

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Families Are Tough: Regret”

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**Genesis 42:1-21**

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We continue this walk through the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis in this series “Families Are Tough.” We’re talking about household dysfunction here, and we’ve all got some dose of it in our story, whether in immediate family, extended family, surrogate family, you name it. But we’re also asking how the gospel of grace might speak into these hard, sometimes painful dynamics we can all face.

Last week, we saw Joseph’s brothers show horrible cruelty toward their brother, conspiring to kill him, selling him into slavery, and then staging his death to their father Jacob. A lot has happened since then, but we come back to the story with Joseph having risen in the ranks of Egypt, and now his brothers are coming back to him, though they don’t know it.

Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, **Genesis 42:1-21.**] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, we pray for your grace upon us. As we hear this Word, we hear our own culpability in those we’ve wronged or think of those who have wronged us. May your grace prevail in our hearts, and may this Word sow seeds of repentance within us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Slumped in the back seat of his car on East River Drive in Manhattan, John Cashmore, President of the Borough of Brooklyn, was unresponsive to his driver in the evening of May 7, 1961.

The next day’s Times went into great detail about the man who had been the longest serving President in the borough’s history. A driven, self-made man, he had a long list of successes: hundreds of millions of dollars-worth of public projects for the borough—major transit projects, tens of thousands of new units of public housing, a new Civic Center. He had one big political failure: he lost the Dodgers to Los Angeles, but hey, no one’s perfect.

He was such a dedicated and driven public servant that on his tombstone, under his family name Cashmore, there are three names: his own, his wife’s, and their son James’s. But above all of their names, it lists his office first: “President of the Borough of Brooklyn, City of New York, 1940-1961; John Cashmore.”

The part the tombstone didn’t tell you about was all he had done for his son: using his influence to afford his son opportunity, the best schools, professional networks, helping propel his son into his own career as an attorney.

But then the other part the tombstone definitely didn’t tell you about was that John rarely spoke to his son James at all through the last 20 years of his life.

In terms of political careers, roughly 20 years had passed for our man Joseph too since we last left him. We come to this passage finding Joseph now a governor—a governor! And his brothers are coming to him to buy grain in the land of Egypt.

Just from last week to today, you might be feeling a bit of whiplash. Hold on. I thought he was just sold into slavery. Well, a lot has happened to Joseph, and over twenty years have passed.

Once sold to Potiphar, Joseph quickly found favor in the household and was named its overseer. Potiphar's wife, however, also noticed Joseph, made numerous advances on him, all of which Joseph refused. She then accused Joseph falsely, so Potiphar had him thrown in prison.

There in prison came two of Pharaoh's officials who had fallen out of Pharaoh's favor. Joseph correctly interpreted their dreams one day, and, as he predicted, one of them was restored to Pharaoh's court.

Years later because of that official, Joseph was plucked out of prison to interpret some of Pharaoh's dreams. Joseph predicted seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine, and recommended that Pharaoh prepare for them. Pharaoh was so impressed by Joseph that he placed him in charge of the whole thing, in effect overseeing of the land of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. You can't keep this man down. A testament to the faithfulness of God, but that's another sermon.

As predicted, when the years of famine came, Egypt had food, so people came from far and wide to buy grain. And Joseph was in charge of it all, leading to this fateful reunion, over twenty years in the making, between Joseph and his brothers who had betrayed him, which we read today.

Like many others, the brothers came to Egypt because of the famine. It seems they were in a bit of arrested development, because it took their father Jacob to tell them "Why do you keep looking at one another?" for them to get off their backsides and get some grain for the household.

But when they come to Egypt, Joseph sees them and recognizes them—they don't recognize him, though. It doesn't immediately go into the emotional state for Joseph, though it had to be fraught. He "treated them like strangers," it says, and "spoke harshly to them." He accuses them of espionage and imprisons them. Then three days later he lets all but one leave on the condition that they bring back their youngest brother Benjamin to prove the truth of their story.

There's a lot going on here, a lot of pent up, unprocessed rage and resentment on Joseph's part. On one hand, he shows them some mercy by not immediately executing them. On the other, he's not purely magnanimous here either. He's stringing them along, and the mind games keep going as the brothers go back and forth from Canaan to Egypt.

But think of the brothers' reaction here too to this reunion. Remember, for them, this is not a reunion. They don't know they're talking to the brother they had betrayed twenty years ago. And yet because of this Egyptian governor's harsh treatment of them, note what they say in v. 21: "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us."

Over twenty years removed, again without knowing it was Joseph they were talking to, their first thought at this treatment was that it was all punishment in some divine justice kind of way for what they had done to Joseph. That was the reason for their, what was it called, "anguish."

Anguish is a pretty strong word. Somewhere in that same word family one might also throw in a few synonyms: regret, remorse, guilt, shame, just to name a few, each somewhere on the same spectrum of an emotional response to past or present wrongdoing.

And it begs the question, whether it be for each of us as individuals; for many of us collectively in groups, in cities, in nations—and that’s no small issue either, tomorrow being Martin Luther King Day, the collective guilt of a society for widespread wrongdoing or even silence, but that’s another sermon—or this being a series about family, for us as we relate to each other in our families, what role for good or ill does regret have to play?

When I was a teenager, some friends and I were driving around in the church parking lot late one evening. And at one point, my friend Teddy crawled onto the hood of my car, arms outstretched grabbing onto the seams on either side of the hood. Being a wise person, I decided to drive around with him on there. At first, he was doing fine—I was driving straight and slow. But then I decided it’d be a good idea to start weaving back and forth.

The rest happened over the span of just a few seconds, but I remember them vividly even now, over twenty years later. As I started weaving back and forth, a look of panic flashed across Teddy’s face. It was just another second or two before he tumbled off the left side of the car.

And that’s all that happened. Nothing broken, just a few scratches and bruises. But we were both shaken, recognizing just how fatally serious that could have gotten, and to this day, I’d say probably about once a week I think about that and shudder at what could’ve happened to my friend, at my hands.

As a result, how many people do you think I’ve let ride on top of a car if I had anything to say about it?

This may be overly simplistic, but if we considered a spectrum of regret, if you will, perhaps think of it as ranging from on one hand the motivations and lessons of past mistakes, near misses, or failures that stir us to change, to learn, to grow—call that, for lack of a better term, guilt—to then on the other, the crippling weight of remorse and sadness for what has transpired in one’s life, leading to an apparent spiritual or emotional paralysis, wallowing in the pit of broken identity—call that, for lack of a better term, shame.

What place might either—guilt or shame—have within one’s life, and more to the point of this series, within one’s family?

Can you think now of things in your life you regret? Can you think now of instances in your family that bring about some guilt in your heart? As a child, as an adult child, as a spouse, as a parent, as a sibling. I know I can. To a certain degree, we kind of should.

There is some place for good and righteous guilt in a life led by faith. I mean look at what we just did in worship a few minutes ago. *We confessed*. Embedded in that is some acknowledgement that there is something amiss about who we are and what we do, and we shouldn’t be all that proud of it. And God-willing, it stirs us to acknowledge it, to change, to repentance.

But nor should it go so far as to drive us into this inescapable pit of self-pity and shame. Put more in theological terms, that undersells the power and acceptance of the grace of our Lord, that no matter the wrongdoing, no matter the shortcoming, no matter the sin, no matter how dark or broken or deep it may seem, the grace of God goes deeper.

And the thing about grace is it isn’t just idle forgiveness, wipe the slate clean sort of stuff. It’s generative. The grace of Christ makes something of us. It transforms us. Makes us a different kind of person that says, I know how things went wasn’t the best, and I regret it, but I want things to be different, and I know because of the grace of Jesus they can be.

Imagine how different things might’ve been for John Cashmore if he had been more intent on his relationship with his son James than with his job. I mean, the relationship was so icy that his son James’s wife

Sandra wrote a poem about it. Due to any number of reasons, among them being the sad reality of family history repeating itself sometimes, that marriage fell apart, but then later Sandra shared that same poem with her second husband, himself a songwriter named Harry Chapin, who turned it into a song, now known as one of the most heartbreaking laments on life mistakes, on tragic cycles in family history.

The poem was a lament of how one father never had time for his son, focused so much on work and career, in part for providing but also in part for ambition. That is, until later in life when he had more time, so he called up his son.

You may recognize it. Here's how it ends:

I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind"

He said, "I'd love to, dad, if I could find the time

You see, my new job's a hassle and the kids got the flu

But it's sure nice talking to you, dad

It's been sure nice talking to you"

And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me

He'd grown up just like me

My boy was just like me

And the cat's in the cradle [That's the name of the song if you didn't recognize it already] and the silver spoon

Little boy blue and the man in the moon

"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when

But we'll get together then, dad, we're gonna have a good time then."

Do any dads out there smell some onions? I do. It's heartbreaking. And all too real. But imagine how different things could've looked, for James, for John, for Sandra, if there had been a bit more grace at work in the heart of this driven man, if there had been a bit more recognition and regret, leading to change. Imagine how different things could've looked if there had been a bit more grace at work in the hearts of Jacob, and of his sons. Maybe they wouldn't have spent twenty years just looking at each other, but might have set out to make a change, set things right.

Now take whatever the instances you were thinking of, those instances of regret in your family, with a child, spouse, parent, sibling, you name it. Doesn't have to be "Cat's in the Cradle," father/son/work stuff necessarily, but that place of regret or guilt. Imagine it. And I recognize that the very scenario you might be thinking of is something for which the window is closed, maybe due to a death or a loss, but even then imagine how things could be different now if as a result you felt both the acceptance of grace and forgiveness and the conviction of guilt, both of them. What would change?

It's not too late.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.