

## The Ministry of Reconciliation

### God Meant It For Good, Part 4

Genesis 42-45

David Sunday

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We're going to cover a large swath of Scripture today. I had to decide whether to preach it in four messages or one, but I think it's a contained narrative so I'm going to do it in one.

Genesis 42-45 is a message about reconciliation and forgiveness, things we're dealing with in our lives every day, every week. C.S. Lewis said, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea—until they have something to forgive. And then to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger." I think he's right. We like to think, "What a lovely idea forgiveness is." But then when you have something to forgive, "Oh, don't tell me to forgive and be reconciled."

Corrie ten Boom had something to forgive. She endured an agonizing sentence in the Nazi concentration camp because her family hid Jews during World War II. Her sister Betsy died in that camp shortly before the war ended and Corrie was released. Just three years later Corrie was back in Germany speaking in Munich in 1947. Her subject: "God's Forgiveness." And there in the audience was one of her former prison guards, listening to her speak. He approached her after the service. She recognized him. He asked for her forgiveness, and she writes what it was like in [The Hiding Place](#):

I knew forgiveness not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war, I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion. I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Help," I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me, and as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into

our joined hands, and then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. “I forgive you, brother,” I cried, “with all my heart!” For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands—the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.

So forgiveness is more than a lovely idea. It’s a costly act of faith. We’d all like to think that we would be like Corrie ten Boom in a similar situation, but hopefully we know ourselves a little better than that. We need to ask, “Would I?”

Let me tell you another story, the story of Julie Nicholson, who was a vicar in the Church of England. Her daughter Jenny, at age 24, was murdered in the July 7, 2005 London underground bombings. Julie Nicholson could not comprehend the possibility of forgiving the suicide bomber who took her daughter’s life, along with his own. She told the BBC, “It’s very difficult for me to stand behind an altar and celebrate the Eucharist (communion) and lead people in words of peace, reconciliation and forgiveness, when I feel very far from that myself.”

So she stepped aside and resigned from her role as vicar. Ten years later, on the tenth anniversary of the bombing, she told the Telegraph, “Can I forgive them for what they did? No. I cannot. And I don’t wish to. I said in the early weeks, and now still say, the name of my daughter’s murdered—Mohammad Sidique Kahn—every day.” And do you blame her? Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea—until they have something to forgive.

Joseph had something to forgive. In the story we read in Genesis 42, bowing before him with their faces to the ground are ten of his brothers, just as Joseph had dreamed in his youth. These were the same brothers who 22 years earlier had cast him into a pit to die, and then rescued him only to sell him into slavery in Egypt. Because of them, Joseph has been cut off from his father, his younger brother Benjamin—who was the only other brother from his mother Rachel—his house, his land, his future.

Now Joseph finds himself governor of the land of Egypt, second in command only to Pharaoh. He has all power. Everyone’s survival depends on him. During this time of famine, if you needed grain, the word was, “Go to Joseph. He’ll take care of you.” He has complete power to destroy his brothers as they bow before him. He recognizes them immediately, but they don’t recognize him, because he looks like an Egyptian pharaoh, and he’s speaking a different language.

As he remembers the dreams he dreamed (Genesis 42:9ff), their fate is in his hands. Will he forgive, or will he take revenge? At first it seems like Joseph is going to be more like Julie Nicholson than Corrie ten Boom. We read in verse seven, “*He treated them like strangers and*

*spoke roughly to them.*” Over and over again, he accuses them of being spies (verses 9, 12, 14 and 16). Then in verse 17, he puts them in custody for three days. On the surface, it seems like Joseph is vengeful.

But Derek Kidner is right when he says, “Nothing is further from the truth. Behind the harsh pose, there was warm affection, and after the ordeal, overwhelming kindness. Even his threats were tempered with mercy.” If you need proof of where Joseph’s heart was, look at verse 24 after he hears how the brothers recognize their guilt in not listening to his cries and selling him into slavery. Rueben is speaking of how he tried to convince his brothers not to do it, and Joseph “*turned away from them and wept.*” It’s like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19: 41-44). He wept, because his heart was tender toward his brothers.

Joseph had a strategy. It was a strategy that might include some severe mercies, but his goal was not only forgiveness but also deep reconciliation in his relationships with his brothers. We need to remember that God also has a strategy. Joseph is not really the hero of these stories—God is. God’s story begins in the first three chapters of Genesis, where He created a perfectly good world which we then ruined through our sin. In Genesis 3-11, we see all the problems and alienation that resulted from our sin.

Then in Genesis 12, God says He is going to rebuild the world and bring blessing to all the peoples of the earth through one man, Abraham, and his sons and family—a family full of people like Rueben, who slept with his father’s concubine. Levi and Simeon, who ravaged the whole town of Shechem and brutally murdered not only the men, but women and children. Judah, who had sex with his daughter-in-law Tamar when she was disguised as a prostitute, and then threatened to burn her alive when he heard she was pregnant. These brothers, this family, is the one through whom God is going to recreate the world? Really? How’s that going to happen?

Just imagine this. You’re walking in the future into the new Jerusalem which has come down out of heaven from God like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband—the new creation, the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2). As you approach the great walls of that city, you see some gates. Over those gates, you see angels, and inscribed on those gates you’re going to see some names. You look up at those gates, and whose names do you see? Rueben. Simeon. Levi. Judah. The twelve sons of Israel are going to be inscribed on the gates of the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:12). This is amazing grace.

When we come to Genesis 42-45, what we’re seeing is how God transforms these men, how He’s working not only to save them from starvation, but also to rescue them from their sin. There’s a process that God is working out here that involves not only their lives but also their hearts and souls. It’s a similar process to the way God works in our lives when He wants us to

experience not only His forgiveness but also our deep reconciliation with Him and with other people.

**A. When our sins have been forgotten but not forgiven,  
God brings them to remembrance.**

I heard Colin Smith say the most dreadful state a person could ever be in is to have your sins be forgotten but not forgiven. In other words, you might think you can do wrong and just move on, forgetting all about it. That's a dreadful place to be—forgetting about your sin but not experiencing forgiveness for that sin—because there will come a day of reckoning.

Joseph's brothers thought they could just move on. They told a lie. They told their dad, "He's been torn up by wild animals." They've lived that lie now for a couple decades. Never did they go to Jacob and say, "You know what? Here's what we really did." Over and over again they tell that lie, and all the while they're trying to suppress it in the conscience. But you get the sense that the very mention of the word "Egypt" aroused something in them. They didn't want to go there.

So when Jacob is looking at their food provisions running empty and realizing they would soon starve to death, he mentions to his sons, "You know, there's grain in Egypt." And finally it comes to the point where he says, "Why do you just stand there looking at one another? Go to Egypt or we're going to die!" They don't want to go there, because as Shakespeare said, "Conscience doth make cowards of us all." How ironic to hear them say to Joseph in Genesis 42:11, "We are honest men." Joseph says, "Oh, really?" In verse 13 they're forced to admit that one of their brothers was now no more. Conscience is being aroused.

Joseph puts them to the test in verses 15-17: "Will one of you go back to get Benjamin?" Then another test in verses 18-20: "Let one of your brothers remain in custody." They choose Simeon, and that's when their consciences are awakened. They remember what they've done. We read in verse 21, "*Then they said to one another, 'In truth we are guilty concerning our brother.'*" I don't know if, in 20 years, they've ever had a conversation like this amongst themselves. But now, "*We are guilty...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.*"

It's very specific. When the Holy Spirit convicts you of sin, He always shows you specifically where you went wrong and what the path to repentance looks like. They now hear echoing in their conscience cries that they had suppressed for a long time, pleas for mercy they had ignored. And now Rueben says, "*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.*" They apparently assume Joseph had

died while in slavery in Egypt. They don't know he is standing right in front of them. They're afraid. Joseph has spoken harshly to them—and they needed it.

But in Jesus' heart there's great love. He longs to embrace them, but he cannot yet, because there's a deep transformation that needs to take place. So he gives them a series of tests. He places money in their sacks along with the grain. Then one of them opens his sack and sees the money. And for the first time in the Joseph narrative, Joseph's brothers mention the name of God in verse 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?"*

Do you see what's happening? The remembrance of their sin is rising to the surface; an awareness of God is coming on to the horizon and the fear of God is returning to their hearts. At the end of this chapter it looks dreadful, as Jacob is filled with terror and self-pity. Reuben is offering, "Father, send me with Benjamin, and if I don't bring him back to you, you can kill my two sons"—as if that's going to solve anything. Everything looks despairing. Guilt, fear and sorrow seem to have the upper hand.

But God is at work and He is doing a good thing. Because, friends, when sins have been forgotten before they've been forgiven, the most kind and gracious thing God can do to you is bring them to remembrance, awaken your conscience and make you restless with remorse. Has that ever happened to you? If so, take heart. The Holy Spirit is at work. He's leading you to the only place where sins can be forgiven and where reconciliation can be found. And that's the second step.

## **B. When we remember our sins with remorse,**

### **God graciously leads us to repentance.**

Look at Genesis 43. The famine is severe. Jacob is trying to get them to go back to Egypt without bringing Benjamin. Judah is stepping up to the plate, saying, "Dad, the man clearly said if we don't bring Benjamin, you're not going to get anything from me. You can't see my face." Jacob, who's also named Israel in verse six, still is just filled with self-pity. "Why have you treated me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?" He can't believe he's about to lose the two sons that he loves the most—Joseph, who's already been lost in his mind, and Benjamin, his little brother, the two sons of Rachel.

And Judah—something’s happening in this man. He’s not the same Judah who went to Tamar thinking she was a prostitute and committed all those sordid acts in chapter 38. He’s becoming a more selfless man. A transformation is taking place in his life. We see it in Genesis 43:8-10:

*And Judah said to Israel his father, “Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever.”*

Judah is taking responsibility. The change is taking place. Jacob is changing too. In verse 14 he prays, *“May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.”* Jacob places himself, Benjamin and all of his sons in the hands of the almighty and merciful God. He’s learning to trust.

The story in the rest of this chapter is really quite beautiful. They take their presents—these nuts from Israel, along with double the money—into the presence of Pharaoh’s governor. Verse 16 says, *“When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, ‘Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon.’”* It sounds like the return of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). *“Kill the fatted calf—we’re going to have a party.”* But the men are afraid because of the money they had found in their sacks.

So God graciously allays their fears through Joseph’s steward. In verse 23 he tells them, *“Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money.”* Then he brings Simeon out. Their brother is released from custody and restored to them. Finally, the steward gets them ready to meet with Joseph by washing them and preparing them for a great feast.

It’s beautiful how Joseph welcomes them into his house. Verse 26: *“When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present that they had with them and bowed down to him to the ground.”* Notice how many times in this story we see Joseph’s childhood dreams being fulfilled. Joseph then *“inquired about their welfare,”* and expressed an unusual interest in their father. *“Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?”* They reply, *“Your servant our father is well; he is still alive.”* And once again, *“They bowed their heads and prostrated themselves.”*

Then Joseph *“lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, and said, ‘Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!’”* In blessing Benjamin, Joseph uses the word “Elohim,” the God of Israel, rather referring to an Egyptian god. And we see the warmth of Joseph’s heart of compassion for his brother, as he hurries out and *“sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there.”*

Joseph eventually returns and serves a wonderful feast. He has them seated in birth order—like some kind of intelligent design going on here. The brothers are scratching their heads, “How could he know where each of us should be seated?” The story ends with them drinking and being merry with him. It’s wonderful! Do you realize it’s often God’s kindness that leads us to repentance? Yes, there can be harsh words, or the law smiting our conscience. There can be the remembrance of our sins. But sometimes God also lavishes us with goodness and kindness. He warmly opens His heart to us. We see the tears of Jesus. We know the words of God’s love. We see the free offer of the gospel, as Jesus says, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28). It’s His kindness that leads us to repentance.

We see a lot of kindness being shown in Genesis 43, but there’s one more test in chapter 44. Joseph says to his steward, “As you send them off to go back to their father, put my silver cup in the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain.” And so it was done. As soon as the morning is light and the men are waking up from this great feast, thinking, “Oh, do we have to get out of bed? Yes, let’s go see Dad.”

They’re on their way back to Canaan and hear the siren behind them. They look in their rear view mirror and they see the flashing lights. “Oh, no. We have to pull over on the turnpike here.” And out comes the officer with a scathing accusation: “Who took the governor’s silver cup? One of you has it!” “We would never do such a thing,” they say. “Whoever did that deserves to die—and we also will be my lord’s servants.” So the officer says, verse ten:

*“Let it be as you say: he who is found with it shall be my servant, and the rest of you shall be innocent.” Then each man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack.*

They’re devastated. Their lives, their families, God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—all of these seem over. And in a very real sense, Voddie Baucham says, they are taking an emotional walk in Joseph’s shoes. They go back to Joseph with their clothes torn, but this time they don’t bow. They fall before him to the ground. They throw themselves at his mercy. And

Joseph says to them (verse 15), *“What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?”* We don’t know that Joseph really did that. This is all part of the ruse to help them realize Joseph knows what’s going on here.

Then Judah says something significant. And I want to ask you: what happens when you are accused of a crime you did not commit, or of doing something wrong that you didn’t do, but in your conscience you know you’re covering up something even greater that you did do—and no one knows it? If you’re not repentant of the greater thing you’re covering up, when someone accuses you of something lesser that you did not do, you will become very defensive. You will become indignant. But when God the Holy Spirit is breaking your heart and giving you true repentance, you will be broken.

That’s what happened to Judah, beginning in verse 16: *“And Judah said, ‘What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves?’”* Here are the significant words: *“God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord’s servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found.”* He realizes, “I’m at a point where I can contain this no longer. I’m the one who first proposed the plan to sell Joseph as a slave. Now my secret sin is coming back to haunt me. This isn’t just blind fate at work. This is God bringing about justice. We sold Joseph into slavery. Now we have to be slaves ourselves.”

Joseph hears all this, but he still pretends not to understand what Judah is saying. He insists, “No, only Benjamin is guilty. Only Benjamin needs to stay behind as a slave. And this is where we see Judah’s finest moment, as he steps up and pours out the longest speech in the book of Genesis, a speech in which he fully identifies with the love that his father has for his son, Benjamin. He remembers the pledge he made to his father, that he will be the protector of Jacob’s youngest son and his younger brother.

So Judah recounts to Joseph in an eloquent plea the agony that Jacob endured at just hearing of the governor’s demand that Benjamin be brought back to Egypt. He says to him in verse 24:

*When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. And when our father said, “Go again, buy us a little food,” we said, “We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down. For we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.” Then your servant my father said to us, “You know that my wife bore me two sons. One left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces, and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol.”*

“I will die a bitter, broken, crushed, devastated man.” But instead of hating his father for the favoritism that is still evident in his statement—as if Jacob only has two sons—Judah identifies with the love his father has for Benjamin. He remembers the pledge of safety he made to his father, saying in verse 32, *“If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.”*

Then the climax of the whole story, as Judah becomes an Aslan figure—a lion—pleading, “Take me instead of him!” Verse 33, *“Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father.”*

We can sense heaven beginning to sing, as Judah faintly resembles the greater Son Who will come after him, Who will be called the Lion of the tribe of Judah, Who will lay down His life for His sheep, Who will remember the command He received from the Father, and by His own authority will say, “Father, take My life instead of theirs.” Through His death, He will purchase for Himself a people from every tribe, language and nation (Revelation 7:9). We hear in the words of Judah a faint echo back of what will happen at the cross of Calvary, when greater love has no man than this, as Jesus lays down His life for His enemies (John 15:13) .

Because of that love that is in Judah—that willingness to be a substitute—forgiveness and reconciliation can now be fully experienced. Look at what Iain Duguid says about this event,—this plea of Judah’s: “Because Judah was willing to suffer for a crime he did not commit, they were all forgiven for the crime they did commit.” Isn’t that the gospel? Because Jesus was willing to suffer for an infinite number of sins and crimes He did not commit, we can be forgiven for infinite sins we have committed. Jesus is a Son infinitely more worthy than Judah.

Let’s look at the wonderful forgiveness. I’m just going to read it, as the pathos of this story speaks for itself. Genesis 45:

*Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, “Make everyone go out from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. <sup>2</sup> And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. <sup>3</sup> And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.*

*<sup>4</sup> So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near [reconciliation]. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup> For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which*

*there will be neither plowing nor harvest. <sup>7</sup> And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”*

Joseph pleads with them to get their father and return to live in the land of Goshen near him, where he will provide generously for them all as they come under his gracious rule. Then in verse 14, *“He fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him.”* What a beautiful picture of reconciliation which is the final step.

### **C. When we repent and throw ourselves on God’s mercy, our sins are forgiven and forgotten.**

That is a beautiful, beautiful truth. Because Jesus was willing to suffer for an infinite number of sins and crimes He did not commit, we can be forgiven for all the sins we’ve been guilty of committing. Not only will they be forgiven, but also forgotten. In the gospel, God says to us what Joseph said to his brothers when they were trembling with dismay at his presence: “Come near to Me, please.” That’s what God’s saying to us. He’s a Father Who is not reluctant like Jacob to give His beloved son, but Who freely gave Him up for us all, so that He might welcome us into His family. “Come near to Me, please,” says the Father.

When we come near to Him, throwing ourselves on His mercy and trusting in what Jesus has done to suffer in our place for our sins, God says to us what Joseph said to his brothers in verse five, “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves any longer. Do not keep pounding yourself for your sins, for as far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your transgressions from you (Psalm 103:6-14). And because the blood of Jesus has been shed and you have been drawn near, I will remember your sins and your lawless deeds no more. They are forgotten.”

Here’s my question friends: When we have irreconcilable differences with someone else, what if we saw ourselves more like Joseph’s brothers than like Joseph? What if we remembered how our own sins have filled us with remorse, but God has graciously led us to repentance as He has freely and fully forgiven and forgotten our sins through the blood of Jesus? What if we remember that? When we realize how much more we are like the brothers in the story than we are like Joseph, we can learn to forgive like him, because we know how much we’ve been forgiven.

Jesus said we need two things every day: “Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:9-13). If you had a day without your bread, I bet you’d miss it. But how long can you go without forgiveness? How long can you go without forgiving? Husbands, when is the last time you said to your wife, “Please, forgive me. I was wrong”? Parents to your kids, “That was stupid. I should not have acted like that. That was hard-hearted and cruel. Please forgive me.” Is there someone sitting across the church from you that you were hoping to get out the door before you had to see them?

You’ve been forgiven much and now God Who was in Christ—reconciling the world to Himself, not counting our sins against us—has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation. That’s who we are, church. That’s what God has called us to do. That’s what we do when we live under the shadow of the cross of Jesus. Let us pray for grace to do it.

God, our Father, thank You for Your patience. How many times have we tried to move on from our sin without confessing, forsaking, seeking reconciliation, thinking we can just put it under the rug and put it behind us? But in Your mercy, You have called our sins to remembrance. You have filled us with remorse and in Your kindness You’ve led us to repentance. You’ve brought us to the foot of the cross of Jesus, Who died for sins He did not commit so we could be released from those we have. You’ve taught us that we are Your children now and You called us to draw close to You. You’ve welcomed us into Your family and You’ve lavished us with all kinds of kindness. Surely goodness and mercy are pursuing us all the days of our lives. You are so good to us, Father. Help us see ourselves as those who’ve been forgiven much and help us to love much.

Father, where there are relationships that we’re not willing to forgive, break our hearts with the mercy that flows from Calvary. Where there are relationships where we tried to reconcile, but it’s not yet happening, help us to wait patiently in hope, remembering it took over 20 years for this to happen with Joseph and his brothers. Where we’ve forgiven but we’re struggling to trust, O Lord, keep working in our hearts, and in the hearts of those who’ve offended us, so that in Your great mercy there may come a day of warm embrace, welcoming one another as You have welcomed us in Christ. Please make our hearts tender with this story and let us live in the good of it, we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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