



SETTING THE STAGE FOR RECONCILIATION

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 42:1-38

38th Message

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In our last study we examined the amazing exaltation of Joseph. Imprisoned and forgotten for twelve years, he was elevated to second-in-command in Egypt. The patriarch declared that this act of God was so sweet, it made him forget all the pain he associated with his family (41:51). But did Joseph really forget, or did the ache for his father and brothers still reside deep within him? And what about his earliest dreams? Would they ever be fulfilled? How would God get the rest of Jacob's family to Egypt, especially when Jacob's father Isaac was warned never to go there (26:2)? I had the same feeling in my own heart from being estranged from my father for twenty years. Though I felt I had had a wonderful career in ministry, I never dreamed that he would see it, let alone be placed at the center of my world.

But, God is able... In the story of Joseph it is God who initiates the reconciliation process by means of a worldwide famine (the verbal root *shever*,¹ "grain," and "to buy grain," used ten times, is a theme word of the chapter). Bruce Waltke calls this one of God's "severe mercies,"² in the chapter that begins the process of reconciliation. Surprisingly, Jacob's family undertakes not one but three journeys to Egypt. Each journey could be described as different layers in the process of reconciliation. The first has an inverted structure. Death frames the chapter (42:2, 36-38), and at the center we find Joseph's brothers in prison.

Literary Outline

- A Leaving Canaan: Jacob speaks to brothers (42:1-4)
"so that we may live and not die"
- B The journey to Egypt to **buy grain** (42:5)
 - C In Egypt: First audience with Joseph (42:6-16)
tension: accused of being spies
 - X Brothers in **prison** for three days (42:17)
 - C' In Egypt: Second audience with Joseph (42:18-25)
tension: Simeon incarcerated
- B' Returning to Canaan (42:26-28)
money returned in mouth of sack with **grain!**
- A' Return home: Brothers speak with Jacob (42:29-38)
*"his brother is **dead**...you will bring my gray head down to the grave in sorrow"* (42:38)

I. Joseph's Brothers' First Journey to Egypt (42:1-4)

Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, "Why are you staring at one another?" He said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die." (42:1-2, NASB)

Once more Jacob reenters the story. Although he is quite old he still carries the patriarchal authority, and in that role is the initiator of the early action. He chides his sons with re-

spect to the famine in Canaan. They seem to lack any initiative to deal with the situation. He orders them to go to Egypt to get grain so that they "may live and not die." Thus it is the threat of death and the need for survival that shakes these brothers out of their inaction. Just as famine has a way of bringing nations together, death has a way of bringing families together, even families that have been woefully estranged.

Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt. But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, "I am afraid that harm may befall him." (42:3-4)

One might expect that Jacob would send all of his sons on the journey to bring back as much grain as possible, but here we learn that he keeps one behind. It is Benjamin, the youngest, Rachel's only other son. The narrator allows us a rare look into Jacob's thoughts, explaining that the patriarch was afraid "that harm (or 'accident') may befall him." As Wenham suggests, "Jacob is using what may be a vague term" (its only other use is in Exod 21:22-23) "to describe a fate like Joseph's befalling Benjamin."³ So favoritism still prevails in this family. We wonder if they are doomed to repeated failure. But this time there is no reaction recorded by the ten brothers. They immediately obey, and leave for Egypt.

Egypt is bursting at the seams, with foreigners lining up to buy grain. The stage is set for the long-awaited reunion of Joseph and his brothers.

II. In Egypt Before Joseph (42:5-24)

A. Joseph recognizes his brothers (42:5-8)

So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also. Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly. And he said to them, "Where have you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." But Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him. (42:5-8)

By the time Joseph's brothers arrive in Egypt, Joseph is well established in his rule. He is widely known, not just in Egypt but also throughout Canaan, as the sole provider of grain. But though he has a monopoly on the grain supply, he does not use it to his own advantage by holding back reserves and driving up prices. He will sell to anyone in need. As the writer of the proverb would later reflect:

He who withholds grain, the people will curse him,
But blessing will be on the head of him who sells it.
(Prov 11:26)

Twenty years after Joseph's brothers sold him to Egypt they now find themselves standing before him. But this time

the roles are reversed. Now it is Joseph who holds their lives in his power. The brothers prostrate themselves in humility (“unknowingly”) before Joseph. He immediately recognizes (*nakar*) them, and disguises himself (same word, *nakar*) so they would not recognize him. This is the same term used by the brothers when they asked their father “to recognize” Joseph’s blood-soaked tunic (37:33-34), and the term used by Tamar when she asked Judah to “recognize” the pledges he had left behind for her sexual favors (38:25-26). The theme of recognition plays a huge role in these stories. Whoever possesses this “knowledge” definitely has the upper hand.

With his brothers before him, Joseph remembers his dreams (37:5-9). But since there are only ten “bowing down,” he immediately devises a strategy to compel the eleventh brother to come to Egypt.

B. First audience with Joseph: Accused of being spies (42:9-17)

Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them, and said to them, “You are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land.” Then they said to him, “No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies.” (42:9-11)

Joseph does not let down his guard until he determines whether his brothers are trustworthy. Like a prosecuting attorney he grills them, accusing them of being spies seeking out “the undefended parts” of the land. The Hebrew reads “the nakedness of the land,” suggesting that Joseph is accusing them of being violators of the worst kind. The probing accusation is designed to bring truth to the surface. Joseph desperately wants to know about his other family members. In their innocence they anxiously protest that their motive is solely to buy grain, and that they are not a regiment of spies, but brothers all from one father, the logic being that “a family does not risk almost all of its sons in the dangerous venture of spying.”⁴ Pressed against the wall of accusation, they claim to be a family rooted in honesty and brotherhood—a far different look than twenty years earlier.

Yet he said to them, “No, but you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land!” But they said, “Your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no longer alive.” (42:12-13)

The grilling goes on. Joseph presses them further, repeating the same accusation. The harder he presses, the more family details emerge. Now he learns they are in fact twelve brothers from Canaan (the number “twelve” takes the emphatic first position in the sentence); and the reason not all are present is that the youngest remained at home, and one is (literally) “no more.” They assume that Joseph is dead, but they can’t bring themselves to say it. The irony is that the twelfth one, whom they think is “no more,” is in fact standing right in front of them.

And Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you, you are spies; by this you will be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here! Send one of you that he may get your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. But if not, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.” So he put them all together in prison for three days. (42:14-17)

Still not satisfied, Joseph’s cross-examination becomes more intense. He doesn’t know whether he can believe them or not. Perhaps out of jealousy they had killed Benjamin, just as they had thrown him in a pit. So he sets up a test to deter-

mine the truth of their words. He will incarcerate all of them, while one of them is allowed to return home to get their “youngest brother.” As he shuts the prison door, it closes with the ominous threat, “by the life of Pharaoh.” Their lives are hanging in the balance. In that culture, suspects were considered guilty until proven innocent. For three days Joseph’s brothers remain in prison, with the words “your youngest brother” echoing in the chamber. One wonders if this was the same cell in which Joseph was incarcerated for twelve years.

But surprisingly, after three days, Joseph’s countenance lifts, and the terms of departure change drastically.

C. Second audience with Joseph: Simeon incarcerated (42:18-24)

Now Joseph said to them on the third day, “Do this and live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die.” And they did so. (42:18-20)

After only three days the prison doors are opened. Instead of nine brothers being detained and one allowed to return home, Joseph requires only one to remain behind. The rest are free to go and take the needed grain home to feed their families. Joseph explains that the reason he changed his mind is that he fears God. Though the brothers might think that Joseph fears one of the gods of Egypt, his words should have jarred their memories, reminding them they did not “fear” the one true God when they took no mercy on Joseph in the pit, and then were dishonest with their father. Joseph’s desire is that they might have life, but what now stands between *life* (v 18) and *death* (v 20) is the return of their youngest brother.

Joseph’s wise strategy works brilliantly.

Then they said to one another, “Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us.” (42:21)

For the first time we learn that after Joseph was thrown into the pit he pleaded for mercy, but his cries fell upon deaf ears. Now those cries, buried for twenty years, are reawakened. Brueggemann well describes the terrible tyranny of guilt that had enslaved these brothers for two decades: “They are bound by their initial act against Joseph. The resulting deception of their father lies at the bottom of everything. The brothers have no room in which to act, no energy for imagination, and no possibility of freedom. They are bound by the power of an unforgiving past, immobilized by guilt, and driven by anxiety. Their guilt and anxiety can surface neither in the presence of the father nor in the presence of Joseph.”⁵

Joseph’s words penetrate their memories, unlocking their past. Gripped in the vice of their corporate guilt, they look at each other and confess their longstanding sin. The process of “recognition” is now beginning for them. They are beginning to decipher God’s hand orchestrating events so that each man is receiving back what is his due.

But the sweet atmosphere of remorse is interrupted by accusations of blame by the firstborn.

Reuben answered them, saying, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do not sin against the boy’; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood.” (42:22)

This is the first time we learn that Reuben had challenged their plan but was not a strong enough leader to prevent it. Now he tries to step out of the circle of responsibility, point-

ing the finger of blame at his brothers, like an adolescent crying, "I told you so!" While they are speaking, Joseph is listening to every word. Up until this point, he probably had blamed Reuben, the firstborn, for what had happened.

They did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them. He turned away from them and wept. But when he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. (42:23-24)

Up until now the narrator has withheld the information that Joseph was speaking Egyptian, through an interpreter. This gave the brothers liberty to speak freely of their own emotions. As they voice their confession, Joseph is so moved that he must turn away to weep. Waltke commends Joseph's spirit: "As the brothers own up to their crime against him, he does not gloat but weeps (42:24)... Joseph will subsequently weep three more times (43:30; 45:2, 14-15). Joseph's tactics are harsh, but his emotions are tender."⁶ After composing himself, Joseph took Simeon and "bound him before their eyes"—another reminder of their guilty past. How different the look in their eyes now from twenty years earlier, as one of their brothers is bound against his will and separated from the rest! But Joseph is still not finished with his strategy. Now he introduces the final note of guilt from their family history—money.

III. Return Trip Home from Egypt (42:25-38)

A. Money discovered en route (42:25-28)

Then Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain and to restore every man's money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. And thus it was done for them. So they loaded their donkeys with their grain, and departed from there. And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money; and behold, it was in the mouth of his sack. Then he said to his brothers, "My money has been returned, and behold, it is even in my sack." And their hearts sank, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?" (42:25-28)

Joseph sends them home generously. They not only have abundant grain for their families, but their traveler's checks are returned! When the money is discovered by one of them on their way home, their hearts literally "came out of them." Once again they tremble, united by their collective guilt.

With this move Joseph has made their ability to prove their innocence all the more difficult. If they go back now they run the risk of not just being suspected as spies, but thieves as well. And with Benjamin in tow, the whole family is at risk. On the other hand, what price are they willing to pay for their brother? If they choose to remain at home, Joseph has made them wealthy. They have every reason not to return to Egypt. With these thoughts running through their minds, the stunned brothers make their way home to their waiting father.

B. Joseph's brothers speak with Jacob (42:29-35)

When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, "The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly with us, and took us for spies of the country. But we said to him, 'We are honest men; we are not spies. We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no longer alive, and the youngest is with our father today in the land of Canaan. 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. But bring your youngest brother to me that I may know that you are not spies, but honest men. I will give your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.' " (42:29-34)

The brothers relate the events of Egypt to their father, but leave out their imprisonment and confession, knowing that would have only added to his pain. Brueggemann notes how guilt has harnessed them to their painful past: "As a result, the brothers are excessively concerned for the safety and well-being of their father and Benjamin. Having falsely grieved their father, they must be on continual guard that they do not add to his grief (44:30-34). Because they could not believe the dream, they are forced to treat father Jacob as though he were the last generation who must be kept alive and unharmed for perpetuity. They cannot see themselves as a generation of promise-bearers."⁷

Jacob has no response to these new events. But as the brothers begin unpacking, the silver spills out of each man's sack.

Now it came about as they were emptying their sacks, that behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed. (42:35)

Jacob sees the money. It has guilt written all over it. Waltke comments, "Up to this point, Jacob probably found their story credible. The money, however, makes them look guilty, especially since he probably knows that they are not always trustworthy. Does Jacob think they sold Simeon? The money in the sack widens the breach between Jacob and his sons but binds the sons more closely together."⁸ Jacob does not wait for an explanation to indict his sons.

C. Jacob's refusal to return (42:36-38)

Their father Jacob said to them, "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin; all these things are against me." (42:36)

Jacob, now consumed by the unthinkable, cannot hide his suspicions. He surmises that Simeon has suffered the same fate as Joseph—and it is their fault. The thought of taking Benjamin down the same path pushes his grief over the edge. Self-pity has consumed the patriarch, robbing him of any faith to see beyond his own needs. Alter remarks that "Jacob speaks as a prima donna of paternal grief... In a small envelope structure, the 'me' at the beginning is balanced by the 'It is I' at the end."⁹ At this dark moment, Reuben attempts to assume some leadership.

Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, "You may put my two sons to death if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my care, and I will return him to you." (42:37)

Reuben tries to console his father with the utterly stupid suggestion that the loss of Jacob's two sons could somehow be compensated for by the death of his own two boys—as if his sons were not Jacob's grandsons! Typically, Reuben is well meaning, but lacks the wisdom to lead this family.

But Jacob said, "My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow." (42:38)

Jacob will not even entertain the suggestion that Benjamin return to Egypt. In the patriarch's words, he is the "only son" he has left. If something should happen to him his life would be meaningless. This is quite a statement to make in the pres-

ence of his other sons. To Jacob they are non-sons. It is obvious that twenty years have not changed his penchant for favoritism that divides this family. As head of the home, he has apparently brought the process of reconciliation to a grinding halt. The story seems deadlocked in a power struggle between a father in Canaan and a son in Egypt. Who in this family will be able to break the paralysis? One thing is certain: if these brothers are ever to be reconciled, it will have to be in spite of, not because of, their father. As for Joseph in Egypt, and Simeon in prison, all they can do is wait.

What can we learn from these opening scenes in the process of reconciliation?

V. Reflections on Reconciliation

A. Faith to “recognize” God at work

In this story we learn that Joseph’s exaltation in Egypt was designed not just to save a gentile nation from starvation, but ultimately to bring about the reconciliation of God’s family to God and to one another. To bring this about, God used drastic “means” to achieve “good” ends. This is not the last time God will use a famine to bring different parties onto the same stage. In the book of Ruth, famine is the means for redemption (Ruth 1:1); it is the spur for the estranged prodigal son to return home to his father (Luke 15:14); and the vehicle God used to unite the Gentiles with their Jewish brethren during the widespread famine in Judea, reported in the book of Acts (Acts 11:28; see also 2 Cor 8, 9). This indicates how important the work of reconciliation is to God. He will use such severe measures just to create the stage where once estranged parties can meet face to face. And just as the threat of death frames the chapter, so also does God often use “death” to bring estranged families together. So the exhortation to us is to open our eyes to the work of God in such times for healing. All of God’s severe measures are ultimately for our good.

B. Patience, knowing it can be a lengthy process

Reconciliation to God and family can be a lengthy and complex process. In our story we discover that an important prerequisite for reconciliation is for Joseph’s brothers to taste the fruit of their own deeds by being placed into the same circumstances into which they had placed Joseph. These also are “severe” measures imposed by Joseph, but they are ultimately designed for his brothers’ good. Every detail in the story (the accusation of being “violators,” their time in prison, the binding of Simeon, and the returned money) reawakens their conscience to such an extent that they now recognize the powerful hand of God orchestrating events. As they can no longer bear the weight of their guilt, they “come to their senses” (Luke 15:17) and openly confess their sin “unknowingly,” before the very brother whom they had wronged. Their open confession of guilt, and newfound empathy for their brother, begins to unite them as brothers. This cannot be accomplished overnight. It takes time for God to orchestrate life so that the guilty parties might walk in the shoes of those they have wronged. This is what creates genuine repentance.

This does not imply that believers should not take immediate action to seek forgiveness when they have wronged others (Matt 5:24; Eph 4:3). It does suggest, however, that we should not impose repentance and reconciliation on unbelievers without the sensitive leading of the Holy Spirit to prepare the way. So our text not only calls for faith, it reminds us to be patient and allow God to prepare the stage. Finally, our text inspires us with courage to be part of the process.

C. Courage to be part of the process

I find it amazing that Joseph’s wisdom is so refined he seems able to do things that only God can do. Who but God would have the insight and authority to orchestrate life in such a way as to “test” and “refine” the hearts of men? In this he serves as a type of Christ, who also would be rejected by his family, betrayed for silver, and given over to death on a cross. And yet, because of God’s faithfulness, Christ, like Joseph, would survive the pit and be exalted first among the kingdom of the gentiles, in the ultimate hope that one day he would also reconcile his own family, the Jews. The recognition of this pattern of reconciliation (Jew, Gentile, Jew) gave Paul the courage to go to Gentile nations with the gospel. For he says, “But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” (Rom 11:13-15). Paul therefore went to the Gentiles, knowing that his work was orchestrated by God to make the Jews jealous and to reconcile them back to God.

God gives us this same ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-21), to tell the world that he has not counted their trespasses against them. And in sharing Christ with the world, we do so not just in the hope of seeing individual conversions from among the nations, but in the hope of one family, Jew and Gentile, fully reconciled by our Savior. That is the ultimate goal.

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1. *Shever* – Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 244, suggests that “The root means ‘to break,’ and the sense seems to be: food provisions that serve to break an imposed fast, that is a famine. (Hence ‘provisions to stave off the famine,’ *shever ra’avon*, in verse 19).”
2. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 550.
3. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 405.
4. Waltke, *Genesis*, 546.
5. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 337.
6. Waltke, *Genesis*, 543-44.
7. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 337-38.
8. Waltke, *Genesis*, 549.
9. Alter, *Genesis*, 250.