

# THE COUP DE GRACE

GENESIS 42:1-38    DECEMBER 21, 2022

*Coup de grâce* is a term for “a death blow [which] ends the suffering of a severely wounded person.”<sup>1</sup> A literal translation is a “blow of grace.” In eras when wars were fought with spears and swords, the “blow of grace” would often be administered by a thrust to the heart.<sup>2</sup> For those dying on the field of battle, this finishing stroke could be a severe but welcome mercy.

Genesis 42 is a blow of grace that thrusts into the hearts of Jacob’s family. After many years of conflict, self-serving, and faithlessness, they are brought to a reckoning. They are doomed to die unless they will acknowledge God, surrender to Him, and allow self to be put to death.

This text is another magnificent example of God’s generous grace. But it shows that God’s grace is not *just* about feeling the warm comfort of God’s blessing. His grace makes demands of us. To receive it we must admit our guilt and humbly invite God to trade our sin for His salvation. This is an exchange He is eager to accomplish, but it requires death. Our hearts of flesh must be crucified and replaced with the heart of Christ. From that blow of grace we rise from death to life.

Donald Coggan wrote, “*It is a great thing to come under the magnificent tyranny of the Gospel!*” We don’t like the word ‘tyranny,’ but our rebellious hearts need the reminder that God is King and if we want to follow Christ, we must lay down our lives and lose them for His sake.

In this story, the hero does some sketchy things. We wonder if he should’ve behaved this way. God set Joseph apart for a major work of providence. His actions are, in some ways, severe. But God’s end purpose was rescue, reconciliation, and redemption for this undeserving family. He was doing the work of plowing up the hard soil of their hearts. So, Joseph is not really a *model* for us in this text, but a *vessel* used by God for His providential purposes.

**Genesis 42:1-2 - When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you keep looking at each other? <sup>2</sup>Listen,” he went on, “I have heard there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us so that we will live and not die.”**

The sons are looking at each other, Jacob is looking at Egypt. From what we’re told, no one is looking to the Lord. Later, God will appear to Jacob and tell him directly, “Go down to Egypt, don’t be afraid,” but in the mean time, this family is swept along by circumstances. The result is a lot of anxiety and hand-wringing and hurt feelings and confusion. None of that is what God wants for us.

Don’t forget to seek the Lord. David said: “Seek the Lord and His strength; seek His face always.”<sup>3</sup> As readers, we know that God had a plan and He had provision, but they were in the dark since they did not seek out the light.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coup\\_de\\_gr%C3%A2ce](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coup_de_gr%C3%A2ce)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-roman-gladiators>

<sup>3</sup> 1 Chronicles 16:11

Another thought: Jacob and sons were facing a very serious famine. They assumed the answer to their problem was to throw money at it. Money was no object - they had *tons* of silver - so Jacob said, "Go buy food." But, as we track through the story, we'll see the money was neutralized. It didn't help them. In fact, it ended up causing more of a problem for them. Money is incredibly useful and can be very helpful in hard circumstances, but it is not the answer to life's problems.

**Genesis 42:3-4 - <sup>3</sup>So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. <sup>4</sup>But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he thought, "Something might happen to him."**

Jacob has another outbreak of favoritism. We saw it with Rachel, then with Joseph, now it's Benjamin. This family is still extremely dysfunctional.<sup>4</sup> Luckily, God can bring beauty from ashes.

It seems strange that they would send all 10 sons, leaving the families exposed. Why not send a delegation of servants or just one or two sons? It's possible that Egypt had per-capita rules in the distribution of grain.<sup>5</sup> Packing up their donkeys I'm sure these guys were wondering why their dad didn't seem to care if *they* lived or died, just their little brother Benny.

**Genesis 42:5-6a - <sup>5</sup>The sons of Israel were among those who came to buy grain, for the famine was in the land of Canaan. <sup>6</sup>Joseph was in charge of the country; he sold grain to all its people.**

Refugees were pouring over the borders of Egypt. Thank goodness for Joseph's compassion. Thanks to God's grace, Egypt had more than enough to supply them all.

In the long line of hungry travelers, God saw His people. He had more than just a plan to fill their pantry. In a world full of needs, hurts, and difficulty, you can be sure that the Lord knows, He sees, He watches over us. God Almighty thinks of you, and has passionate, tender provision for you.

**Genesis 42:6b-8 - His brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup>When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he asked. "From the land of Canaan to buy food," they replied. <sup>8</sup>Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him.**

At age 17, when Joseph told them about his dreams, they angrily responded, "Oh really? You think you're going to rule over us?" Like the crowd at the foot of the cross, they unwittingly fulfilled prophecy. They proved God's Word to be true, even when they didn't want it to be. God speaks and it is done.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

<sup>5</sup> *Faithlife Study Bible Notes*

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 33:9

Joseph is harsh with his brothers. Shouldn't he have just immediately forgiven them and not put on this ruse? We're left to wonder why exactly he did what he did, but we can see currents of compassion even as he brings down heaven's blow of grace. He could've had them all killed for what they had done and no one would've bat an eye. Instead, we'll see he is concerned for their families and their plight. As for forgiveness, it seems clear that Joseph decided to test his brothers - to see what sort of men they were after more than 20 years of separation. Remember: These men had been killers and thieves. Some of them had committed incest. They sold their own flesh and blood into slavery. The real work was about hearts, not hunger. God was drawing these men to repentance and reconciliation. Their hard hearts would need tenderizing.

How is it possible that they didn't recognize Joseph? He had been a teenager when they last saw him. Now, his head was totally shaved - no hair, no beard. He'd be wearing ceremonial makeup on his eyes, wearing all Egyptian clothing, and speaking a foreign language.<sup>7</sup>

**Genesis 42:9 - <sup>9</sup>Joseph remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies. You have come to see the weakness of the land."**

We love movie scenes where everything suddenly comes together, *The Sixth Sense*-style. Joseph recalls the dreams - the sheaves, the bowing, his reigning over the stars. It all came together. And, it seems he realized at least in part that God was using him to bring his family altogether down to Egypt. So, he starts working a plan to accomplish that goal.

He challenges them to reveal what their mindset and motives were. He had known them as brutal, hateful men, ready to exploit anyone. They had stripped *him* naked and thrown him down a well. He knows they aren't spies, but are they still the cruel killers they had been?

**Genesis 42:10-14 - <sup>10</sup>"No, my lord. Your servants have come to buy food," they said. <sup>11</sup>"We are all sons of one man. We are honest; your servants are not spies." <sup>12</sup>"No," he said to them. "You have come to see the weakness of the land." <sup>13</sup>But they replied, "We, your servants, were twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no longer living." <sup>14</sup>Then Joseph said to them, "I have spoken: 'You are spies!'**

Some of what they said was true, some not so much. A lot of words could be used to describe these guys. 'Honest' wasn't really high on the list. They *were* being honest about not being spies, but I find it interesting that at some point, they started to believe their own lie. "Joseph is dead," they said. They had no evidence of that. But they had told the lie so often, it took hold of their hearts.

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<sup>7</sup> CSB Study Bible Notes

Bruce Waltke notes, “*The covenant family must be more than honest; it must show loving loyalty to one another.*” They had money. They had flocks. They had history. Did they have *hesed*? Joseph was going to find out.

**Genesis 42:15-17 - <sup>15</sup>This is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. <sup>16</sup>Send one from among you to get your brother. The rest of you will be imprisoned so that your words can be tested to see if they are true. If they are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!” <sup>17</sup>So Joseph imprisoned them together for three days.**

We sense that Joseph is making strategic moves. His dreams are going to be fulfilled, but they’re not *all* the way fulfilled as long as Benjamin and Jacob stay in Canaan. Joseph focuses his efforts first on bringing his 11th brother to Egypt and, ultimately, the rest of the family.

Joseph recognized that God made *him* the ark for his family’s survival. The Lord told Noah, “Bring in the animals that they may be saved,” and then God had worked *with* His servant to accomplish the rescue. Now, Joseph *himself* is the vessel set apart for the salvation of God’s people. He knows the famine has five more years to go.

Kenneth Mathews points out that, after three days in the clink, the brothers were unable to choose who would go free.<sup>8</sup> Though they have made *some* progress in unity, they’re still a fractured bunch.

**Genesis 42:18-20 - <sup>18</sup>On the third day Joseph said to them, “I fear God—do this and you will live. <sup>19</sup>If you are honest, let one of you be confined to the guardhouse, while the rest of you go and take grain to relieve the hunger of your households. <sup>20</sup>Bring your youngest brother to me so that your words can be confirmed; then you won’t die.” And they consented to this.**

There’s a lot going on here. First, Joseph shows compassion and care for their families. He’s not acting out of vengeance. He wants to give short term relief while working toward full-blown rescue.

Second, we see that, even in his compassion, he backs them into a corner where they will *have* to make a decision. He says, “Prove what you said *then you won’t die.*” The suggestion is that he might hunt them down if they didn’t return. On the other hand, if they don’t settle accounts with this prince, they and their families would starve to death. They were facing death at the end of every road, *unless* they submitted and obeyed and came clean.

Third, Joseph invokes Elohim. He said, “I fear God.” This would’ve been quite a moment. He *didn’t* say, “I fear Ra,” or, “I fear Osiris.” He said, “I fear *Elohim.*” Now, that is not the Personal name Yahweh - the God of Abraham. Elohim is more generic, more a title than a name - but it would’ve been a signal to these Hebrews. This was the universal term for the highest God who ruled the universe.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews *Genesis 11:27-50:26*

<sup>9</sup> Cyrus H. Gordon *The International God "Elohim/Ntr"*

The Old Testament reveals that the pagan nations did have a concept of this *Elohim* God. The Philistines and Abraham discuss Him in Genesis 20. Later, in 2 Chronicles, Pharaoh Neco will tell King Josiah, "Elohim spoke to me so don't get in my way." There was a cultural understanding that when a city had the fear of Elohim, people would be safe there.<sup>10</sup> A thousand years after Joseph spoke about fearing God, Homer would write *The Odyssey*. In it, he said the test of God-fearing men was whether they showed love to strangers.<sup>11</sup> So, there was this cultural understanding and Joseph is signaling to the brothers.

He wasn't ready to reveal his identity, but he did show a card here, hoping his brothers would make the free-will choice to do what was right and to fear God themselves. This moment of mercy - sending 9 back instead of 1 - finally got the brothers thinking more spiritually.

**Genesis 42:21-24** - <sup>21</sup> Then they said to each other, "Obviously, we are being punished for what we did to our brother. We saw his deep distress when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this trouble has come to us." <sup>22</sup> But Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to harm the boy? But you wouldn't listen. Now we must account for his blood!" <sup>23</sup> They did not realize that Joseph understood them, since there was an interpreter between them. <sup>24</sup> He turned away from them and wept. When he turned back and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and had him bound before their eyes.

Reuben lashes out. He tries to absolve himself of any guilt regarding Joseph, but it was his idea to throw Joseph into the cistern. He was unwilling to stand up to his brothers and simply stop them. Instead, he tried to con his way through. Poor Reuben never has any ideas that work out.

For the first time the brothers admit what they've done. They even echo God's Word in Genesis 9, talking about requiring life for life and they admit they are guilty. And, we see the blow of grace is plowing up their hard hearts. For the *first* time, they call Joseph their brother. Earlier they would only refer to him as "Jacob's son," with jealousy and disdain. But God is drawing them in.

In this moment, Joseph doesn't laugh, he *weeps*. This isn't about spite or revenge. He isn't trying to hurt them - God is working to *heal* them. So, Joseph orchestrates a test. He holds Simeon back. Simeon is not the firstborn and (Joseph knows), he is not particularly well-liked by their father. Simeon was one of the *more* expendable brothers in one sense.<sup>12</sup> Would they leave him hanging? Would they run away from the grace they were being shown and try to hide from judgment they deserved? Would they sacrifice him to save themselves?

**Genesis 42:25-28** - <sup>25</sup> Joseph then gave orders to fill their containers with grain, return each man's silver to his sack, and give them provisions for their journey. This order was carried out. <sup>26</sup> They loaded the grain on their donkeys and left there. <sup>27</sup> At the place where they lodged for the night, one of them opened his sack to get feed for his donkey, and he saw his

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<sup>10</sup> Genesis 20:11

<sup>11</sup> Homer *Odyssey* 9.172-6

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Steinmann *Genesis*

**silver there at the top of his bag. <sup>28</sup> He said to his brothers, “My silver has been returned! It’s here in my bag.” Their hearts sank. Trembling, they turned to one another and said, “What has God done to us?”**

Compared to Noah and Abraham, these fellows weren’t very faithful. They believed God was ready to curse them, but didn’t live as if He wanted to help them. George Costanza once said, “*God would never let me be successful. He’d kill me first. He’d never let me be happy.*” His therapist was puzzled: “*I thought you didn’t believe in God?*” George responded, “*I do for the **bad** things!*”

The sons of Jacob are acting a little like that. Meanwhile, God says, “Give My people *this* message: The Lord bless you and protect you; may the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; may the Lord look with favor on you and give you peace.”<sup>13</sup> That’s our God’s heart for us.

God wanted to help these guys and guide them. With that said, this silver situation was serious. This was the kind of thing that gets you impaled on a pole. Joseph’s move accomplishes two purposes: First, it would test their supposed *honesty* when they inevitably returned for more grain. And second, it was an act of tender generosity he could secretly do for them in their time of need.

The Hebrew says “their hearts went out.”<sup>14</sup> More than ever they were doomed men. They could no longer claim to be “honest” before Joseph. Instead, *if* they came to him, they would have to throw themselves on his mercy - which Joseph fully intends to give them. But the choice is theirs.

Your goodness, your honesty, your not-as-bad-as-the-guy-next-door life are not enough to save you from death. Only the grace of God through the generous sacrifice of Jesus Christ can save you. He fully intends to extend mercy to you and fill your life with His grace, but it’s your choice.

**Genesis 42:29-35 - <sup>29</sup> When they reached their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them: <sup>30</sup> “The man who is the lord of the country spoke harshly to us and accused us of spying on the country. <sup>31</sup> But we told him, ‘We are honest and not spies. <sup>32</sup> We were twelve brothers, sons of the same father. One is no longer living, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.’ <sup>33</sup> The man who is the lord of the country said to us, ‘This is how I will know if you are honest: Leave one brother with me, take food to relieve the hunger of your households, and go. <sup>34</sup> Bring back your youngest brother to me, and I will know that you are not spies but honest men. I will then give your brother back to you, and you can trade in the country.’ ” <sup>35</sup> As they began emptying their sacks, there in each man’s sack was his bag of silver! When they and their father saw their bags of silver, they were afraid.**

They still didn’t own up to Jacob about what they did to Joseph, even though they recognize that they are guilty of sin. The coup de grâce hadn’t finished its work. But their fear reveals they were

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<sup>13</sup> Numbers 6:24-26

<sup>14</sup> Alter

understanding more and more that they would have to face a reckoning. Luckily, the prince who would decide their fate was a prince of peace and mercy and love.

**Genesis 42:36 - <sup>36</sup> Their father Jacob said to them, “It’s me that you make childless. Joseph is gone, and Simeon is gone. Now you want to take Benjamin. Everything happens to me!”**

Jacob’s hard heart shows here. Childless? Even *if* he lost Joseph *and* Simeon *and* Benjamin, he still had 9 sons before him and many grandchildren. But he reveals that he really doesn’t care about them very much. Think of poor Simeon! Jacob says, “Well, he’s just as dead as Joseph.” “No, dad, he’s not dead. In fact we can bring him back to you in 2 or 3 weeks if we just...” “Nope. Simeon’s dead!”

Here’s an important principle we learn from Jacob’s attitude: Selfishness kills. This selfishness that he’s allowing to dictate his choices would eventuate in the death of the whole family. His refusal here puts them on a path that ends in broken-hearted starvation.

H.A. Ironside wrote, “Many professing believers are so terribly self-centered. They are always looking inside and always seeking blessing for themselves. That isn’t the ideal Christian at all. The ideal Christian is one who is resting in Christ for his soul’s salvation and his great concern becomes the salvation of others.”<sup>15</sup>

**Genesis 42:37-38 - <sup>37</sup> Then Reuben said to his father, “You can kill my two sons if I don’t bring him back to you. Put him in my care, and I will return him to you.” <sup>38</sup> But Jacob answered, “My son will not go down with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left. If anything happens to him on your journey, you will bring my gray hairs down to Sheol in sorrow.”**

R. Kent Hughes sees Jacob’s anguish and is reminded that Paul taught us how to properly gauge sorrow in our lives. In 2 Corinthians we’re told that *Godly* sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation *without* regret. Worldly sorrow produces death. Which Jacob is experiencing is clear.

Reuben’s plan is absurd<sup>16</sup> and cowardly.<sup>17</sup> Judah ultimately takes control and, when he does, he offers *himself*, not someone else. That’s real leadership.

To go back would risk death or imprisonment, on account of the silver.<sup>18</sup> To stay meant death by famine. Their only hope was the mercy and grace of a powerful ruler. But to receive that grace they would have to die to self, admit their guilt, and obey his commands. God’s grace is ready to be poured out for us. Are we ready to receive heaven’s coup de grâce?

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<sup>15</sup> H.A. Ironside *Acts*

<sup>16</sup> R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*

<sup>17</sup> Waltke

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*