

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 25, 2009**

REUNITED

Genesis 42:1-8

Not all reunions are happy reunions. You probably know that in your own experience. Some are, but not all. Have you ever been to a class reunion or a family reunion that didn't turn out the way you hoped? Or have you ever been surprised by a reunion with someone you never expected to see again (and maybe wish you hadn't)?

Reunions can be happy occasions. They can bring back happy memories. Or not so happy ones.

The brothers of Joseph never expected to see him again. In their minds, he was as good as dead, if not for real. But in the providence of God, Joseph was alive and well in Egypt and serving as governor of the whole land (Genesis 42:6).

Seven years of abundance and unequalled prosperity in Egypt had come and gone, just as Joseph had predicted. Joseph had used those seven years to strategically prepare for the seven years of famine to come. Now the famine had arrived, not just in Egypt but in all the countries of the world (41:57), including Canaan, where Joseph's father Jacob and all his family lived.

The stage was now set for one of the most dramatic stories not only in the Bible but in all of history – the reunion of Joseph first with his brothers and then with his father and all of his father's family.

In Genesis 42, we read of the first journey to Egypt by Joseph's ten older brothers. Jacob sent them to Egypt, because he had heard there was food there (42:1-5). He would not allow his youngest son Benjamin to accompany the rest of his sons, though, because he feared losing him, just as he had lost Joseph more than 20 years earlier.

When they came to him, Joseph's brothers all bowed down before him, just as Joseph had dreamed they would years ago. At the time, they all thought Joseph was crazy. But now – dream fulfilled.

His brothers, of course, didn't recognize Joseph. At least 20 years had passed since they sold him into slavery in order to get rid of him. He looked like an Egyptian. He was dressed like an Egyptian. He spoke to his brothers in Egyptian through a translator. No way would they have guessed him to be their long-lost brother. To his brothers, Joseph was just a powerful official at whose mercy they found themselves.

Though they didn't recognize him, Joseph recognized them as soon as he saw them. He could have revealed his identity to them right on the spot, but he decided to put them through a few tests to see if they had changed over the years since they conspired against him.

To prove their honesty, Joseph demanded that they bring their youngest brother to him. Simeon (Jacob's second oldest son) remained behind in Egypt while the other nine returned home to Canaan with grain, along with the silver Joseph had put back in their sacks without their knowledge. Already we see Joseph extending grace to his brothers, showing kindness to them in spite of the way they had treated him so many years ago. Like the Lord Himself in His dealings with us, Joseph did not treat his brothers as their sins deserved, or repay them according to their iniquities against him (see Psalm 103:10). Hard as it may have been, Joseph resisted the urge to seek revenge.

As Chuck Swindoll points out, his brothers deserved to be on Joseph's hit list, after the way they had treated him. But Joseph had no hit list. No "enemies list." It is worth asking: Do you have a hit list in your life? Are there people who have hurt you in some way with whom you would like nothing better than to get even? If so, let it go. Joseph knew the desire for revenge was not God's way for him. And it is not God's way for us.

The brothers returned home and told their father what "the man" had said and his demand that they bring Benjamin to him. Jacob said "no way." But the famine didn't go away. At the beginning of Genesis 43, we read that the famine was still severe in the land (43:1). And eventually Jacob and his family ran out of food again. When Judah reminded his father of "the man's" demand to see their youngest brother, Jacob reluctantly relented. So the brothers took Benjamin with them and went back to Egypt.

When they arrived, Joseph had a banquet prepared for them. His reunion with his brother Benjamin was a moving experience for Joseph. Genesis 43:30 says: "Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there." He was still not ready to reveal his true identity to his brothers. But his heart was "deeply moved."

Joseph then sent his brothers back to Canaan, loaded with as much food as they could carry (44:1). But he instructed his steward – the manager of his household – to return to each of them their silver and to hide Joseph's silver cup in Benjamin's sack. He then sent his steward after them. When he caught up with them, the steward accused the brothers of stealing from the prime minister. It was a test to see how they would respond.

All the brothers were shocked when Joseph's cup was found in Benjamin's sack. And heartbroken, too, because they all knew their father's heart would be broken if they returned home without Benjamin.

When Joseph told them they were all free to go – except Benjamin, who, Joseph said, would have to become his slave – Judah stepped forward and made a moving plea for Benjamin's life. He offered to take Benjamin's place. He offered himself as a substitute for Benjamin, just as centuries later, in the fullness of time, a descendant of Judah, Jesus of Nazareth, the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God, would offer up His life on the cross as a substitute for us, taking upon Himself the punishment we deserve for our sin.

Overcome in his spirit, Joseph simply couldn't take it anymore. In a scene filled with emotion and drama, he revealed his identity to his 11 brothers. "I am Joseph!" he said (45:3). At the news, his brothers were stunned in fear. If this was really Joseph, what would he do to them? They all knew what they had done to him. Now that the tables were turned, *WWJD*? What would *Joseph* do?

Sensing their uncertainty and fear, Joseph spoke again: "I am Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! 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.... God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. It was not you who sent me here, but God.... Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me and don't delay....' You can see for yourselves that it is really I who am speaking to you. Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly" (45:4-13).

The first reaction of Joseph's brothers when they discovered their long-lost brother was not only alive but the governor of Egypt was one of fear. They were terrified. Why? Because after all these years, they were still troubled by a guilty conscience. And now, the one they had wronged was standing in front of them. And he had the power to get them back.

The passing of time, someone has said, cannot erase a guilty conscience. You can dull your conscience. You can even kill your conscience. Some people, it seems, have no conscience at all, because they have killed it. You can try to bury your guilt. You can repress it and do your best to forget it. You can try to rationalize it away. But the passage of time itself will not erase guilt. You cannot get rid of your guilt until you face up to it and confess it, until you give it over to God and receive His forgiveness. You cannot get rid of your guilt until you let Jesus take it away. The good news is that Jesus is always ready to take it away. The good news is that Jesus died to take care of your guilt. Only God has the power to erase our guilt. And He has done it for us – for all who come to Him in true repentance and faith – in the person and work of His Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Are you troubled by a guilty conscience today? Are you plagued by regret over something you have done, even if it was a long time ago? It had been more than 20 years since the brothers of Joseph cruelly sold him as a slave. But after all these years, when it was brought to mind, they felt guilty. They were filled with regret. They knew that what they had done was wrong.

One of the most theologically astute movies I have ever seen is a Woody Allen film from 1989 called *Crimes and Misdemeanors* about a respected eye doctor, a much-loved husband and father, who foolishly gets involved with another woman and comes to regret his unfaithfulness. The movie does not provide the hope of the gospel. Woody Allen does not know the answer to the problem of this man's adultery. But it does provide a moving glimpse of the seriousness of sin and its power to hold us captive.

Do you think David Letterman regrets his recently-publicized liaisons with members of his staff? Or ESPN baseball analyst Steve Phillips, whose affair with a young staffer has prompted ESPN to suspend him? Of course they regret what they did, if only because of the consequences in terms of public embarrassment and damaged relationships. Sin always has consequences, even if they are not immediate or visible to the naked eye.

The brothers of Joseph knew they were guilty. Whereas Joseph had once been at the mercy of his brothers (who showed him no mercy, except that they decided not to kill him when they had the chance), now the brothers were at Joseph's mercy. Which is exactly what he showed them. Not vengeance but mercy. In essence he said to them: "You don't need to be afraid of me. You don't need to be afraid of what I'm going to do to you. I forgive you for what you did to me. I am not angry with you. I don't hold it against you. I forgive you all. And I am ready to start over in my relationships with you and all of my father's family."

After all these years, reunited – and it felt so good. Reunited and reconciled – which is the way God wanted it to be. There was still another reunion to come, when Joseph and his father Jacob were reunited after a separation of at least 22 years. You can do the math: Joseph was 17 when his brothers sold him into slavery (37:2). He was 30 when he became the prime minister of Egypt (41:46). The seven years of abundance had come and gone. And now the famine had been in full force for two years (45:6). He had disappeared from his father's life at the age of 17. Now Joseph was 39.

Can you imagine what it would be like to be reunited with a family member you lost so many years ago? You probably know the story of Jacy Dugard, kidnapped 18 years ago by a convicted sex offender. She was 11 years old at the time. Any realistic hopes of finding her alive were long gone. But now, 18 years later, she has been found alive and reunited with her mother and family.

After Joseph's brothers returned home to Canaan and finally convinced their father that Joseph was alive and well in Egypt, Jacob and his whole family piled into the family van and went to Egypt. Joseph went out to meet his father. And when he saw him, he threw his arms around him and wept for a long time (46:29).

Have you noticed that Joseph was a man of deep emotion? Sometimes we think that expressing emotions is a sign of weakness for a man. Many of us were taught that a man never cries. Let me tell you something: Joseph was a man. A real man. And he was not afraid to express his emotions.

It was an emotional reunion between Joseph and his father. His aging father said: "Now I am ready to die, since I have seen for myself that you are alive" (46:30).

Reunited – and it felt so good.

Reunited – according to the sovereign plan of God who had sent Joseph to Egypt ahead of his family. God was behind it all and in control of it all.

Reunited – and their reunion shows us the power of grace over guilt. Do you know that God Himself longs to be gracious to you and me? Listen to what the Bible says in Isaiah 30:18:

The LORD longs to be gracious to you;
He rises to show you compassion.

It is not that God is like Joseph in His dealings with us, but that Joseph was like God. And God, amazingly, desires to be gracious to us. In his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner writes: “After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shopworn nobody’s much interested anymore. Not so with *grace*, for some reason. Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A crucial (characteristic) of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There’s nothing *you* have to do. There’s nothing you *have* to do. There’s nothing you have to *do*. There’s only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you reach out and take it. Maybe (that) is a gift too.”

It is. Grace is a gift from beginning to end. The Lord longs to be gracious to you. Will you open your hand and your heart to receive His grace, His forgiveness, His love? You can do it right now.

And will you, like Joseph, show mercy and grace to those who hurt you?

Lord, let it be so. And may all our reunions and all our relationships be filled with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the glory of His name. Amen.