



Genesis - Chapter Forty Two

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.c Genesis 37:1-50:26 - Jacob's Descendants (continues)

Summary of Chapter Forty Two

Jacob sends his ten eldest sons to Egypt to purchase food due to the severity of the famine keeping Benjamin at home. When they arrive they bow down to Joseph as he is the governor of Egypt and responsible for deciding who can buy grain. Joseph recognised his brothers but they did not recognise him. He then accuses them of being spies, which they vehemently deny. Joseph had them imprisoned for three days.

After three days Joseph had them released but he had Simeon bound as a hostage until they return bring Benjamin also to prove they were telling the truth. The brothers believed they were being punished because they had sold Joseph into slavery. Joseph order that their money be put back into the sacks of grain secretly and he let them go.

When they discovered that their money was returned to them they believed this would lead to more trouble and believed it was God who was punishing them. When they told Jacob he grieved for Joseph and Simeon, and feared also for Benjamin if he were taken to Egypt and so he refused to release him despite Reuben's pledge to take care of him.

II.c.vii Genesis 42:1-38 - The Brothers' First Journey to Egypt

Shortage of food in Canaan forces Jacob to send his sons to Egypt, but Benjamin, Joseph's younger brother, remains at home, for Jacob fears losing him, too. When Joseph finally encounters his brothers again, he deliberately conceals his identity. After accusing them of being spies, he holds Simeon hostage, sending the others

back to Canaan on the understanding that they will return with Benjamin. Naturally, Jacob is very reluctant to permit this.

II.c.vii.1 Genesis 42:1-25 - Joseph's Brothers Go to Egypt

Due to the severity of the famine in Canaan, Jacob sends ten of his sons to Egypt where they encounter Joseph but do not recognise him but he knows them. He questions them and then accuses them of spying, locking them up in prison for three days. When he releases them he keeps Simeon in bond against their return with Benjamin and has their money returned to their sacks without their knowledge.

¹ When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, 'Why do you keep looking at one another?' ² 'I have heard', he said, 'that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.' ³ So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴ But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him. ⁵ Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan.

Genesis 42:1-5

Why do you keep looking at one another? Jacob noticed a strange expression among the brothers when Egypt was mentioned, because the brothers knew it was likely Joseph was sold as a slave there. Their conscience made them feel terrible any time Egypt was mentioned. The phrase means: 'to look questioningly one at the other.' Joseph's brothers had lived with a terrible secret for 20 years. They would never have talked about it but it never left them. Any mention of Joseph or Egypt brought back the guilt. They needed to be set free from the power of their terrible secret. They clearly did not understand the power of repentance in the way that King David did: <<***Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit***>> (Psalm 32:1-2 NIV).

Jacob feared that harm might come to Benjamin. The impression given of Jacob from this chapter is of a man who was bitter and pessimistic about everything. Because he had lost Joseph some 20 years before, he lived in constant fear that he would also lose Benjamin, his last link with his beloved Rachel.

Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers. In keeping with this attitude, he demanded Benjamin be left behind. Although he had eleven sons only one was a son of his beloved and deceased wife Rachel, and Jacob felt he must protect him. If Jacob had only known; if he could only trust the hand of God

which he could not see! In fact, the only reason there was grain in Egypt to provide for their needs was because God sent Joseph ahead of them all. God knew what he was doing.

The famine had reached the land of Canaan. Famine is never a good thing, but God used it. God can and does use material need and lack in life to get people to do things they normally might never do. Normally, the brothers would never go to Egypt; but need drove them to Egypt and thus the Hebrew nation was preserved.

⁶ Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he 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. ⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognised them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he said. They said, 'From the land of Canaan, to buy food.' ⁸ Although Joseph had recognised his brothers, they did not recognise him. ⁹ Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, 'You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!'

Genesis 42:6-9

Joseph treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. About 20 years have passed since his brothers last saw Joseph at age 17. While Joseph recognises them, not surprisingly, they remain oblivious to the true identity of the Egyptian governor who questions them regarding their motive for visiting Egypt.

Bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. The brothers' obeisance is clearly interpreted by Joseph as fulfilling his earlier dreams (37:5-11). The narrator underlines this by observing that **Joseph also remembered the dreams.** Speaking through an interpreter (v.23) and without disclosing his true identity, Joseph accuses his brothers of being **spies** who have come to assess Egyptian defences against invasions.

The nakedness of the land is an idiom that alludes to the locations where Egypt would be most vulnerable to attack by a potential aggressor.

¹⁰ They said to him, 'No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹ We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies.' ¹² But he said to them, 'No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!' ¹³ They said, 'We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more.' ¹⁴ But

Joseph said to them, ‘It is just as I have said to you; you are spies! ¹⁵ Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! ¹⁶ Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain in prison, in order that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you; or else, as Pharaoh lives, surely you are spies.’ ¹⁷ And he put them all together in prison for three days.

Genesis 42:10-17

Your servants have never been spies. In their attempt to deny the charge of being spies, which is issued three times: v.9, v.12, and v.14, Joseph’s brothers mention that their youngest brother is now with our father. Seizing on this reference to Benjamin, Joseph demands that the brothers prove their trustworthiness by sending for their brother. Then, by way of demonstrating his authority over them, Joseph has them placed in prison for three days.

One is no more. This was a lie and the brothers knew it. They had every reason to believe Joseph was not dead, but living a horrible life of slavery. Perhaps they had repeated the lie to themselves so often they came to believe it or, perhaps, hope it was now true.

¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, ‘Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned. The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰ and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die.’ And they agreed to do so. ²¹ They said to one another, ‘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.’ ²² Then Reuben answered them, ‘Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.’ ²³ They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter. ²⁴ He turned away from them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them. And he picked out Simeon and had him bound before their eyes. ²⁵ Joseph then gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to return every man’s money to his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. This was done for them.

Genesis 42:18-25

Do this and you will live. After three days in an Egyptian prison, the brothers were ready to agree to whatever Joseph wanted them to do. They had been humbled, and would listen to Joseph's demands.

I fear God. Joseph did not want his brothers to fear him as much as he wanted his brothers to trust him. If the brothers were wise enough to consider what this really meant it would be a great comfort to them.

The brothers would not have been surprised by this claim from one they thought to be an Egyptian. Although they had their own Gods they were a people who had come to recognise the power of the God that Abraham and Isaac acknowledged as the one true God and would still have been in awe of his power, even though they failed to recognise that he was their God too!

Joseph's great grandfather had demonstrated his fear of God when he demonstrated his willingness to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice: <<He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me'>> (Genesis 22:12). David too acknowledged he ruled in this same reverential fear: <<The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me: One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land>> (2 Samuel 23:2-4).

By way of concession, motivated by his fear of God, Joseph permits all the brothers to return to Canaan, apart from Simeon. In Joseph's hearing the brothers interpret their present dilemma as a punishment for their heartless treatment of Joseph in the past. Their words so move Joseph that he withdraws from their presence to weep. Upon his return, Joseph sends away all the brothers, except Simeon, having instructed his servant to return every man's money to his sack.

Give them provisions for their journey. In addition to the grain they thought they had purchased, they receive a free gift of provisions for their return journey to Canaan. There is no mention of their gratitude for this act of kindness.

II.c.vii.2 Genesis 42:26-38 - Joseph's Brothers Return to Canaan

When the nine brothers return and tell Jacob what had happened and that they must return to Egypt with Benjamin, he refuses to let his youngest son go. He is still grieving the loss of Joseph and now Simeon has been taken from him. Despite a pledge by Reuben to keep his youngest brother safe, Jacob will not be swayed by their pleas.

²⁶ They loaded their donkeys with their grain, and departed. ²⁷ When one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging-place, he saw his money at the top of the sack. ²⁸ He said to his brothers, ‘My money has been put back; here it is in my sack!’ At this they lost heart and turned trembling to one another, saying, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’

Genesis 42:26-28

At this they lost heart and turned trembling to one another. Later, when they stop for the night, one of the brothers discovers that his money has been replaced at the top of his sack. This apparently inexplicable occurrence evokes considerable apprehension. The brothers interpret it as something that God has done, with the intention of bringing further harm to them. Running through this section of the story is the idea that those who perpetrate evil cannot evade punishment forever. The brothers’ consciences clearly trouble them and they rightly feared God’s judgement for their lack of repentance: <<*As soon as we heard it, our hearts failed, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below*>> (Joshua 2:11).

²⁹ When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰ ‘The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly to us, and charged us with spying on the land. ³¹ But we said to him, “We are honest men, we are not spies. ³² We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.” ³³ 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, take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. ³⁴ Bring your youngest brother to me, and I shall know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will release your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.”’

Genesis 42:29-34

We are honest men. The same brothers lied to their father some twenty years before, saying that Joseph was killed by a wild animal when they sold him to slave-traders.

One is no more. The brothers repeated the lie again, and would be proven dramatically wrong.

³⁵ As they were emptying their sacks, there in each one's sack was his bag of money. When they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed.

Genesis 42:35

The unexpected discovery of their bundles of money in each man's sack naturally fills the brothers and their father with fear. The extraordinary event would make others think that they have taken the grain from Egypt without paying for it, or even that they had sold Simeon for cash.

³⁶ And their father Jacob said to them, 'I am the one you have bereaved of children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has happened to me!' ³⁷ Then Reuben said to his father, 'You may 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.' ³⁸ But he said, 'My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol.'

Genesis 42:36-38

All this has happened to me! Jacob seems to feel he is in some way being persecuted or punished and, rather than trusting in God, he has become fearful of his circumstances: <<*Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me*>> (Job 3:25), and: <<*What the wicked dread will come upon them*>> (Proverbs 10:24a). In light of all that has happened, Jacob is reluctant to let the family go down to Egypt again, being exceptionally anxious about the possibility of losing Benjamin. Here was a sobering contrast between Jacob and Joseph. Joseph had far worse circumstances, but he never took this attitude.

You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Reuben did the best he could, making the dramatic gesture to allow Jacob to take Reuben's own two sons as surety. He would not allow Benjamin to go to Egypt. Reuben's response does little to reassure his father. Jacob is unlikely to entrust Benjamin to someone who cares so little for the lives of his own sons. Therefore, Jacob emphatically states: My son shall not go down with you.

Sheol is the proper name for the place where people go after death, although solid knowledge about the afterlife was lacking at this time. The news causes Jacob to believe that his grief will continue through the afterlife as it did when he heard that Joseph had been killed. Refer to the comment made on 37:35.