same thing. Only this time it's stealing. Their money is planted back in their bags to make it look as though they're thieves.

Verse 28. Has that ever happened to you at Woolies, the self-checkout?

You scan your groceries and you walk off forgetting to pay for things. And then your heart sinks and you tremble because you know it looks like you're a big shoplifter. You see, on one level, life and death because of the famine.

[6 : 30] Life and death because of their spies. Life and death because they're thieves. But they are actually honest. They're innocent of the charges.

Because on another level, at a deeper level, it's life and death of a spiritual kind. Because for 20 years, these brothers have been living a lie about what they did to Joseph.

Walking around with guilt. And in every situation, God brings their past catching up with them. So this is point two.

And what we'll do is we'll go back through the verses and see if you can hear God catching up with them. So verse one. When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, Why do you just keep looking at each other?

Obviously, they need grain in Egypt. But that is where Joseph is. Egypt was a sign of their sin. They're too numb with guilt to get grain.

- [7 : 34] So instead, they just keep staring blankly at one another. Let me ask you, if there was a famine, are these the 10 men you would trust to bring you grain?
- Old man Jacob, he has no choice. You can't choose your family, as they say. But you can hear his mistrust. Verse four. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with the others because he was afraid that harm might come to him.
- You see, the last time Jacob sent a favorite son amongst these brothers, he never saw him again. So this time he keeps a new favorite Benjamin safely at home.
- They're too dishonest to trust. They can't outrun their guilt. And in verse six, you can see God orchestrating things. Now, Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people.
- There is no way the brothers are going to miss Joseph. God has put them all on a collision course. Verse six. So when the brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.
- [8 : 46] Do you remember when Joseph was 17? He had this dream, which is going to be on the slide. Now, in his dream, he said this.
- We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose up and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it. It is no coincidence that brothers are literally bowing down, literally asking for Joseph's superior sheaves of grain.
- God has done this. Verse seven. As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger.
- Verse eight. Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. You see, the brothers don't recognize Joseph just as they don't recognize God's hand in all of this.
- And it's such a huge moment because Joseph's in a position of power. His brothers are now at his mercy and revenge is sweet. But verse nine.
- [9 : 52] Then he remembered his dreams about them. See, this is God's family. His plans of land and offspring and blessing. They can't come true if Joseph gets his revenge.
- And so instead, he sets about remaking this family. You see, on one level, verse nine to 17 are about spying.
- But really, God is breaking these brothers down. He's humbling them. They're thrown in jail just as they threw Joseph in jail. A dose of their own medicine.
- God is waking them up to their guilty past. Verse 18 to 19. He says, do this and you will live. For I fear God. If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison while the rest of you go.
- You see, once before, the brothers left one of their own in prison. And like a dose of their own medicine or a wicked sense of *deja vu*, the penny finally drops.
- [10 : 59] They finally recognize what God has been doing to them. Verse 21. 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 is why this distress has come on us. Reuben replied, didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy, but you would not listen.
- Now we must give an accounting for his blood. And so let us do some accounting this morning. On one side of the ledger, they plotted to kill Joseph, stripped him of his privilege, threw him in a cave, sold him to slavery for some silver, lied to their father, Jacob, making him believe he was torn to pieces by wild animals.

And they've been lying about it ever since. When it comes to reconciliation with God, their account is way in the red. The only way to balance the ledger is by their death.

That's the only payment God accepts for sin. And we all say, get him, Joseph. Revenge is sweet. But instead, verse 24, something remarkable.

[12 : 15] He turned away from them and began to weep. You see, Joseph's heart is God's heart. God is so personally hurt by our sin that he weeps.

When we recognize our guilt, instead of judging us as we deserve, he weeps. God has orchestrated these events to wake these brothers up so they will finally recognize their guilt before him.

Surely we are being punished because of our brother, they said. In verse 25 to 27, when Joseph planted that silver in their sacks, it reminds them of the last time they had lots of silver.

When they sold Joseph to slavery. Verse 28. Their hearts sank. They turned to each other, trembling and said, what is this that God has done to us?

You see, on one level, an Egyptian minister has been setting them up on trumped up charges. When really, God has been setting them up ever since they arrived.

[13 : 24] Needling them. Prodding them to expose their guilt. Are you spies? No. Are you thieves? No. Are you honest men? No.

Because once we left our brother in prison. We left him for dead. We sold him for silver. And we've been lying to our father ever since.

What is this that God has done to us? Surely we're being punished because of our brother, they said. You see, for the first time in their lives, their eyes are open.

They've been broken down by God, humbled so they could see or reach that first R, recognition of guilt.

Perhaps God is ready to build them up again. Perhaps they're totally changed individuals. But actually, the truth is, God has had to drag them kicking and screaming the whole way.

[14 : 25] And for the rest of the chapter, we'll see just how far they have to go. Let me show you how unrepentant they still are. This is point three. Verse 29 to 34.

What happens is they retell of their time in Egypt. But look at how much detail they leave out. They don't mention three days in jail.

In verse 33, they claim to have left one of the brothers with the Egyptian official. But actually, we know that Simeon was bound up and before their eyes are thrown in jail.

In verse 34, they claim that once they produce Benjamin, they will be free to trade in the land, free to come and go as they please. But we know the Egyptian official said, bring Benjamin here so that you may not die.

And most of all, they still haven't come clean to their father about what they did to his favorite son. These honest men, they can't stop lying.

[15 : 30] Bending the truth has helped them out of so many tricky situations in their lives. They're not ready to give it up. No repentance here today. And that is why this family is still so dysfunctional.

That's what the rest of the verses are all about. Sure, they recognize their guilt, but they refuse to repent of their sin, to change their ways. So there can be no reconciliation in this family, no peace with God as well.

This is point four. Let me show you how messed up this family still is. So verse 35, the brothers, they open their sacks in front of dad. And when they and their father saw the money pouches, they were all frightened.

The brothers are frightened because, again, it looks like they're thieves. But Jacob is frightened for a very different reason. Verse 36. The father Jacob said to them, you have deprived me of my children.

You see, the last time the brothers came home with a bunch of silver. Jacob says that Joseph was no more. This time they come home with a bunch of silver and Simeon is no more.

[16 : 42] He says, now you want to take my favorite son, Benjamin. Everything is against me. Verse 37. Eldest brother Reuben, he tries to guarantee Benjamin's safe return against the life of two of his own children.

Only in a family this messed up would they think granddad can be comforted by the loss of his favorite son with the killing of two of the grandkids.

And I think that's why in verse 38, Jacob is still playing favorites. Jacob said, my son, Benjamin, will not go down there with you. His brother is dead.

He is the only one left. There's only one son that matters in this family. The rest are all unrepentant rotters. You see, even though God wants this family, he doesn't want them as they are.

They aren't yet the honest men they claim to be. Not yet ready for God to use to bring about promises of offspring. But today is still a vital step.

[17 : 50] They can't be reconciled to God if they don't first recognize their guilt with him. They have taken that first step from death to life.

The step of recognition. And as we apply this passage, maybe we are like the brothers. Maybe we're guilty of sinning against other members of our family.

Other members of the church family. Over the next two weeks, before we take Lord's Supper again, this will be a perfect time to recognize our guilt.

To seek out other members of the family. Recognize our guilt with God. Maybe like the brothers, we're innocent of little things, all the while guilty of the bigger things.

Maybe we put on a good public face, all the while carrying around the guilt of secret things. Maybe we don't have any skeletons in the closet.

[18 : 53] Maybe we're not like them. Maybe there aren't any scandals to speak of. But maybe it is our acceptable sins that is the problem. So, we haven't stolen anything from Woolies, but just like every other Aussie, are our tax returns completely up to scratch?

We don't violently attack one another, but when are we ever going to start taking our anger seriously? We don't sell people into slavery in Egypt, but we do all love a good gossip session or a grumbling session.

I don't look at dodgy things on my phone, but I'm really good at driving while texting, which is surely much less bad, isn't it? I think there's a problem with recognizing guilt before God in our culture.

Our culture says there's no such thing. People probably disagree with my accounting earlier that if there is any red in our ledger, we can balance the books with some equal and opposite good deeds.

I'm sure our culture disagrees that guilt is a matter of life and death, because after all, if there was a God, surely he's all love and good things. He would never judge us.

[20 : 12] But a good life and death situation should wake us up. It's designed to open our eyes to the fact that we need to be reconciled to God.

We need to recognize our guilt with him first. The coronavirus, very serious life and death situation. 350,000 people around the world have lost their lives.

One of our prayers through this season have been that it would wake people up to how fragile life is, so they would do business with God, recognize their guilt with him.

My auntie Christine, she is dying of cancer. The doctors gave her about nine months to a year to live a couple of weeks ago. A literal life and death situation, but also a matter of life and death.

If she meets God with her guilt still intact. And so every week I go and see her, I talk to her about handing over her sin and guilt to Jesus.

[21 : 18] God's word to us today is come clean. Recognize our guilt today or face him with a guilty conscience tomorrow.

In a moment we're going to confess our guilt as a church family. But before we do, let me give you some great motivation to help you come clean. Remember we saw that Joseph didn't judge his brothers as they deserved, but he wept.

You see, far from smiting us from heaven, God's heart breaks when we confess our sins. He weeps. He's more grieved by our guilt and shame than we are.

He urges us to take it to him. He sent Jesus to take the death that our guilt deserves, so that we could only have the life. And so let me pray and then we will confess our sins together.

Let me pray. Father God, we thank you that you don't judge us as our sins deserved, but you weep. Thank you that you sent Jesus so that guilty sinners could be counted righteous.

[22 : 36] Thank you that you drag us, sometimes kicking and screaming, to recognize our guilt, just as you dragged Joseph's brothers to. convict us by your spirit that our eyes would be open to the ways that we have sinned and wronged you.

Amen.