

Genesis 42 – Joseph and His Brothers-Part 1

Review

Last time we saw Joseph's rise to a powerful position in the Egyptian government second only to Pharaoh after God used Joseph to give Pharaoh a satisfactory interpretation of two disturbing dreams. As foretold by Joseph, Egypt enjoyed seven years of extraordinary plenty during which Joseph directed the storing of food in the cities which would be needed during the seven years of famine which followed. At the end of Genesis 41, we saw that the seven years of famine had begun throughout the entire region, and Joseph had begun to sell the stored food to the hungry Egyptian people.

Joseph's Brothers Journey from Canaan to Egypt to Buy Food

¹When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" ²And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." ³So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him.

Genesis 42:1-4 (ESV)

Once again, Jacob's favoritism of his younger sons over his ten elder sons raised its ugly head. Recall that Joseph and Benjamin were born to Jacob by his favorite wife Rachel who died giving birth to Benjamin. How truly despicable this family dynamic was, and it was all due to Jacob's favoritism – first favoring Rachel over her sister Leah and their maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah, then by favoring Rachel's sons over all the others. Without doubt any harm that might have come to Benjamin on the journey to Egypt might also have come to the entire party, but Jacob didn't even consider the dangers the elder sons might encounter.

⁵Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan. ⁶Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. ⁷Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." ⁸And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. ⁹And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them. And he said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land."

Genesis 42:5-9 (ESV)

As Joseph's brothers bowed before him, Joseph remembered the dream we read about in Genesis 37:5-8 in which he and his brothers were harvesting grain and the sheaves gathered by his brothers bowed down to Joseph's sheaf. Small wonder that Joseph took the opportunity to treat his brothers roughly as strangers when he recognized them.

¹⁰They said to him, "No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food.

¹¹We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never

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been spies.”¹²He said to them, “No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see.”¹³And they said, “We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan, and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is no more.” Genesis 42:10-13 (ESV)

There are several good reasons why Joseph’s brothers didn’t recognize him.

Joseph was twice as old as when his brothers last saw him – Recall that Joseph was still not quite full grown when his brothers sold him into slavery – probably not much older than seventeen as he was when he brought the bad report about his brothers to their father Jacob that we read about in Genesis 37:2. By the time Joseph’s brothers arrived in Egypt to buy grain Joseph was 37 years old.

Joseph seemed to be a native Egyptian – He was dressed as an Egyptian. He was shaved in the manner of an Egyptian upper-class man of the day. He spoke the Egyptian language and seemingly ignored their Hebrew conversations among themselves, using an Egyptian-Hebrew interpreter to give the impression that he himself didn’t understand Hebrew (Genesis 42:23).

Joseph was serving in a powerful position in the Egyptian government – How could his brothers have imagined the extraordinary events that God used to orchestrate Joseph’s rise from slavery into an influential position second only to Pharaoh?

His brothers never expected to find Joseph alive – Joseph’s brothers thought he was dead – at least that’s what they told Joseph himself when he accused them of being spies (Genesis 42:13). This highlights a flaw in human perception. Oftentimes, we deny what our senses tell us if they conflict with our pre-conceived ideas of what to expect. As the saying goes, “You only see what you *want* to see.” Conversely, sometimes we see and hear things that aren’t there just because we *expect* them.

It seems clear that Joseph’s brothers truly thought he was dead. This lends credence to the idea that it was the Midianites, not any of the brothers who lifted Joseph out of the pit in Dothan and sold him to the Ishmaelites who brought him down to Egypt. That would also explain Reuben’s surprise when he returned to the pit and found Joseph gone (Genesis 37:28-30). But then we must wonder why the brothers felt compelled to deceive their father by soaking Joseph’s special robe in goat’s blood before returning it to their father Jacob (Genesis 37:31-33).

As we shall learn later, Joseph clearly knew his brothers’ complicity in him being sold into slavery.

²⁰As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

Genesis 50:20 (ESV)

Furthermore, Joseph recognized what we ourselves must never forget – all the travails Joseph’s brothers brought upon him were in accordance with God’s preordained plan to preserve Israel through the famine, and (what Joseph himself couldn’t possibly know) with Israel’s preservation the line of descent through Jacob to Jesus was also preserved so that all mankind might be saved by Him out of death.

¹⁴But Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you. You are spies. ¹⁵By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶Send one of you, and let him

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bring your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. Or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.” ¹⁷*And he put them all together in custody for three days.* ¹⁸*On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear God* [אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm]: ¹⁹*if you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households,* ²⁰*and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die.” And they did so.*

Genesis 42:14-20 (ESV)

We can almost see Joseph winking at his Egyptian attendants and his brothers squirming nervously as Joseph indulged in a little fun at their expense. Seriously though, Joseph left the brothers with no choice but to comply with his little test. If they wanted the grain they had come to Egypt seeking, they had to go along with whatever Joseph commanded in Pharaoh's name, just as all Egyptians did.

It was good for them that Joseph wasn't a vindictive man and didn't turn them away empty-handed. With hindsight of course, we know that everyone involved acted and spoke as God had willed. Living in the moment without benefit of hindsight, we must all walk by faith, never fully understanding God's purposes but trusting that God's will is always perfect. I'm reminded of Paul's words to the church in Rome.

²⁸And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (ESV)

Regarding Joseph and all the so-called “Old Testament saints,” I'm also reminded of the words from Hebrews summarizing their lives of faith and trust.

³⁹And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Hebrews 11:39-40 (ESV)

Their example of faith and trust through seeming hardships provides us great encouragement as the Hebrews writer goes on to say.

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:1-2 (ESV)

Notice when Joseph proposed that one of the brothers would remain behind as a hostage pending their return with Benjamin (Genesis 42:18), he remarked that he also feared the Hebrew God אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm. I find it strange that none of them either Egyptians or Joseph's brothers found this casual statement striking. After all, Joseph had to all outward appearances “gone native.” To me it raises the question whether worship of אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm was out of the ordinary among the Egyptians of the day.

We must assume that Joseph raised his own half-Egyptian sons Manasseh and Ephraim to follow אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm the One true and living God. That in turn begs the question how it might have set with Joseph's Egyptian wife Asenath and her father Potiphera the priest of the Egyptian sun god Ra. It seems that Egyptian society was tolerant of those desiring to worship אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm rather than following the Egyptian pantheistic, animistic religion. Certainly, Pharaoh and Joseph's Egyptian

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servants and family must have been aware of his fear of אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm. But I find it intriguing that Joseph's brothers from Canaan didn't seem to find it remarkable either.

ASIDE - Here in Genesis 42:18, we find another instance of the phrase “*third day*.” Although it's intriguing, I'm not so sure it's particularly significant.

21Then they said to one another, “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, 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.” 22And Reuben answered them, “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.” Genesis 42:21-22 (ESV)

It's difficult to imagine what leap of logic caused Joseph's brothers to associate his rough treatment of them with the guilt they felt over putting him into the pit at Dothan. Perhaps they had dwelt upon their guilt over what they had done that day through all the intervening years. Genesis 42:22 affirms their conviction (at least Reuben's) that Joseph was dead, but we're still left with the mystery of why they deceived Jacob with Joseph's blood-soaked robe.

23They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. 24Then he turned away from them and wept. And he returned to them and spoke to them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. 25And Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, and to replace every man's money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. This was done for them. Genesis 42:23-25 (ESV)

Despite what his brothers had done, Joseph felt compassion and empathy for them. In this, Joseph once again reflected the heart of Jesus who asked His Father to forgive His persecutors even as they were crucifying Him (Luke 23:34)! Furthermore, Joseph followed through on his compassionate emotional response with the practical help of returning to them the money they had used to buy the grain and providing for their needs on the return journey to Canaan. This reminded me of the encouragement and admonishment from Jesus' half-brother James.

14What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. James 2:14-18 (ESV)

It's unclear why Joseph chose Simeon as the “hostage” to hold until his brothers returned with Benjamin. After all, Reuben, not Simeon, was Jacob's firstborn. It seems that the responsibility for being held as surety against the brothers' promise to bring Benjamin back with them to Egypt should have fallen to Reuben. Nevertheless, Joseph (and of course, God Almighty) must have had good reasons for holding Simeon hostage instead of Reuben, even though we ourselves can't fathom it.

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ASIDE – Money is mentioned several times in this passage, but neither the Egyptians nor the Canaanites (or Hebrews living in Canaan) in that time used struck coins for monetary exchange. Most financial deals were made by trading commodities such as food, clothing, spices, medicines, and livestock directly. Since food was in short supply, Jacob’s sons went to Egypt carrying bags of precious metals (most likely silver) to use in exchange for Egypt’s food. Of course, silver can’t be eaten, so we might well wonder what was in it economically for Pharaoh and Egypt. But Pharaoh knew from the interpretation of his dreams that the famine would come to an end after seven years. In the meantime, Pharaoh’s treasuries grew with the steady flow of silver being exchanged for food. No doubt, those who had no silver with which to buy traded their land holdings for food. Thus Pharaoh (and Joseph) essentially nationalized their lands, turning them into de facto sharecroppers from the time of the famine onward.

26Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. 27And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money in the mouth of his sack. 28He 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?” Genesis 42:26-28 (ESV)

How tragic it is that Joseph’s brothers never seemed to acknowledge God’s hand in providing their families with relief from the famine (and failed to recognize their presumed dead brother Joseph as God’s agent in His provision). Yet how quickly they blamed God for the return of their money instead of simply accepting it as the blessing it was.

How much like them we ourselves are! When things are going smoothly as we have hoped and expected, we scarcely acknowledge God’s blessings at all. Yet, when things don’t go as we expect or desire, we oftentimes wring our hands and complain about God’s actions, forgetting in our desperation God’s steadfast love, compassion, and provision in our lives. Sadly, this forgetfulness extends even to God’s having redeemed us out of death in our sins by Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. No wonder Jesus so sternly chastised the church at Ephesus (and of course the Church as a whole) in John’s apocalyptic vision.

2“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. 4But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Revelation 2:2-5

(ESV)

We must acknowledge and worship God in our “mountaintop” moments just as much as we desperately seek His aid when we walk in the valley of the shadow of death!

29When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, 30“The man, the lord of the land, spoke roughly to us and took us to be spies of the land. 31But we said

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to him, ‘We are honest men; we have never been spies. ³²We are twelve brothers, sons of our father. One is no more, and the youngest is this day with our father in the land of Canaan.’ Genesis 42:29-32 (ESV)

I find it quite humorous that these grown men came back whining to their father about Joseph as if to say, “Daddy, he was mean to us.”

³³Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, ‘By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, and take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. ³⁴Bring your youngest brother to me. Then I shall know that you are not spies but honest men, and I will deliver your brother to you, and you shall trade in the land.’” ³⁵As they emptied their sacks, behold, every man’s bundle of money was in his sack. And when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were afraid. Genesis 42:33-35 (ESV)

Neither the brothers nor their father Jacob seem to have even acknowledged in their own hearts God’s blessing in providing them food to carry their families through the famine. They were too busy worrying about potential fallout from Joseph’s blessing in returning their money. Joseph had made it very clear what needed to be done. Yet they seemed quite reluctant to follow his simple instructions and graciously accept the blessings he had given them.

In this too, Joseph models Jesus while his brothers and father model fallen mankind. Jesus’ Gospel is quite simple:

By His birth into human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, His exemplary sinless life as the Son of Man, His sacrificial death on the cross taking God’s rightful punishment of death for our sins upon Himself in our place, His resurrection to life and return to the glory He shared with God the Father since before the beginning, and His promise to return one day to gather His children to Himself, Jesus provides us the unmerited opportunity to share in His resurrection and enjoy eternal life with Him in His glorious presence.

All He asks from us in return is our acknowledgment and belief in the blessing of His Gospel, and our loving devotion in grateful service to Him and our fellow creatures. Yet, most of mankind will miss out on Jesus’ blessings simply because in our sinful pride we refuse to humbly acknowledge our undeniable need for His salvation and seize for ourselves the redemption out of death that He offers.

³⁶And Jacob their father said to them, “You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me.” ³⁷Then Reuben said to his father, “Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.” ³⁸But he said, “My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.” Genesis 42:36-38 (ESV)

I must admit that Jacob’s attitude and his interactions with his family and neighbors often gets me hot under the collar. There was Simeon – bound in Egypt as a hostage. Meanwhile, the other nine of

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Jacob's sons had risked their own lives on a hazardous journey during times of desperation to bring food back for their families. Any time along that way down to Egypt, they might have been robbed and killed for the silver they were carrying to pay for food. Then on the return journey, they might have been robbed and killed for the food Jacob had sent them to acquire. They had accomplished the mission their father had assigned to them and returned with the silver he had sent with them to boot. Furthermore, they had received clear instructions from Joseph about how more food might be obtained.

But all Jacob could see was how it all affected him personally. Compound that with Jacob's blatantly self-deceptive statement that Benjamin was the only son he had left. Notice also the tacit implication that Jacob's mourning for Benjamin would kill him, but that if one of the other sons "took one for the team," it would be okay. Once again, we see the ugly, destructive favoritism of Jacob for the two sons of Rachel over all the others. If I had been there as one of Jacob's sons, I might have been severely tempted to wring the old man's neck until I put him out of my misery.

Furthermore, I'm appalled by Reuben's offer to allow their grandpa Jacob to kill one of his own sons as recompense for any harm done to Benjamin. That despicable idea must have truly endeared Reuben's sons Hanoah, Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi to their loving Papa!

But I'll get down off my soapbox now. In the meantime, despite these family squabbles, they were safe from starvation for the time being after the nine brothers returned from their successful mission to Egypt.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll look at Joseph's ongoing interaction with his brothers when they return to Egypt seeking to buy more food from him as the regional famine continued.