

Guilt & Shame

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Lord's Supper

Genesis 42:1-25

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Friends of our Lord Jesus,

What secrets are lurking in your background? Is there something that you've done years ago that still fills you with guilt and shame?

When we read this story of Jacob's boys, I come away—in part at least—feeling thankful that my family isn't nearly as messed up as Jacob's. That's small comfort but it's something. Nonetheless, my life has its hidden places of guilt and shame. We might be able to keep things covered up for a time, but sooner or later guilt of the past shows its unwelcome face.

Jacob's sons were all young men when they conspired together against their younger brother Joseph. And here in Genesis 42, they have been hiding their secret from their father for over 20 years. For 20 years they lived with guilt and shame for what they'd done. Because they were jealous that their brother Joseph was treated specially by their dad and that he also shared visions of his grandeur with them, Joseph's brothers grabbed him when he was 17 and sold him to slave traders. Then they told their dad that Joseph was killed by wild animals. It was a scandalous cover-up of their guilt.

We all can understand their frustration. We get their annoyance with listening to their little brother speaking down to them, as if he is better. Boasting about himself to his brothers had to stop; Joseph had gotten away with his spoiled-boy behavior long enough! And there was no talking to their dad, Jacob, about his favouritism of Joseph. Jacob kept sending the older 10 brothers off to do the dirty work every day while he kept Joseph close by the house, covered in fancy clothing and running errands for his dad.

It had been a lifelong pattern for Jacob. Jacob had four wives and Rachel was his favourite. She bore him Joseph and she died giving birth to Benjamin. The other boys lived with Jacob favouring Joseph while he was around. And after Joseph was gone, their father still favoured Benjamin as we can tell from reading this chapter. The ten boys go to get food in Egypt but their dad keeps Benjamin at home. Jacob favoured Rachel and her two boys and that seemed to be a family dynamic the other boys had to endure. Even after the brothers got rid of Joseph, their father's favouritism continued. But it was Jacob's blindness that prevented him from seeing how his favouritism hurt his family and contributed to his other sons feeling second rate.

Looking at Our Guilt and Shame

Would you stop and think with me about the guilt and shame you live with? Are there ways in which you have contributed to making your family or others feel less loved than someone else? Are there things you've done that haunt you? You wish you hadn't done them and now you live with guilt and shame.

What offences do you feel guilty about? We feel guilt for something wrong that we've done. Jacob's boys were guilty for selling their brother Joseph into slavery. What an absolutely terrible thing to do to your brother. They had other options for dealing with their frustrations but they choose to do something which maybe felt less harmful than just killing Joseph. That "mercy" might have soothed their consciences for a while. At least we didn't kill him. But over the years, they probably thought that Joseph was long dead, either worked to death as a slave or killed by an angry slave owner. He would have had no rights whatsoever; he would have been at the mercy of his owner. These brothers were guilty, they were blameworthy, what they did was wrong! Full stop. So guilt was a common companion.

I doubt they talked about it often but, it's clear from this story, that when they found themselves in scary conditions, they immediately thought back to the sin they committed against their brother Joseph. In v.21, Joseph overhears the brothers say to one another,

Gen 42:21 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's why this distress has come upon us."

Guilt was never far away. I'm sure that each time something went wrong in their lives, they thought back to what they did to Joseph and figured God's justice was coming for them. And now in this super tight spot in Egypt, they are all in agreement. Guilt has overtaken them and they are fearful, perhaps feeling their guilt more intensely than ever and more fearful than ever that their guilt was finally going to be exposed by God.

A couple chapters farther into this same story, the brothers are discovered to have a golden cup from Egypt. None of them took it but there it was and again, the fruit of guilt poured out from their lips. We read in Genesis 44:16,

Gen 44:16 ... "What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves—we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup."

Every time something went wrong, their evil deed to Joseph haunted them. Guilt and shame haunted them.

It saddens me when I see people today living with guilt. Don't get me wrong. Guilt has an important role to play in our spiritual health. It's good that we all come to a place of seeing our sinfulness. Even shame can be good for us. Shame is different than guilt. If guilt is feeling bad for something you've done, shame is feeling like you're a bad person. Guilt is "I did something bad." Shame is "I am bad." We all should be ashamed of what our sin does to us. We ought to come to

the point of seeing our condition and feeling bad about ourselves. Not just bad about our actions but bad about who we have become as a result of sin. Freedom from sin starts with acknowledging our helplessness to remove it.

Some of you hate yourself for things you've done wrong and some things you're still doing wrong. You said you'd never drink again or smoke again or overeat again but that only lasted a few weeks. You said you'd never go to another porn site but then you did. Maybe you swore you'd never cheat again but that also didn't last. You said you'd never talk badly again about that girl in your class, but when your friends started, you joined right in again. You even trashed her on Instagram. Maybe you're just ashamed of certain things you keep very private, but you don't like yourself for doing what you do.

Some of us deal with guilt and shame at a young age. Others find it coming back time and again throughout mid-life. And plenty of those who are close to the end of life often find themselves plagued by shame from deep, dark secrets that were supposedly buried away. But as you grow more frail, the secrets creep out and do their dirty work in destroying your peace. Guilt and shame can be constant companions—unwanted ones—but so hard to shed.

We all know guilt and shame and know how Joseph's 10 brothers feel in our Bible reading today.

Say Good-bye to Guilt & Shame

For more than 20 years Joseph's brothers carried their guilt and shame. But now it all came to a head and they were terrified.

Only one person could deliver them from it. That was Joseph. The brothers were tormented by their guilt. Joseph knows that they do not recognize him. And he keeps up his Egyptian cover while he helps his brothers truly recognize their guilt. They even confess it when they speak to one another while thinking Joseph doesn't understand their Hebrew language. Joseph helps his brothers become more and more honest as he strings them along for a long time... months long... as they go back to Canaan and bring Benjamin back to Egypt before the whole story finally comes out.

Joseph has obviously learned a lot about forgiveness—his own guilt as well as the guilt of others—through the school of hard knocks. He faced injustice from his brothers. But he worked hard in Egypt and won respect in Potiphar's house. Then Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of sexual misconduct and Joseph was thrown into jail where he labored for several more years. He would have had to again deal with forgiving those who wrongly accused him. He must have been angry when he rightly predicted—with God's help—the fate of the Butler and Bakker but the Butler did not immediately remember to advocate for Joseph's release. That took another two years of lingering in prison. And, again, Joseph had to learn to not let the sins of others bind him to sinful choices and thoughts.

Based on what we see in Joseph's character, including his concern for his brothers, we learn that Joseph understood the power that guilt and shame can hold over us. He, therefore, understood the power of forgiveness. He himself had to learn to be free from resentment, bitterness and anger for being sold as a slave by his brothers, being falsely accused of sexual misconduct by Potiphar's wife, being wrongfully jailed for several years by Potiphar, being forgotten in prison by the butler for another two years and who knows what else? Only by resting himself in the hands of the Lord Almighty did Joseph find the grace to forgive those who wronged him. When this story comes to a head, the impact of God's grace on Joseph is clear in his words to his brothers after their father Jacob has died. We read in Genesis 50 that the brothers are still nervous that Joseph might hold a grudge against them. But Joseph tells them,

Gen 50:19 ...Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Those last words mean that he set their hearts right. He didn't just say nice things to them. He assured them that they could live with peaceful hearts. Forgiven! Guilt and shame free! That reminds me of the words of God's grace when he says in Psalm 103, "As far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your sins from me." In other words, it is done. It is no longer on my radar. It is forgiven. Blotted out. Gone! Your sin is as if it never had happened. Move forward in peace and confidence. Now live free from guilt and shame!

As we come to the Lord's Table together this morning, we are reminded to leave our guilt and shame behind us. We are called to embrace the grace of God through Jesus.

Joseph was the savior of Egypt who oversaw the prosperity of that nation through a catastrophic famine. That famine brought Jacob's boys to Egypt and Joseph became the savior of his family who later flourished in the land of Goshen. Joseph becomes a type of Jesus, pointing us to a fuller and eternal salvation from all our sins.

Only through Jesus can we receive freedom from our guilt and shame so that we can flourish in this world. He was despised and rejected for us. Our guilt was carried on him to the cross. Our shame buried with him in the grave. And now as he rose from the dead, victorious over guilt and shame, we have his new power in us to live a renewed life. Guilt has no claim on you. Shame has no claim on you. Death has no power over you. Jesus claims you as his redeemed and calls you into a life of freedom.

Freeing One Another from Guilt and Shame

What does living out of freedom from guilt and shame look like? It'll be different for each of us but start by looking at where you are responsible for shame or guilt poured on someone. And then also look at how you must no longer live under bondage to guilt and shame.

About 7 years ago, I took a road trip with our son Erik. He's our second youngest child and has been always a super happy-going kid. In the course of our car ride, he brought up an incident that happened when he was about 8 or 9 years old. Without getting into details, it involved me trying to teach him a lesson about respecting others. After he shared how I made him feel back then, I realized that the lesson I was trying to teach him was a major fail. For—ironically—my effort at teaching him to respect others was taught in a way that disrespected him. I hurt him deeply. As he retold this experience to me, I felt terrible and apologized as we drove down an unfamiliar stretch of highway. My apology released a burden of unwanted shame for Erik and he began to weep. I told him to pull over and I ended up holding him in my arms as he sobbed from several minutes. I never imagined all those years ago that I had hurt him. I felt so bad for how I had handled him back then and I was glad that he was able to share that painful memory so we could help heal that broken part of our relationship—a part that I never even realized was broken before then.

That one incident, more than anything else, has probably helped me realize that no matter how well we do in raising our kids—or how well we might think we are doing—we're almost certainly doing something wrong. Jacob messed up through blindness to his own sin. I did the same. And I suspect we all hurt our kids in some way, though we certainly don't intend to. The humbling thing is that God is here for our families to help us learn to forgive and help one another heal from the shame and guilt we carry. Guilt and shame come to us all. We aren't perfect people. We mess up a lot more than we even realize.

But we are not hopelessly lost and stuck in our ruts of sin and shame and guilt. No, with the grace given to us in Christ, we are freed from our guilt and shame, like Joseph's brothers. Freed as even father Jacob had to be freed. Then from the place of freedom and grace, let us confess our sins to one another, let free one another from guilt and shame and let us help one another live in the freedom that is ours in Christ our savior and Lord.