

GENESIS 42:1-44:34

JOSEPH TESTS HIS BROTHERS

We've been in the book of Genesis since the beginning of the year and we're getting close to the end. The great patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – we've looked at their lives and seen God at work. Now we're focusing on the fourth generation and specifically Joseph.

Last time we saw how Joseph revealed to Pharaoh the meaning of two dreams that Pharaoh had and how he was quick to give God all the glory for being able to reveal what those dreams meant. The dreams meant that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine. Joseph suggested to Pharaoh to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth (20 percent) of the produce of the land and store it away in a reserve so that when the famine came people would not perish through the famine. Pharaoh was pleased with this idea. He appointed Joseph himself to be the overseer of that project. He elevated Joseph to second in command in all of Egypt. Everything Joseph predicted comes true. There are seven years of plenty. The Egyptians under Joseph's supervision gather up grain into storehouses. This is followed by a severe famine. Chapter 41 closes with these words: "All the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth."

You hit Genesis Chapter 42 and the scene suddenly shifts to Jacob and his sons in Canaan. It's been a while since we heard from them.

READ Genesis 42:1-5

So, this is what brings the ten older brothers to Egypt. It sets the stage for this story.

READ Genesis 42:6-9. So, Joseph recognizes his brothers and remembers the dreams he had back in Genesis Chapter 37. He recalls the reaction his family had to those dreams. They had said, "Are you indeed to rule over us? Are we to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" Joseph

remembers that. The brothers are fulfilling Joseph's dream and they don't even know it.

It says in v 7 that "[Joseph] treated [his brothers] like strangers and spoke roughly to them." Now, is Joseph just being mean and vindictive here? Is he toying with his brothers? What is Joseph up to? Why is he acting like this? The title of this lesson is "Joseph Tests His Brothers." That's what's going on. As we will see in today's lesson there will be a series of tests.

What is Joseph testing his brothers for? What is he trying to determine? If they have changed or not. It's been 20 years since they threw Joseph into the pit and sold him into slavery. The last time he had been with them, they had been pretty mean guys – ruthless, uncaring, unloving. Are they the same old reprobate brothers or have they changed?

V 9 says, "...you have come to see the nakedness of the land." The New Living Translation says, "You have come to see how vulnerable our land has become."

READ Genesis 42:10-12

Of course, Joseph's brothers deny they are spies because they AREN'T. They are NOT spies. We know that and Joseph knows that. They tell Joseph...

READ Genesis 42:13

In their minds they think that Joseph is dead. But Joseph insists and in a stern voice he says...

READ Genesis 42:14-17

I want you to put yourself in the brother's place. They must have been terrified. This mysterious man has the power of life and death over them! He's accused them of being spies and they don't know what's going to happen to them.

Well, after three days they are released and Joseph gives them their first test. It's a test of their honesty. "This is what you do – one of you will remain here in custody while the rest of you take the grain back to your families. You are then to come back here with your youngest brother" (Benjamin). Why is this a test of honesty? Because the brothers had just told Joseph that their youngest brother was with their father in Canaan. Joseph wants to see if they are telling the truth. For all Joseph knows the brothers may have done to Benjamin what they did to him. After all, with Joseph gone, Benjamin would become their father's favorite son. They may have killed him out of jealousy too. They got away with it once, why not do it again? If they are being truthful with Joseph then they will bring their youngest brother back with them. That's the test.

Then the brothers gather together and they talk to each other in their native Hebrew tongue. They discuss the current predicament they are in there in Egypt. They see it as being the result of what they did to Joseph years before. That's where you have the verse we referenced earlier showing that the brothers saw Joseph's distress and heard him begging for help while he was down in the pit. But they ignored him. So, they're discussing this. They don't realize that Joseph understands every word they're saying.

Joseph selects Simeon as the brother who will remain in Egypt. There is no explanation given for why Simeon is chosen. One commentary suggested it was because Simeon was the cruelest of his brothers. But we really don't know.

Joseph then has their sacks filled with grain and sends them on their way home. Oh, but now comes Test #2 which, again, is a test of their honesty...

READ Genesis 42:25-28

They believe that this must be some kind of oversight on the part of the Egyptians. So, what are they going to do?

The nine brothers eventually arrive back home and they tell Jacob everything that happened to them in Egypt and what a story it is! They tell Jacob about the ultimatum that was given to them by "the lord of the land," to bring Benjamin back to Egypt with them. But Jacob flatly refuses.

READ Genesis 42:36-38

Jacob says, "He's not going. End of discussion." And that's how things will remain for now. Well, several months go by. The food they brought back from Egypt eventually is depleted...

READ Genesis 43:1-5

Jacob sends his sons for more food but Judah reminds him of the ultimatum they had been given by "the man." Judah offers his own family as a pledge for the safety of Benjamin. Jacob realizes he has no other option. So, reluctantly he agrees to send Benjamin with his brothers. Jacob is referred to as Jacob throughout most of this narrative but I want you to notice verse 11 where his name Israel is used.

READ Genesis 43:11-14

Jacob resigns himself to the fact that what's going to happen is going to happen and it is out of his control. It is all in God's hands. With that the brothers leave and head down to Egypt. It appears as though the older brothers are going to pass the first two tests. (1) They're bringing Benjamin back with them – this proves that they were telling Joseph the truth. And (2) they're bringing back the money that had been placed in their sacks "inadvertently" (or so they thought). They are demonstrating honesty.

Now the scene shifts to Egypt...

READ Genesis 43:16-23

Everything seems to be OK. Joseph is pleased to see Benjamin and he invites all the brothers to dine with him. They're off the hook about the money found in their bags. And their brother Simeon is reunited with them. Happy ending, right?

Now all 11 brothers are escorted into Joseph's house...

READ Genesis 43:26-30

You can understand why this would be such an emotional moment for Joseph. Think about it. The last time Joseph saw Benjamin was when Benjamin was only a year old, just a baby, a toddler. That was over 20 years ago! Now Benjamin is a young man in his early 20s. Joseph is overcome with emotion and he weeps.

Eventually Joseph is able to compose himself and returns...

READ Genesis 43:31-32

By the way, we live in a day and age where it seems as though everything is labeled as "racist." THIS is what real racism looks like. The Egyptians of that day were quite prejudiced against the Hebrews (Jews). Of course, Joseph, who is actually one of THEM, a Hebrew, continues to play the part of the Egyptian lord to perfection. The Egyptians don't know about Joseph's background.

READ Genesis 43:33

The brothers are given their assigned seating order. They wonder to themselves, "How is it that we have been randomly seated from oldest to youngest?" You have the oldest son Reuben, then Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and last of all Benjamin. The brothers are amazed. Is this pure coincidence? How do the Egyptians know this? I have no basis for this, but I imagine that Joseph is giving them a little hint here by having them placed in this particular order. But they haven't caught on just yet.

READ Genesis 43:34

Joseph understandably shows favoritism toward Benjamin. At this point one might think that Joseph is preparing to reveal himself to his brothers. It is all set for that. But not quite yet! Joseph has one more test for his brothers. And that takes place next.

READ Genesis 44:1

This is the same thing that the Egyptian servants had done before, but with an added twist.

READ Genesis 44:2-3

So, off the brothers go back home trudging thru the desert sands on their way to Canaan completely unaware of what Joseph and his servants have done.

READ Genesis 44:4-5

This is the line that Joseph wants his servants to speak to his brothers. NO, Joseph does NOT practice divination (black magic or witchcraft). That was a common practice in Egypt, but it's all part of the ruse Joseph is creating in order to test his brothers.

READ Genesis 44:6

"These words," the words that Joseph had directed them to say.

READ Genesis 44:7-9

The brothers reply, "What are you talking about?" The 11 brothers are incredulous. They know that they're innocent. They are confident that they have done NOTHING wrong. That's their response to Joseph's steward and to his men.

READ Genesis 44:10-13

This is their worst nightmare come true! What are they going to do now? They are escorted back into town.

READ Genesis 44:14-15

Joseph is playing his part well. He infers that the way he figured out they had taken his silver cup is thru divination. Of course, we know this isn't true. We know the cup was planted. It's all part of the test.

READ Genesis 44:16

Judah is speaking for all the brothers. He says, "OK, we're guilty as charged. All of us. We will remain here in Egypt and become your slaves."

But Joseph is having none of that...

READ Genesis 44:17

Joseph says, "No, I'm not going to do that. Only the one who was found with the cup in his sack will be my slave, speaking of Benjamin. The rest of you are free to go." This third test is a test of loyalty. Knowing how much their father loves Benjamin, what are they going to do? How much do they love their father and how much do they love Benjamin? That's the test.

With that Judah speaks up. Keep in mind as you hear these words that this is the same Judah who had been the one primarily responsible for selling Joseph into slavery and breaking his father's heart in the process. What we are about to hear is what I call "Judah's finest moment."

READ Genesis 44:18-34

In these verses Judah pours out his heart. He lays it all out for Joseph. How does Judah feel about his father Jacob? How does Judah feel about his youngest brother Benjamin? He feels a deep sense of loyalty and love and concern for their well-being, doesn't he? And so much so that he is willing to remain a slave in Egypt for the rest of his life. Judah is willing to sacrifice his own life for them. Judah, speaking on behalf of his brothers, passes the third test. It's an incredibly gut-wrenching, emotional moment. And Joseph's reaction is how Genesis Chapter 45 begins...

I won't leave you hanging. Here is Joseph's response...

READ Genesis 45:1-3

And that is where we will leave it until next time. This sets off a whole chain reaction of events that will take us right up to the end of Genesis.

So, what can we take away from these three chapters? A lot!

- God tests us in the various situations that He allows in our life – both good and bad – though we are often unaware of it. In Chapter 42, Joseph's brothers had no idea what was going on, that they were being tested. Facing bad circumstances the brothers asked, "What is this that God has done to us?" Jacob concluded, "All of this has come against ME!" They didn't realize that God was at work during all of the negative things that were happening to them.
- A guilty conscience may subside over time, but it never completely goes away. Case in point: Twenty years after selling Joseph, his brothers still struggled with what they had done. They are still racked with guilt for what they did.
- Trust is something that, once lost, is extremely difficult to earn back. Jacob finds it hard to trust his sons even after all those years have passed.
- Jacob's (Israel's) instructions to his sons in Chapter 43 teach us that honesty obliges us to make restitution and generosity promotes peace, even with our enemies. Jacob showed wisdom here.
- We may depend on our own human wisdom and reasoning for a while, but eventually we MUST step out on faith and trust God. There will come a point in your life where you will not have the answers. Just live long enough!
- "We cannot judge what people are by what they have been in the past; nor what they will do by what they have done." (quote from Matthew Henry) – people can and do change!
 - True love is not self-seeking (1 Cor 13:5). Judah in Chapter 44 demonstrated his love for his father and youngest brother in his heartfelt statement to Joseph. Judah is a different man than he was earlier in the story. God was at work! He was not only working in Joseph's life, but in the brothers lives as well.