

***The Belonging: A Study in Genesis 37-50***  
**Lesson 5 - Joseph and His Brothers - Part One**  
**Genesis 42-43**

**Forgiveness is a decision to release a person from their offense.**

As our story continues, a worldwide famine has struck. The situation is dire and people are starving. The only country with food is Egypt, due to God's hand on Joseph. Just as we saw in Potiphar's house, the prison, and now the palace, the Lord is with Joseph and His favor is resting on him.

**I. The Famine (Genesis 42:1-28)**

The famine has extended to Canaan, affecting Jacob and family. This is a solemn reminder God's people are not immune to suffering.

"God's people have no unconditional guarantee they will escape the floods and the famines, the tornadoes and earthquakes, the horrors of war and rebellion that descend from time to time upon the world" (John Phillips, *Exploring Genesis: An Expository Commentary*).

News of available grain in Egypt has made its way to Canaan. Jacob chides his sons for their lack of involvement in finding food for their families. His words seem sharp and condescending. Perhaps his rather harsh words are due to his anxiety over the famine. After all, he has a large number of people relying on him to provide food. Or perhaps his grief for Joseph has remained so close to the surface and stayed so raw that he is given to bouts of anger towards his sons. With his disapproval still ringing in their ears, ten of the brothers "went down to buy grain from Egypt" (Genesis 42:3).

Jacob refuses to allow Benjamin to accompany them saying, "I am afraid that harm may befall him" (Genesis 42:4). Do we denote a bit of sarcasm? Without reading too much into the text, it does seem that Jacob holds his sons responsible for Joseph's death. Rachel had borne Joseph and Benjamin to Jacob. Jacob did not seem to attempt to hide his feelings towards his favorite son, Joseph. And he seems oblivious to the impact his paternal partiality has on his other boys. Having lost Joseph, it is likely Jacob has transferred much of the favor he had displayed toward Joseph to Benjamin. And it seems from the text that Jacob has developed some suspicions around the account of the brothers in regard to Joseph's demise. Perhaps he does not fully believe the brothers, thinking there is more to the story than they are telling. At the very least, he cannot imagine losing another son, especially not Benjamin.

The brothers join the throngs of refugees descending upon Egypt, hoping to purchase grain. As the brothers make the trip to Egypt, I wonder if the subject of Joseph is discussed. After all, the caravan that purchased their brother over twenty years ago was headed there. Life as a slave was a harsh one, and perhaps they surmise that Joseph has died from the hardship of his position.

As the brothers approach the Prime Minister of Egypt, "they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground" (Genesis 42:6). This response shows proper decorum to the master of

the land, but the very act of bowing symbolizes more than they realize. This fulfills the dreams of the young Joseph, to whom the sheaves and stars bowed down (see Genesis 37:5-10). It was the dream, coupled with his father's adoration, that had inflamed the brothers' hatred for him.

Joseph recognizes his brothers. They are bearded, unlike the Egyptians who were clean shaven. They are wearing the garb of Canaan and speak Hebrew. As Joseph looks intently at the ten men before him, there is no doubt that these are his brothers! As they stand before Joseph, they do not recognize him. Looking at this authoritarian figure, with a clean-shaven face, heavily embroidered Egyptian royal robes, and speaking an Egyptian language, the brothers have no idea this is the brother they sold into slavery. After all, he is the last person they would expect to see in such a prestigious position.

Staring into their faces, Joseph remembers his dreams. He accuses his brothers of being spies. They vehemently deny such an accusation and fearfully defend their intentions by saying, "We are all sons of one man; **we are honest men**, your servants are not spies" (Genesis 42:11, emphasis mine). Honest men, you say? This is one of several times that Joseph could have identified himself and torn into his brothers, sentencing them to the worst kind of death. But he does not. Joseph had worked through forgiveness many years before, even though he assumed he would never see his brothers again. He has not nursed a grudge or plotted revenge. He has allowed God to change his heart from getting even to getting free from bitterness. Allowed to grow unchecked, bitterness would have surely turned to hatred if he had clung to the offense. It would have affected his relationship with God, ultimately assigning blame to Him for allowing it to happen in the first place. Indeed, Joseph has laid his brothers before the Lord and asked God to help him forgive them and get past the past.

Forgiveness on any level is never easy, especially when the offense comes from family members. Of all people who should love us unconditionally, it is family. When the offense comes from within the camp, the hurt is deep and the pain is doubled.

The brothers continue to plead their case, "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" (Genesis 42:13). Their words drip with divine irony since they are kneeling in front of the one who is "no longer alive." While their version of this statement is factual, speaking of the death of Joseph must have hit hard on their souls knowing they are all guilty for their role in getting rid of the brother they hated enough to murder. After 20 plus years, these words must surely cut like a knife as their consciences struggle to defuse their guilt.

Joseph sets forth a test. He wants to learn if they have been truthful about his father and Benjamin. He also hopes the test will elicit repentance over his brothers' past sins. Before imprisoning the men for three days Joseph tells them what is expected, "Bring back your younger brother as you have said, or be killed. One brother shall retrieve him while the others are confined to prison." After three days, Joseph changes his strategy, sending all but Simeon home with grain for their households.

## II. The Fault (Genesis 42:29-38)

As the brothers talk among themselves, unaware that Joseph can hear and understand them, he becomes the topic of conversation. I wonder if they speak of him very often. Does

the mention of his name cause heart palpitations and sweat to drench their tunics? Do guilt and shame disturb their sleep? Have they privately agonized over their actions? It is impossible to say, but as the boys are facing serious charges, they begin to talk about the taboo subject of Joseph. "Truly we are guilty; therefore this distress has come upon us" (Genesis 42:21). At long last, the brothers admit their guilt. The brothers construe that their present "distress" is divine retribution for their disregard of Joseph's distressed cries for mercy from the pit and then from the caravan, as it vanished over the horizon on its way to Egypt.

Kenneth Matthews writes,

That the brothers immediately acknowledged their sin suggests strongly that they recognized the deeper meaning of his challenge to their integrity. From their perspective, the Egyptian Lord presumably did not know their family secret, but in the ears of their conscience his words were the judgment of God against them (Kenneth Matthews, *The New American Commentary*, p.779).

As the weight of the brothers' words land on Joseph's heart, he is overcome with emotions and turns away to weep. Joseph orders his men to fill their bags with grain and return their money. In an act of extravagant grace, Joseph even provides additional provisions.

En route, one of the brothers discovers his silver has been returned and placed in the mouth of his sack of grain. Upon telling his brothers, their hearts sink and they are visually shaken. Once home, they report what has happened to their father. As they unpack the sacks of grain, each man discovers his silver had also been returned. The Bible says they are dismayed. Now the charge of thievery will be added to the accusations of being spies!

The money may have alarmed Jacob who was already suspicious and very concerned about Simeon's wellbeing. Perhaps they have sold Simeon to the Egyptians Prime Minister or cut some kind of nefarious deal and made Simeon the bargaining chip. He said, "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" (Genesis 42:36). The grief of losing Joseph and the threat of losing Simeon and Benjamin is more than Jacob can absorb.

### **III. The Fear (Genesis 43:1-23)**

Jacob has come to recognize that the sustained famine and his resistance to sending Benjamin to Egypt is putting his family in danger of extinction without a source of grain. Reluctantly, Jacob allows all his sons to return to Egypt and places Benjamin into Judah's care. He advises his boys to take double the money and an assortment of gifts to help appease the powerful Prime Minister of Egypt. Proverbs 19:6 says, "Every man is a friend to him who gives gifts."

We can only imagine the strong emotion that is evoked when Joseph sees Benjamin. The two siblings surely had a special bond as Jacob's only sons by Rachel, having spent much of their childhood together.

Joseph instructs the steward to prepare a state dinner and invite the brothers. This leads to fear on the part of the brothers, who assume this might be their last meal!

“While the brothers anxiously fear the worst that will happen, Joseph is excitedly planning the best. While they are riddled with guilt, he is saturated with grace.” (*The Belonging*, p. 157).

The brothers have occasion to speak to Joseph’s house steward and plead their case. The steward accepts the brother’s explanation for the returned silver and urges them to be at ease. They feel a sense of relief for the first time since the famine had begun.

#### **IV. The Feast (Genesis 43:24-34)**

Joseph’s demeanor seems to have softened towards the brothers. He receives their gifts and inquires about their father. The sight of Benjamin in his house causes Joseph to make an emotional exit.

Joseph and the Egyptians in his court do not share a table with the Hebrew brothers “because the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is loathsome to the Egyptians” (Genesis 43:32). This final scene depicts the Egyptian mysteriously seating the brothers by birth order. Sitting in the massive dining hall of Joseph’s home, causes the men to look at each other in astonishment. And we can only imagine their shock when Joseph “took portions to them from his own table” (Genesis 43:34). To Benjamin, Joseph gives five times as much as the others. This extravagance really has the brothers confounded. Even so, “they feasted and drank freely with him” (Genesis 43:34).

Joseph demonstrates for us the path of forgiveness. He has taken his hurt to God and relies on Him to work forgiveness in his heart and soul. Joseph has extended forgiveness to his brothers before they have shown contrition or repentance.

“We can be healed and the Lord can allow us to choose to forget. It is what the Father does for us.” (*The Belonging*, p. 164). Hallelujah! What a Savior!