

Genesis 42: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 42 When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, Why do you look at one another? And 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.

So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan. Now 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.

Joseph 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. And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. And 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.

They said to him, No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies. He said to them, No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see. And 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. But Joseph said to them, It is as I said to you, you are spies. By this you shall be tested.

By the life of Pharaoh you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of you, and let him 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.

[1 : 57] And he put them all together in custody for three days. On the third day Joseph said to them, Do this and you will live, for I fear God. 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, and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words will be verified, and you shall not die.

And they did so. Then 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. And 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.

They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. Then 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. And 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.

Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. And 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. 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? When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, The man, the lord of the land, spoke roughly to us, and took us to be spies of the land. But we said to him, We are honest men, we have never been spies. We 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. Then 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. Bring 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. As they emptied their sacks, behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack.

[4 : 14] And when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were afraid. And 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. Then 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.

But 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 grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol. In Genesis chapter 42, we see something akin to a game of musical chairs.

Similar stories to those we've seen in previous chapters are being played out, but people are in different positions. How will they act when tables are turned? When they have power that they did not have before? When they have the opportunity to replay something that they did in the past? Jacob sends his sons down to Egypt to get food there.

The severe famine that's affecting the area seems to be beyond the specific local factors of Egypt, the particular winds and the Nile, but has many different factors that are affecting many different places within the wider region. Jacob sends ten of his sons down to Egypt to get food, the sons of Leah and the sons of the handmaids. And as he sends them down, he holds Benjamin back.

Why does he hold Benjamin back? Benjamin is all that remains to him of Rachel now that Joseph has gone. And also, he doesn't seem to trust the other brothers. He fears that harm might happen to Benjamin.

[5 : 55] Where would that harm come from? Well, maybe from the other brothers. He's already seen what happened when he sent Joseph to the brothers. And now he's fearful of sending this other son of Rachel to the brothers. There is a great rift in the family along the lines of the favoured and the unfavoured wife and the sons. And he has already seen that this rift can be expressed not just between the brothers, but also against him. His son, his oldest son, Reuben, has attempted a coup against him, sleeping with Bilhah, his concubine. The ten brothers arrive in the land of Egypt and they bow down to Joseph. And here, once again, divine intention is foregrounded. What are the odds that Joseph and his brothers would encounter each other again under these circumstances, even with Joseph having risen to power in the land?

They're truly astronomical. But yet, God is bringing about the fulfilment of Joseph's dreams. They do not, however, recognise Joseph, even though Joseph recognises them.

We've seen stories of disguise already, in the story of Jacob and Isaac and receiving the blessing, but also in the story of Tamar and Judah. Seeing his brothers, Joseph is reminded of his dreams at this point. But the dreams don't teach Joseph exactly what to do. He's seen his brothers and he knows that God is bringing to pass something that was foretold in the past. But at this point, he really has to decide how he's going to respond to the situation. He begins by accusing them of being spies. Now, it's worth thinking back to the story of chapter 37. The first thing that set him at odds with his brothers there, the first inciting incident, was his bringing back a bad report on the sons of the handmaids. In that story, that language is the language of spying. And now he begins by accusing his brothers of being spies. That maybe was what they accused him of being, a spy for his father. But now he presents them as spies. They have to disclose and be open with him in order to prove their innocence. Now, if he was just enquiring about their family and asking about their father and their brothers, the nature of his interest might have been suspicious. However, by beginning with an accusation, he puts them on the back foot and puts them in a position where they have to protest and prove their innocence. But they are none the wiser about the true cause of

Joseph's interest in them. Joseph puts them in prison and they are placed in prison for three days. We've already seen the importance of three days earlier on in the story. It's three days until the chief cupbearer and the chief baker will be raised up to a higher position or removed from their office. Joseph insists that they bring Benjamin back with them. And why is he doing this? Perhaps because he's wondering whether Benjamin is safe. To their mind, he's just testing the truth of their story. But for Joseph, the real concern is, is Benjamin safe? Have they done with Benjamin what they did with him? Have they tried to cast him out of the family, leaving only the children of Leah and the handmaids? Why have only ten of them come? Surely there is another brother that could have come too. The fact that this son has not come with them is deeply suspicious to him. And so he wants to check their story. He wants to confirm that there is indeed another brother, that the other brother is safe, and also that he wants to see Benjamin again. Benjamin, when he left, was only an infant, presumably.

And now Benjamin is probably around the age that he was when he was sold into slavery. Hearing this request, the brothers are dismayed, and they talk among themselves. They recognize in the situation some recompense for what they have done to Joseph. So Joseph sees the fulfillment of his dreams in their bowing down to him, and they see that their punishment is coming upon them for what they did to Joseph. Both parties then recognize that this is a significant encounter, and that many events of the past are coming back at this moment. Reuben protests that they should have listened to him. They should have spared Joseph. His name means see a son, and he was given that name because the Lord has looked upon my affliction. That's the reason why Leah gave Reuben that name, and he saw the affliction of Joseph and tried to act in that situation, living up to his name. But Simeon did not. And so hearing the conversation, Joseph decides to take Simeon and hold Simeon back rather than Reuben.

[10:38] Simeon is the one that seems to be more in with the rest of the brothers. He was part of the plan. He did not stand against it in the same way. Reuben was the natural choice at first. He was the oldest, the firstborn. He was presumably the leader of the plot against Joseph. But the revelation of the fact that he stood against his brothers in the plot to kill Joseph suggests to Joseph that Simeon is the one to hold back instead. Simeon is next in line to Reuben. Simeon was given his name because the Lord has heard that I am hated, but he did not show any care and concern for the hated son, for Joseph.

The other thing about Simeon that might make him a more apt choice is he's the second son of Leah. He's going to hold back the second son of Leah in order that they bring the second son of Rachel, Benjamin. When they find their money in their sacks on the way back, they are deeply concerned.

They've left a brother in Egypt and they are returning with money in their sacks. What is their father going to think? How are they going to return to Egypt when it might look that they are not just spies but also thieves? They might see that this is a trap set for them and it gives them an incentive not to return. They've got their money and they've got their food. Do they value the brother over their money? They're now given the choice to have money in their hands and to leave their brother behind or to go on the dangerous mission back to Egypt to gain their brother again and to give back the money.

There's a replaying of the choice that they had earlier with Joseph. Are they going to bring back the son and give up the money? Or are they happy to bereave their father and to destroy their brother for their own pockets and their own security? When Jacob sees them returned, he is concerned too, probably for different reasons. He fears that they have done something to Simeon and want to do something to Benjamin too. He has already had his sons returned to him with tokens of a dead brother.

Where did the silver come from? They have two different stories. They have the story of Simeon being held back by the ruler of the land but they also have this story about this money just turning up in their sacks. Where did the silver come from? Jacob puts the pieces together perhaps of Simeon gone and the money in the sacks and maybe at that point it comes to his mind this helps to explain the seeming death of Joseph too. This has happened before and it's a very troubling memory. Reuben offers at this point to kill his two sons, Jacob's grandsons, if he doesn't bring Simeon back and Reuben is probably not the sharpest tool in the box. This is an exaggerated and ridiculous offer but he cannot truly protest innocence in both the case of Simeon and of Joseph. He is to some degree complicit so upping the stakes of it all by offering to kill his sons is a way of trying to recover some degree of trust from his father in a situation where he knows he's not trustworthy anymore. It's reminiscent of the story of Judah and Tamar in some ways too. Tamar married Ur then Ur died. Tamar then was taken by Onan and

[13 : 53] Onan died too and Judah had to send Shelah to Tamar and he was not willing to do so. To actually lose two of his sons and then give a third was too much for him to do. But yet had he done so he would have received sons in return. In the same way in the story of Joseph if Jacob is to receive the two lost sons back he has to give that third son. He has to give Benjamin. Pay attention to the language that Jacob uses at this point. My son. Not your brother. It's my son over against the murderous brothers.

His brother. Not your brother. The other half of the family is virtually disowned at this point. Benjamin seems to be the only one left to him. He speaks of him in that way as if he was the only child he had remaining. Jacob possibly now suspects that the sons of Leah and the handmaids are just devouring his family. His hope and his life is hanging on by the thread of Benjamin alone. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make. You would bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol. A question to consider. Joseph places the brothers in a position to test what they will do with regard to Simeon and Benjamin. Replaying certain themes of the story in which he was sold into slavery.

But Joseph is also placed in a position by God. His dreams seem to be coming to pass. God has placed him in power over his brothers. I want you to reflect upon the ways in which this would serve as a test for Joseph 2.