

God reconciles families

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[0 : 00] Reconciliation is a really beautiful thing, isn't it? 22 years before what we've just read, back in chapter 37, the brothers had hated Joseph and they couldn't bear to speak to him.

! They'd ganged up, they'd plotted together, they'd grabbed him, they'd sold him to slave traders. A vicious, cold-hearted betrayal of their brother, this family torn apart by their sin.

And yet now, this morning, chapter 45, 22 long years later, there's reconciliation. You think, can you imagine what it must have felt like for them?

In the Bible in front of us, chapter 45, verses 14 and 15, then Joseph threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept. And Benjamin embraced him, weeping.

And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them, and afterwards his brothers talked with him.

Reconciliation is beautiful, it's beautiful when it happens.

[1 : 03] And maybe you know what that feels like. When you argue with someone close to you, and cross words are said and someone lashes out, and you walk away from each other, your relationship torn so painfully.

Until one of you comes back and says, I'm sorry. I was wrong, I hurt you. I won't do it again, please forgive me. And when the other person says, that's okay, I forgive you, come here.

And you hug, and cry, and breathe again. And your relationship mended. Beautiful, that's beautiful.

And some of us will live in families that are ongoingly torn. Maybe something bad happened way back when. And still now today, there's brothers or sisters or relatives who cannot bear to be in the same room together.

Attitudes of hardened and hatred and hurt runs deep. And it feels like there's no way back. And yet you ache and you long for reconciliation.

[2 : 08] To throw your arms around each other and weep and talk. Reconciliation, when it takes place, is beautiful. It's right. It's how things are meant to be. And one thing that Joseph's story shows us so wonderfully is that our God is in the business of reconciling families.

Reconciling brothers and sisters and relatives to one another and reconciling families to himself. That is God's work. It's what he's about.

God reconciles families. And we've read this morning just now from Genesis 42 and then Genesis 45.

And there's four and a half pages of story here, 42 through 45, which we're not going to work through verse by verse. Really helpfully, the Bible itself gives us a summary of the Joseph story for us to grab hold of.

In the New Testament, in Acts chapter 7, Stephen is speaking. He's the first Christian martyr. And listen to his story summary on the screen and just see how our chapters fit in.

[3 : 15] Look, because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. That's chapter 37. But God was with Joseph and rescued him from all his troubles.

Chapter 39. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

Chapters 40 to 41. Now our chapters this morning. Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering and our ancestors couldn't find food.

When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. Chapter 42, our first reading. On their second visit, chapters 43 and 44, Joseph told his brothers who he was.

Chapter 45. And Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. So in chapters 42 to 45, Joseph's brothers, who are desperate for food, make a first visit to Egypt and then a second visit.

[4 : 19] And it's in and to these two visits to Egypt that God works miraculously. Works miraculously. In the hearts of these brothers and the circumstances of what takes place.

To bring about the kind of reconciliation that we long for and that he plans for our good. This morning, from Genesis 42 to 45, I would love us to see three steps to reconciliation. Three steps to see what it takes and what God does to mend and reconcile torn and broken families.

Here's the first. Recognising your sin. Because with God and with one another, there will be no reconciliation until we recognise and confess what we have done wrong.

In your Bible, just turn back a couple of pages to the start of chapter 42. Chapter 42. At the start of chapter 42, at this point, Joseph is in Egypt.

[5 : 31] Remember, he's the wise ruler. He's got enough grain to feed the world. And in 42, verse 1, we're in Canaan with Jacob and the 11 brothers and they're starving. Just see what happens.

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, Why do you just 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.

You think to yourself, why do they just keep looking at each other? Could it be that they're not too keen to go to Egypt? Just in case someone from 20 years ago is there.

Well, they do what their dad says and 10 of them go down to Egypt. Not Benjamin, though. Not Joseph's brother. The other son of Rachel. It would break Jacob's heart if harm came to Benjamin as well as to Joseph.

Now, verse 6, Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.

[6 : 35] And as soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognised them. But he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. Where do you come from? He asked. So in the story, here's the drama and the suspense all the way through.

Joseph instantly recognises his brothers after all those years. Those who'd sinned against him. He sees them and he knows them. But they don't know who he is in his Egyptian clothing.

Speaking Egyptian, he's just the governor. And Joseph pretends to be a stranger. He holds back from them, understandably maybe. And then in his wisdom, he decides to test them.

Remembering his dreams, remembering that they will bow down to him. He says to them, you're spies. And they say, no, no, no, we are honest men. Well, are they? They say, verse 13, we were 12 brothers of one man.

And the youngest, Benjamin, is with our father. And one is no more. Joseph says, I'm summarising, I will test you. Your youngest brother must come here.

[7 : 42] I want to know if you are truth tellers. If you're honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison. You take grain to your household, but you must bring your youngest brother to me.

And so now the brothers are in a trouble. They're in a sticky situation in Egypt. And notice what they say. In front of Joseph, verse 21.

They said to one another, surely we are being punished because of our brother. They remember to 20 years ago. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen.

And that's why this distress has come on us. You see, they know. They know what they did. And it weighs on them.

And in this unrelated distress, they sense God's heavy hand on them. Reuben replied, didn't I tell you all those years ago not to sin against the boy, but you wouldn't listen.

[8 : 49] Now we must give an accounting for his blood. We sinned. We did wrong. We must pay under God. And they didn't realise that Joseph could understand them because he was using an interpreter.

And Joseph turned away from them and began to weep as he heard them, conscious of their sin. Before then, turning back and sending them off with their grain and putting their silver back in their sacks so it would look like they stole their silver wrongly.

And so the brothers go on their way and they stop for the night and discover the silver. And in verse 28, their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, what is this that God has done to us?

Having a guilty conscience can be a good thing. When we've sinned against someone and in so doing have sinned against God, if your heart sinks and you tremble and in your life you know that God sees you and his hand of discipline is on you, that's a good thing.

Well, fast forward through the story. The brothers make it back to Jacob. They eat their food. They get hungry again. They need a second trip to Egypt. And in chapter 43, they take Benjamin, as Joseph had demanded, and arrive to get more food.

[10:19] In chapter 44, Joseph sends them off again, but this time he places his special silver cup in Benjamin's sack. And when the steward catches up with them, they say, surely none of us has the silver cup.

In fact, if any of us has it, he will die and the rest of us will become servants. And so the cups, the sacks are opened and the cup is found in Benjamin's sack. And they're escorted back to Joseph as prisoners.

And Judah and the brothers come in and they throw themselves on the ground before Joseph. They still don't know who he is. Now listen to what happens.

This is chapter 44, forward a couple of pages, and verse 16. Joseph says to them, what have you done? And in verse 16, they say, what can we say to my Lord?

Well, Judah replied, what can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servant's guilt. The truth is they're innocent of stealing the silver cup, although they can't prove it.

[11:28] But the truth is that at the same time, God is uncovering their guilt. When they hated Joseph and sold him into slavery all those years ago, they sinned against him.

And they sinned against God. And they are guilty. And now God is uncovering their guilt. And they confess their sins before this unknown Egyptian ruler.

What do you think of what's going on here? It is actually very uncomfortable, if we're honest, when your sins are exposed.

And you realise you're guilty. Isn't it? Partly in our lives, we prefer that the bad we've done stays hidden. And so how tempting in our lives and our relationships and our families to be hard-hearted and to pretend that we've done nothing wrong.

But if we never recognise the things we've done wrong, we'll never find reconciliation with family members or with God.

[12:42] If you're never prepared to say, I've done wrong, you'll end up hardened and alone and cut off. But God in his mercy can open people like us up.

And we say it is a kind work of the Holy Spirit. When our God gets to work in us and convicts us of what we've done wrong. And shows us how we've hurt and betrayed others.

It's painful, but it's such a kindness to uncover our guilt and bring us to a sense of what we've done wrong. It is such a kindness.

Because this is the first step towards reconciliation. First thing these brothers do, they recognise their sin. We know what we've done wrong. Second step now for them.

Repenting of their sin. Repenting. And that is because there is no reconciliation for us with one another or with God. Until we turn away from the things that we have done.

[13:53] In Genesis 42 to 44, God not only convicts the brothers of their sins. He also begins to change their hearts. He brings them to repentance.

You notice it firstly maybe at the end of chapter 43. In chapter 43, the brothers have come a second time to Egypt and brought Benjamin with them.

And Benjamin is like Joseph. He's a favourite of Jacob's. Back at the beginning, Jacob favoured Joseph. Dad favouring the son. And made him a special technicolour coat.

Do you remember? And the brothers were jealous and they hated him for it. At the end of chapter 43, Joseph serves food to all the brothers. And in verse 33, the men had been seated before him in order of their ages from the firstborn to the youngest.

And they looked at each other in astonishment. Because when portions were served to them from Joseph's table, Benjamin's portion was five times as much as everyone else's.

[14:58] It's a set up. It's a test. Now Benjamin is the specially loved and favoured one. What will the brothers do? Like it's a really good test.

I don't know what mealtimes are like for you at home. What happens if one child or one other adult gets a slightly bigger portion than everyone else? Or five times as many chips on their plate?

Well, will the brothers hate Benjamin for it? As they hated Joseph. Is there in the brothers that wretched brotherly envy still festering inside them?

He's got more than me. I hate him. No. They feasted and drank freely with him. Because they're changing.

God is changing them. Not just here in this moment, but secondly, in the great climax of chapter 44. In chapter 44, again, Benjamin has been found with the silver cup in his sack.

[16:07] And in verse 44, verse 17, Joseph says, The man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you go back to your father in peace.

And at this moment in the story, it's decision time for the brothers. Back in chapter 37, they callously sold Jacob and Rachel's dearly loved son into slavery in Egypt.

They returned home with silver in their pockets and they broke their dad's heart. Right here in chapter 44, the same decision is before them.

Are they going to leave this son of Jacob in slavery and take the silver and return home? They don't. Because up steps Judah.

Chapter 44, verse 18. If you've been here with us through the Joseph story, you know who Judah is, huh? Judah is the brother who said, let's sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites.

[17:14] Judah is the brother who went down to Egypt, married outside the family, slept with a prostitute, decreed that his daughter-in-law should be burned to death, and then in a moment of clarity admitted that Tamar is more righteous than I.

Judah is the cruel, sinful family wrecker. But now, he's changed. Recognising his crime and knowing his guilt before God, he turns.

And addressing the Egyptian ruler, so he thinks, he speaks so nobly. We have a father. And this young son, Benjamin's brother, is dead.

And Benjamin's the only one left and his father loves him. And if we don't take him back, our father will go down to the grave in sorrow. No cruelty anymore. But compassion for his father.

And then finally, in verse 33, a stunning offer from this changed man. Chapter 44, verse 43.

[18:24] Now then, please let your servant, that's Judah, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers.

How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No, do not let me see the misery that would come on my father. In self-sacrificing love for his father, Judah offers his own life and offers himself as a slave in place of Benjamin.

What should we say? He's changed. He's no longer the man he was. Through these strange encounters with an Egyptian ruler, God has been changing him.

The God who sees and knows all has acted sovereignly and moved the brothers to recognise their sin, but not just recognise their sin, turn from it.

And that is why now, thirdly, you see this family finally reconciled by grace.

[19:39] Chapter 45 is the great reveal. It's the great reveal, the climax. All the way through, Joseph had been testing them and wept in sorrow and heard them express their guilt about the brother is no more.

And now finally, Judah, seeing Judah offer himself rather than leave Benjamin in slavery. Seeing this soft-hearted repentance in this brother who once sold him.

Joseph is finally undone. And he could no longer control himself before all his attendance and he cried out, make everyone leave my presence.

So there's no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers and he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him and Pharaoh's household heard about him. Joseph said to his brothers, I am Joseph.

Is my father still living? But his brothers were not able to answer him because they were terrified at his presence, you think. But leaning towards them in grace and compassion, Joseph says to his brothers, come close to me, come close.

[20:50] And they did and he said again, I'm your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt.

And now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here. Because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.

And he spoke kindly to them and he reassured them. And then, verse 14, he threw his arms around Benjamin and wept. And he kissed his brothers and wept over them.

This family, torn and broken for over 20 years, but now reconciled so beautifully. Reconciled by God.

Because this is God's work. The God who rules over every circumstance of our lives. The God who has power to change hearts and attitudes.

The God who here in Genesis, the God who doesn't change. The God who reconciles brothers and sisters and relatives to one another and reconciles families together to himself.

[22 : 02] I think the application of these verses to our lives falls out fairly straightforwardly. Will we seek after reconciliation? In God's world, reconciliation, a restored relationship, always has to take place firstly, primarily with him.

You know, we can't hide our sins from him. He sees us. He knows our every thought and word and deed.

And if and when he uses circumstances in your life to bring home to you your guilt before him, that is good. So can I say, if you haven't yet, would you recognise your sin and come clean with God?

And then turn. Lord God, I'm sorry for how I've treated others and treated you. I've done wrong. I turn from my sins and I turn to you.

Have mercy on me. Because as you do that, like Joseph to his brothers, the Lord God will welcome you into his family with reconciling grace and outstretched arms.

[23 : 20] Seek after reconciliation with God in your own life because he is a God who brings reconciliation. But then secondly, seek after reconciliation with one another.

You know, there is no family situation. And there is no church family situation so torn and broken that the Lord God cannot repair it.

Our God is able to soften hearts and change lives and move us to confess and turn from our sins and be reconciled.

I wonder if in your family, your nuclear family, not your church, I wonder if in your nuclear family there is a tear. I wonder if there are sins that have been committed and bad words spoken, maybe even 20 years ago, and a family split has stuck.

Do you have a nagging guilt over the part you played in it? Do you have an ache for reconciliation? Do you have a nagging guilt over the part you played? Could it be time for you this week, this year, to recognise the part that you played?

[24 : 37] To say to the person, God has uncovered my guilt, I did wrong against you. I sinned against you. And I was wrong. And I'm sorry.

You know, it would take great guts, but it takes great spiritual humility and bravery to come clean and to turn from what you've done.

But how wonderful if, having been forgiven, you might hug someone again, a relationship mended. Or maybe you were sinned against many, many years ago.

Is it time for you, like Joseph, to lean in with an open-handed and an open-hearted desire for reconciliation? With someone in your family?

With someone at work? Someone in your church family? Reconciliation is the work of God. It is what he's about.

[25 : 44] He longs for us to be reconciled. Reconciled to himself and to one another. And do you know what? Final thing to say this morning. It is through reconciled families that the Lord God acts to save a broken and torn world.

It was through this family, Jacob and his sons, that God's plan moved forward as they were reconciled.

And today it is through church families like ours, of people who've been cruel and sinful and yet reconciled to God and reconciled to each other through Jesus.

It is through church families who are reconciled that the Lord God acts to save a broken world. Will we seek after reconciliation?

Let me lead us in a prayer. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Some words from Proverbs 28.

[26 : 57] Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Our Lord and God, Cain killed his brother Abel.

He was not his brother's keeper. You are the God who brings about reconciliation. Reconciliation with you and with one another.

We praise you for the beauty of reconciling grace. Thank you that by your Holy Spirit, you are able to convict us of our sins and grant us repentance and give us reconciliation.

Please make us soft-hearted men and women before you. Make us those ready to lean in to those who have sinned against us with open hands and an open heart. make us those who are reconciled to you and to one another. Make us a wonderful witness to the world around us of your great plan to bring reconciliation to all.
[28 : 13] We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.