

Joseph's treatment of his brothers — reflections and applications (first version)

by Barbara Roberts

This is the first version that I published as a blog post on 24 March 2021. After receiving constructive criticism, I updated the blog post. I no longer agree with all I wrote in this version, but I am keeping it in the public domain as a PDF. It can also be found at the Web Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210324201512/https://cryingoutforjustice.blog/2021/03/24/josephs-treatment-of-his-brothers-reflections-and-applications/>

For the updated post, [go here](#).

Joseph's treatment of his brothers was not vindictive or bitter, but it *was* shrewd and calculating. He boxed them into a corner. To plan and execute that complex series of tests required wisdom and strategy.

Shrewd and calculating ≠ cold and heartless

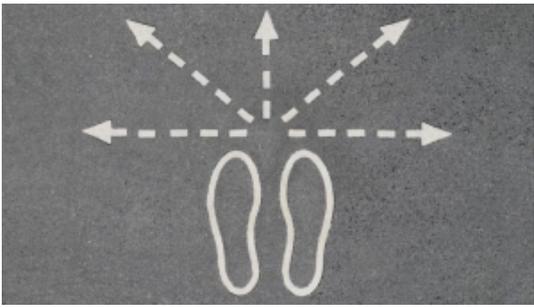
Joseph is a good example of how being shrewd and calculating does not necessarily mean being cold and heartless. In order to be wise as serpents yet harmless as doves, shrewd calculation is sometimes necessary.

How to help re-activate a person's conscience

Only the Holy Spirit can convict a person of sin. To whatever extent the brothers felt conviction in their hearts, Joseph was a subsidiary (second cause) of the brothers coming to feel that way. In a sense, Joseph was intelligently cooperating with the Holy Spirit's work of convicting sinners. His tests helped reactivate the seared consciences of his brothers. The narrative leaves us in no doubt that all his actions were done in love.

It is not necessarily our role to help God reactivate another person's congealed conscience. God can do that entirely on His own! But if we are to play a subsidiary part, how can we do so? How can we help a person who no longer feels the pricks of conviction because he has persistently suppressed them? If that person's sins are defined as crimes under the criminal code, we can report the crimes to the police and hope that the State, which wields the sword, will legally prove guilt and punish the offender. If — *big if!* — we are in a local church where the elders are astute, we can report the offender's sins to the church in the hope that the church will apply discipline to the offender (e.g., remove the offender's privileges, leadership position, even excommunicate the offender). However, as we know, both church discipline and the legal system often fail to properly investigate and enforce justice. And even when those institutions carry out justice rightly, the sinner does not necessarily admit his sin, let alone genuinely repent and reform.

Test the sinner by setting moral dilemmas which require him to act



As individuals, we will almost certainly be ineffective if we confront the sinner point blank. If we tackle the confirmed sinner head-on about his egregious sin, his conscience is most hardened on that very point, so we will achieve nothing. He doesn't feel the weight of that accusation. The way to do it is to find or create issues (moral dilemmas) that will link to the issues we really want the person to face. This is the strategy that Joseph used with his brothers: he gave them experiences where 'the boot was on the other foot' (they were the ones who were imprisoned, falsely accused, called spies, etc.) and where they were put in the moral dilemma of either sacrificing another vulnerable person or protecting the vulnerable person. Joseph's set-ups compelled the brothers to choose. They couldn't ignore the test: they had to act.

Use stories and parables to prick the hardened conscience

Another way to penetrate a hardened conscience is to tell a story that is analogous to the sinner's issue. On the surface, the story doesn't name the person we are trying to convict. If the person sees the weight of the moral issue in the story, we can then help them make the connection to themselves and their own behaviour.

The prophet Nathan used this strategy when he told a parable to King David. He did not start off by accusing David directly. Instead, he told a story which brought David to express moral indignation about the sinner's conduct in the parable. Then he confronted David: "Thou art the man!" ([2 Sam 12:1-15](#)).

Another example of the 'tell a story' strategy is in [2 Sam 14:1-21](#). David had banished Absalom for murdering Amnon. Joab got the woman of Tekoa to tell a story to David. The woman recounted the story as if it had really happened to her, but it was a made-up story. In that sense, what she did was akin to Joseph telling lies to test his brothers: she lied, but her falsehood was only done with a harmless and benevolent agenda. Her story elicited David's sympathy. Then, with great courtesy and deference to his office of kingship, she showed David how the story related to his own treatment of Absalom. This pricked his conscience and he relented from his harsh attitude to Absalom — he allowed Absalom to return from exile.

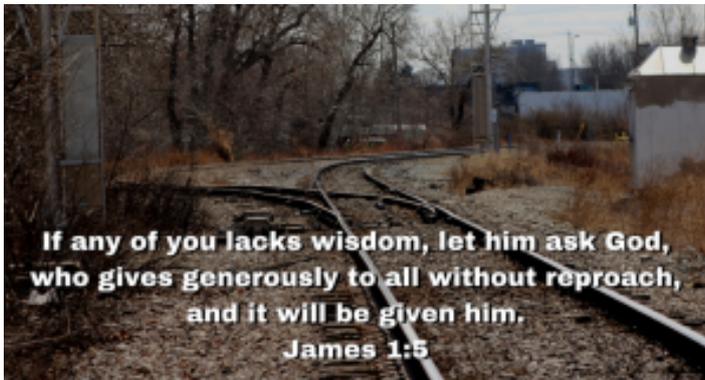
Many of the parables of Jesus fall into this category too — they were aimed at activating the seared conscience because it would have been profitless (and potentially dangerous) to hit the sinners between the eyes with their sin.

Comparing ourselves with Joseph

Even if we (as victims of abuse) are unable to do much to help God activate the seared conscience of our abuser, we can learn a lot from Joseph about wise reconciliation.

We do not have the powers of the State, as Joseph had. We are not rulers of the land. We do not have the power to imprison, to set free, to 'set up' and accuse, to shower gifts and favours. We probably don't have the power to demand the production of 'evidence' (Benjamin), or to withhold

the basic food that keeps body and soul together. But if we do desire continuing relationship with the offender, we can, like Joseph, purposefully refrain from reconciliation until it is proven safe. We can withhold reconciliation until the abuser [genuinely demonstrates reformation of character](#), and this has been proved by testing the abuser under pressure, in situations of temptation.



If you are currently separated from your abuser and you need wisdom to be able to test your abuser in this way, I suggest you pray for that wisdom. God may give you ideas about how to test your abuser. You might have friends or counsellors who can assist with devising tests. The counselors need to be wise to the deceptions of abusers and the counterfeit reformations of abusers. You might like to ask your friends and counselors to read this series.

Above all, I encourage you not to be afraid of seeming cold and heartless. Remember Joseph — use him as your model.

If people misjudge you as cold and calculating; take courage. God looks at the heart, not on outward appearances. God knows the difference between sham reconciliation and true reconciliation. God does not want sham reconciliations, and he certainly does not want dangerous reconciliations where the abuser will turn again and rend you to pieces.

Perhaps some of Joseph's strategic brilliance came from divinely imparted wisdom, but some also came from his own maturity of character. I venture to suggest that this is one of the biggest differences between us and Joseph. What Joseph had is what we so often lack. Let me make that personal: What Joseph had is what I so often lack. Allow me to show you what I mean.

When his brothers first presented themselves to him, Joseph's heart was ready to burst with joy for the impending reunion, but he hid his emotion. He kept under control his need for reunion; he was strong enough to set that need to one side while he put into effect the series of tests. Are we victims that strong? Often we are not. We fall with relief into the open arms of our (un-reformed) abuser, glad for his enfoldment of us, happy to drop whatever half-hearted boundaries we might have been forming, ready to 'forgive and forget' in naivety rather than wisdom.

Of course, our cultural and church conditioning trains us to take this approach, and our position in society is far less powerful than Joseph's was in Egypt. So it is not really fair to compare ourselves too unfavourably with Joseph. But I know that for me there was a weakness in my personality and in my understanding that contributed to the sliding back into the unchanged relationship with my abuser. The personality weakness came from my sexual abuse in childhood; the weakness in understanding came from the lack of good counsel I had received on the subject of abuse and reconciliation with one's abuser.

Dear reader, lest you collapse in self-condemnation or despair about the vast difference between Joseph's strong character and your own, I will now point out some other significant differences.

When Joseph tested his brothers so stringently, he came from a position of robust health, self-confidence and social approval.

The abuse Joseph suffered, whilst grave, was not so extreme, soul destroying or prolonged that he was permanently damaged. Joseph's trauma was relatively light compared to the trauma of long-term domestic abuse, repeated rape, child abuse, being tortured for a prolonged time, being a concentration camp victim, or a prisoner of war under the Japanese. He had not been manipulated for years into thinking that 'it was all his fault'. He had not been so systematically traumatised and manipulated that he had bonded with his abusers as the only way of coping with the untenable.

Even during Joseph's years in prison, his good character had been acknowledged and valued. In contrast, the good character of a victim of domestic abuse is rarely acknowledged and valued by her friends, family, church and church leaders. Her abuser only pretends to acknowledge her good character when he is at the stage of the cycle where he is 'treating her like a princess' and is trying to manipulate her to get things such as sexual favours.

Unlike most victims of abuse who are considering reconciliation, Joseph the Governor had not been living with his abusers for many years. It was about twenty years since he had been subject to the original abuse by his brothers; and it was seven years since he had been released from prison and elevated to the position of Governor (five years of plenty, two years of famine). He had well and truly recovered from whatever ill health the abuse had caused in his body, and the damage it had caused in his soul. His life was in order, his housing secure, he had no family court matters pending or judged against him, he was in a well paid, high status job, his children weren't abusing him or out of control, his family life was stable, and he was not lonely.

Furthermore, Joseph had no circle of acquaintances who were likely to collude with his abusers' point of view. These Egyptians didn't know Joseph's brothers, nor did they know any of the history of the relationship. They did not have any doctrinal agendas which might incline them to put pressure on Joseph to reconcile quickly. In addition, Joseph did not have children with his abusers. His children were not putting pressure on him by saying to him "Daddy, can't we let them come and live with us?" If and when he did choose to reconcile with his brothers, it was most unlikely he would be living under the same roof with them. To summarise, Joseph was in no fear of his former abusers, no-one was colluding with his abusers, and he was in no desperate straits in other departments of his life.

This should be a lesson to the church which, having listened to and believed an abuse victim, is trying to support her. If she can be helped to gain control and security in all the departments of her life — basic safety and protection from ongoing abuse, housing, finance, health, bringing up children, employment, legal stability, friendship, emotional recovery (which includes looking at and understanding the abuse in all its details), then she is likely to be in a position of strength from which she can with safety and wisdom consider the path of reconciliation. If she is not helped with these things, she is more likely to make poor choices... poor choices of unwise reconciliation, of unwise re-partnering, of neglecting or even abandoning her faith — the list could go on and on. And so could the abuse.

It is my prayer that abuse will cease, that misunderstanding will be no more, that suffering will end. However, the Bible tells us that only in the new heaven and the new earth will there be no more tears. If there must be tears, let us seek to promote the tears of godly separation from ungodly perpetrators, rather than the tears of the prisoners who believe they are condemned forever to imprisoning relationships. Let us help rebuild lives, let us examine the bridges we build to others, and if there could be reconciliation, let us promote only the careful, wise, well-tested reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers.