

Merciful Testing
Genesis 42

I open tonight with the words of William Cowper written in 1774 in the hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
and rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
of never-failing skill;
He treasures up His bright designs,
and works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy and shall break
in blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

Cowper’s life was filled with pain and sorrow. His mother died when he was six, and his father sent him off to boarding school with the desire that he should be trained in the law and become involved in politics. He was a brilliant young man with a bright political future, but he suffered from bouts of severe depression and even spent time in an insane asylum, which is where he came to faith in Christ. The words of God Works in a Mysterious Way help to make sense of a life so mixed with depression and flourishes of faith. His was a life lived more in the downs than the ups, but through it all, he came to see that behind the frowning providence, behind the pains and sorrows of this life, there hides a smiling face.

Which brings us back to Joseph, another man who lived through some of the most painful trials imaginable, and in the end was able to look back on it all and say, “What you meant for evil, God meant for good.”

As we come to chapter 42, we have witnessed the meteoric rise of Joseph from the pit of prison to the pomp of the palace. His prison garments have been traded for royal robes. The faithfulness of God was once again put on full display as Joseph was exalted from his low estate to the place of honor at the king’s right hand. All of this took place just as God had planned it. It was all divinely orchestrated and ordained according to His perfect will and timing.

At this point in Joseph's life, he had certainly learned a few lessons in humility. He had to learn that the way up is down before he could successfully navigate the waters of worldly success and fame. You are not prepared for leadership in this life until you have suffered want, hardship, trials of many kinds, and learned the hard lessons of humility in the school of hard knocks. That was the path God ordained for Joseph, whose future as a 17-year-old could not have looked brighter. This is speculation, but I believe that Joseph would have been an utter failure in life had he been elevated to a position of authority at the age of 17. He would have been an arrogant and snobby leader if the Lord had granted him the fulfillment of the dreams of his youth immediately. What's more, his brothers would have had zero respect for him.

The Lord knows exactly what we need. He writes our stories in such a way that we get what we need, and He gets the glory. Here's a major problem we all have in life. We think we know what we need, and we tend to want the glory for ourselves. We tend to think we already have things figured out. We don't realize what we are, namely, sinners who can only be saved by the grace of God. Joseph was in that company of sinners. He was a man just like us. Understanding what we are gives us a new perspective on the trials we endure in this life. Our trials are one of the primary ways that God's mercy comes to us. Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds ye so much dread, are big with mercy and shall break with blessing on your heads. The Psalmist put it this way.

Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep your word.
(Psalm 119:67)

This is the way that our loving Father in heaven gets our attention and teaches us our deepest need. If we were not afflicted in this life, we would pay no heed to the Word of God. We would not have any reason to look for salvation in Christ Jesus. We would have every reason to think we are sufficient in ourselves and that happiness could be attained in this fallen world without God. Joseph's afflictions taught him to depend on God. They taught him that he could not be the man he dreamed of becoming until he was humbled through afflictions. He had to pass through the fire in order to come out as gold.

Tonight, we will see how Joseph was shaped by the refining of his sufferings to become a man of mercy, and we will see the testing of his brothers begin. The very ones who sent Joseph hurtling into thirteen years of slavery and imprisonment will now come, 20 years later, in poverty and utter desperation crying out for help to the man whose life they ruined. As we open Genesis 42, the famine of which Pharaoh dreamed has stretched across all the known world, and Joseph's own family is in dire need of the assistance of Egypt.

When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" ² And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. (Little did he know that it was his own son, whom he thought was dead, who was responsible for this surplus of grain in Egypt.) Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not

die.”³ So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴ But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. ⁵ Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan. (Genesis 42:1-5)

Remember that Benjamin was the second-born son of Jacob's favored wife, Rachel. Rachel had been barren for many years before she bore Joseph as a son, and then many more years passed before she gave birth to Benjamin. Remember also that Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob had lost Rachel and Joseph, and it is that background of grief and sorrow that has caused him to live in crippling fear of losing Benjamin.

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. ⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ They said to him, “No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹ We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies.”

¹² He said to them, “No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see.” ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ But Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you. You are spies. ¹⁵ By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ And he put them all together in custody for three days. (Genesis 42:6-17)

Can we just take a minute to appreciate how great of a story-writer our God is? This is incredible drama, and it's true history! God is like a master composer, placing every instrument and every note and every dynamic flourish with careful and exact precision to produce the most beautiful symphony imaginable. The story that He writes is the greatest story of all. He puts Shakespeare to shame. Shakespeare could write a great drama, but God can bring one to pass in time and space. The Bible is filled with the most incredible stories ever told, and the best thing of all is that they are all true history.

The tragedy is that we all want to write our own stories rather than surrendering and allowing God to be the author and finisher of our stories. We would prefer to be the author of our life, to have the control and freedom to make anything we want out of ourselves, but when we do this, we rob God of His glory and we deny ourselves the great blessing of having our stories written by the God of redemption. The God who trades sorrows for joy, and ashes for beauty. Who is writing your story today? Are you the author, or is God?

Joseph allowed God to be God. He surrendered to His will even though it meant going through terrible trials and sorrows. Now that he has ascended to the position of power, God is going to present him with an incredibly difficult decision. Just take a moment here and try to put yourself in Joseph's shoes. Try to imagine of all the pain and anguish Joseph had endured on account of these brothers who had betrayed him. They have no idea that they are bowing before the one who knows their deepest, darkest secret. Not only does he know it, but he's the one who suffered because of it—the one who was the object of their malice and envy. Now, he has the power to pay them back. Think of the people in your life who have wronged you and mistreated you. Think of your greatest enemies. Imagine that they came cringing before you in utter weakness and helplessness, and you held the power to do with them whatever you wanted. How would you deal with them? Do you help them? Do you unleash a torrent of punishment upon them and relish it?

I think we would all be tempted to get our revenge. I think Joseph was wrestling with this temptation the first moment he saw his brothers bowing on the ground before him. All the anger and resentment he had pent up within him might have bubbled up to the surface, and who could blame him if it did. This may be why he initially spoke to them so roughly. The text is not clear as to why he was initially so harsh with them, but it is clear that Joseph showed a great deal of restraint and discretion in this first encounter with those who had wronged him. He struck fear in them, but he did not lash out in his anger. He had them put in prison and clearly took some time to ponder and pray about how to deal with his brothers.

¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they did so. ²¹ 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."²² 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."²³ They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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 42:18-28)

First of all, the plan changed a bit during the three days they were in prison. Initially, Joseph said 9 of them would need to remain in prison while just one went back home to bring Benjamin

back to Egypt. Now, he is going to let 9 of them go, while just 1 stays behind. Why the change? I believe it was an act of mercy. Joseph, who might have struggled initially with the heated emotions stirring in his heart upon seeing the very men who had sold him into slavery, and who had callously ignored his cries for release, has clearly taken time to cool off. After three days, he shows an incredible amount of mercy in letting nine out of the ten go so that they can bring back sufficient provisions for their households. In allowing nine to leave, he is able to provide them with much 80% more grain for his family back home. He is taking care of his family, even though they did not take care of him.

Why keep one behind? Because he still wants to test them to see what kind of men they have become. He really does want them to come back with Benjamin, who was his blood-brother. He wants to know if they can be trusted. It is not clear why Simeon is the one he chose to keep imprisoned, but we can speculate based on what we know about Simeon from other passages. We know Simeon was especially prone to violence from Genesis 34, when he and Levi his brother attacked and murdered the Shechemites because Shechem had defiled their sister, Dinah. We know that later in Genesis 49, when Jacob blesses his sons, he describes Simeon and Levi as having weapons of violence as swords, and he curses their anger. It is not far-fetched to assume, therefore, that Simeon, also being one of the oldest sons of Jacob, second-born, might have been the leading voice in having Joseph put to death back in Genesis 37. Regardless, Simeon is the one singled out to be left behind in prison in Egypt.

The admission of guilt in verse 21 is incredibly significant. "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." Remember that over 20 years have passed since they committed that crime. Still, after all that time, the voice of their guilty consciences haunts them. Nobody mentioned the crime they committed against Joseph. Joseph obviously didn't bring it up. He said they were in prison because they were spies. Yet, the experience of being in prison for three days riddled their conscience with the true guilt of their past. They could not escape it. There was no way of getting away from what their hands had wrought. A guilty conscience can drive a man mad. If we never have our guilt removed, it can drive us to utter despair. Deep down, they know they deserve this punishment.

Reuben's response is interesting. He seems to rub salt in the wound, saying, in essence, "I told you so!" Remember, he had been the one who sought to keep his brothers from killing Joseph. He had told them to just put him in a pit, and then his plan was to go rescue Joseph after they left. He is not technically wrong to say he had told them not to sin against the boy. But we should also remember he was already dealing with his own guilt of having lain with Bilhah, his father's concubine, after the death of Rachel. In Genesis 49, Jacob describes Reuben this way,

"Reuben, you are my firstborn,
my might, and the firstfruits of my strength,
preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.
⁴ Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence,

because you went up to your father's bed;
then you defiled it—he went up to my couch!
(Genesis 39:3-4)

It is clear that Reuben suffered dreadful consequences for his sin with Bilhah, namely, losing the preeminence of his birthright, but it is not clear that he ever repented. In a moment of utter vulnerability for his brothers, he seems callous and uncaring, while he seems to be blind to his own guilt. Sure, he may have been innocent of Joseph's blood, but he was not perfectly innocent. None of us are!

Joseph, upon hearing his brothers' confession of guilt is overcome by emotion and has to step away to weep. That is beautiful! That is mercy. That is a man who wants his brothers to be well. He wants them to be restored. He wants them to be forgiven. He should bring to mind another man who weeps for His brothers. Jesus Christ, is described in Hebrews 2 as the one who is not ashamed to call us brothers. He is the brother who wept for us. He wept over the grave and over Jerusalem. His heart still yearns for us. He wants us to be redeemed and forgiven. With yearnings too deep for words, He longs to show us mercy. He so longs for it that He was willing to shed His own spotless blood so that we might be called forgiven.

After weeping for them, Joseph pours out grace upon them by filling their sacks not only with the grain they came to purchase, but by replacing their money in their sacks as well. He gave it to them free of charge! That is grace. Remember, mercy is not receiving the punishment we deserve, while grace is receiving what we don't deserve. Joseph showed his brothers both mercy and grace. He did not punish them as they deserved, and he filled their sacks with money they didn't deserve.

With both his mercy and his grace, Joseph is putting his brothers to the test. How will they respond? How will they use the mercy and grace which they've been shown? That is the question underneath all questions in our life in this world. The simple fact that we are existing right now is a result of the mercy of God. Every breath that we breathe, we are breathing in His grace. His mercies really are new every morning because when we wake up to face a new day, we are living under the sunshine of His never-ceasing mercy. Whether we realize it or not, God is constantly showering His mercy upon us simply by keeping us alive when we all deserve death.

What will we do with God's mercy and grace? How will we respond to the One who has shown Himself to us in His mercy and grace? Will we humble ourselves, confess our need for his mercy and grace, and receive it with empty hands? Will we allow it to transform our minds? Will we let His mercy soften our hard, stony hearts and make them hearts of flesh again. Will we walk in step with the Spirit? Will we walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we've been called? That is the test we all face in this life. It is the test of faith. Will you trust in the One who is merciful and gracious. Will you admit that you need Him to save you? Will you open your heart to Him?

There are two primary ways you can fail the test of His mercy. The first is the secular way of ignoring it altogether, and just pretending this life is all there is. The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." You can eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die. But in so doing, you are spurning His mercy. He is patiently waiting for you to come to yourself, like the prodigal son, and to see that you are living in the pigsty, while the Kingdom of Heaven is being held out to you. You are forfeiting your soul to gain the world, and all the while His mercy is waiting. But you don't know when your soul will be demanded of you. Wake up, for this very night your soul might be demanded of you!

The second way you can fail the test of God's mercy is by seeking to earn it. This is the failure of the self-righteous. It is false religion. It is seeking to sew together fig leaves to cover your shame, rather than letting God clothe you with the righteousness of Christ. You see, mercy means that we don't get what we deserve. Mercy means that what I got is not what I earned. False religion tells us that we need to be good enough to tip the cosmic scales in our favor so that God will say that we were righteous. There are no cosmic scales. There is only mercy! And God in His mercy says, the blood of Jesus cries out and says, "No, stop trying to earn your way. Lay your deadly doing down." The only thing you can earn as a sinner is death, for the wages of sin is death. But to the one who does not work but believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness (Romans 4:5). Righteousness is not something we can earn, it is only something God can give us, and bless His name, He has given it to us fully, perfectly, gloriously complete in Jesus Christ His Son!

That is mercy, and that is grace. It is held out to every single one of us. How are you responding to it? Are you passing the test? Do you rejoice in His mercy and grace? Does it thrill your heart and cause you to shout His praise? Does it bring you to tears as you consider the fact that every transgression is forgiven? Does it make you shudder to think that you might wander away from Him into sin again? Does it cause your heart to fail you and to say in reverent fear, "What is this that God has done to us?" (verse 28) It is amazing!

Joseph's brothers, at this point, don't even realize how much mercy and grace has been shown to them. They can only see the frowning face of the lord of the land of Egypt. They don't know that behind that frowning providence, there hides a smiling face. There hides a man who is seeking their welfare and their good.

²⁹ When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰ "The man, the lord of the land, spoke roughly to us and took us to be spies of the land. ³¹ But we said to him, 'We are honest men; we have never been spies. ³² 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.' ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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.'"

³⁵ 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.

Grace does have a tendency at first to make us afraid. It is the holiness of God out which His grace proceeds. It is something strange to a sinner. It is something very unlike us. Jacob and his sons were afraid when they saw the bundles of money because they couldn't make sense of it. How did it happen and why? That is our initial reaction to the grace of God in Christ Jesus as well.

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me?

I'm awestruck, I'm afraid. This is something too wonderful for me! I don't deserve it. Surely, God must be angry with me, a sinner. But no, he is not angry with you. His wrath was poured out in full upon His own Son. He is holding out His mercy to you today. Simply repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved.

Jacob did not take kindly to the request to bring Benjamin back to Egypt.

³⁶ 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."³⁷ 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."³⁸ 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 speaks from his grief. He speaks out of his fears. He cannot see that there is a man, his own son, waiting for him in Egypt, who will relieve his fears and ease his sorrows. Our fears are most often very ill-informed. They are usually based in our ignorance of what God has done, what He plans to do, and what He surely will do. Our deepest fears very rarely come to pass, and even when they do, God has promised that He will be there, too, just as He was for Job, just as He was for Daniel, just as He was for Joseph, just as He was for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Fear not, for I am with you;
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
(Isaiah 41:10)

Reuben's offer is rather off-putting. Clearly, it did not inspire trust in Jacob, nor should it have. Why would I trust a man who is willing to put his own sons' lives on the line for his own failures? What kind of offer is that? What kind of father puts the lives of his own sons at risk in that way? What a rash negotiation! No, I would not put my son's life in the hands of a man who is willing to put the lives of his own sons' on the line. But I might trust a man who is willing to put his own life on the line. I might trust a man who was willing to lay His own life down for me. I might trust a man who was willing to bear the penalty that was due to my own sins.

The question looming at the end of chapter 42 is: Is there anyone in Jacob's family faithful enough to put his own life at risk in order to save the rest of the family? It is with that cliffhanger, that we conclude chapter 42 and our study for tonight.

We have all been tested tonight by the mercy of God. His Word has opened up to us the revelation of His mercy and grace once again. You may feel at this moment that it is too hard to believe, or it is too good to be true. Perhaps your life has been too hard and full of sorrows and afflictions. All you've ever thought of God is that He must be punishing you or frowning upon you. The Word of Truth, the gospel of your salvation, offers a different picture of God. Will you trust His Word, or will you listen to the lies of your accuser and the enemy of your souls?

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

He is eager for you to come to Him empty handed, believing His gospel, that He might lavish His love and grace upon you, all to the praise of His glory! Do not fail the test of His mercy! Come and be saved! All you sinners, come, and be washed in the cleansing tide of His precious blood.