

Genesis 42

God knows that a famine is going to hit the entire world (41:57) and in order to protect His chosen family, He needs them in the fertile land of Egypt. He has already set in place His man, Joseph, second in command of Egypt (41:41-44). The next few chapters will detail how Israel's family will live in Egypt and how Joseph's brothers will be reconciled to Joseph.

TRANSLATION - 42:1-17:

1 Then Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt and Jacob said to his sons, "Why are you looking around?" **2** And he said, "Behold, I hear that there is grain in Egypt. You all go down there and you all buy for us from there and we will live and we will not die."

3 Ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt. **4** But Benjamin, the brother of Joseph, Jacob did not send his brother because he said, "Lest there encounter him an accident." **5** The sons of Israel came to buy in the midst of the ones coming because the famine was in the land of Canaan.

6 But Joseph, he [was] the vizier over that land, the one selling to all the nations of the earth and the brothers of Joseph came and bowed down to him, with [their] noses to the ground. **7** And Joseph saw his brothers and he recognized them but he made himself unrecognizable to them and he spoke to them severe things and he said to them, "From where have you come?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan to buy food."

8 Now Joseph recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him. **9** Then Joseph remembered the dreams which he dreamed of them and he said to them, "Spies you [are], to see the nakedness of the land you all have come!"

10 But they said to him, "No, lord. Your servants have come to buy food. **11** We all [are] sons of one man. We, ourselves, [are] honest, we [are]! Your servants are not spies!"

12 Then he said to them, "No, but the nakedness of the land you have come to see."

13 But they said, "Twelve servants, brothers we [are], sons of one man in the land of Canaan and behold, the youngest [is] with our father today and one is no more."

14 Then Joseph said to them, "That which I spoke to you all, saying 'spies, you [are]!'

15 In this you all will be tested, by the life of Pharaoh, if you all go out from this [place] except to come your brother, the youngest, here **16** you all send from yourselves one and let him take your brothers and you all will be confined and your words [for] truth with you but if not, by the life of Pharaoh that spies you [are]." **17** Then he gathered them into custody, three days.

WORDS:

"Go down" (verse 2) is a commonly used Hebrew verb, being used 382 times. "Buy" is found 21 times. "Send" (verse 4) is also a commonly used verb, used 847 times. It is used as an imperative in verse 16. "Accident" is only used five times in the OT: 42:4, 38; 44:29; Exo. 21:22-23. In verse 6, the words "land, earth, and ground" all translate the same Hebrew word but each seems to denote a different idea.

"To recognize" (verse 7) is used 50 times and is the verb related to "strange" or "stranger." It is used in a different form in the same verse to denote the exact opposite: "to disguise" or to "make himself unrecognizable." "Severe things" translates a word which means "difficult, hard, or severe." It is used 36 times.

The word "spies" (verse 9) is related to the word for "foot." It is used six times (in its gerund form) in this context: 42:9, 11, 14, 16, 31, 34. "To spy" is used 26 times; "foot," 251 times; and "foot soldier," 12 times. "Nakedness" was used in the account of Noah and Ham (9:22-23) and in this passage (42:9, 12), in Genesis. Here, it refers to the defenseless nature of the land.

"Honest" (verse 11) is found two dozen times but only here in Genesis (42:11, 19, 31, 33-34). It means "honest, correct, right." Out of stark surprise of such an outlandish, and

unexpected, accusation, in verse 11, the brothers use two different pronouns for “we” with no verb in that phrase.

“Tested” (verses 15-16) means to “try, put to the test, or examine.” It is used 29 times but only here in Genesis. “To be confined” means to “tie, bind, imprison,” and is used 73 times but in Genesis, at: 40:3, 5; 42:16, 19, 24; 46:29; and 49:11.

COMMENTS:

Jacob heard, from some source, that there was grain in Egypt So, Jacob challenged his sons to quit staring at each other and go to Egypt to find grain. Their situation was getting hopeless (42:2). So, the ten brothers of Joseph (the only time this phrase is used in Scripture) go to buy grain. Identifying the sons as brothers of Joseph set up for the reunion which will happen in Egypt. Jacob chose not to send Benjamin, Joseph’s full-brother, for he was afraid some harm might happen to him. He was, as Joseph had been, the son of his favorite wife, Rachel, who had since passed away (35:16-21).

Notice in verse 5 the designation “sons of Israel.” They are certainly not a nation yet. But, they are acting as a group and carry the designation which the nation itself will later bear. The phrase refers to the sons of Jacob, as “sons of Israel,” at 32:32; 36:31; 42:5; 45:21; 46:5, 8; 50:25. Once the phrase appears in Exodus, it refers to the nation of Israel itself. This verse also shows that many people from many different places were coming to Egypt to buy grain.

Joseph is the “ruler” over the land, the vizier, the second-in-command (42:6). He had control of the buying and selling, the bartering, of the grain supply which had been stored in Egypt (41:48-49). His brothers came before the vizier and bowed, with their faces, to the ground, before their brother. Joseph recognized them but he was disguised from their recognition.

We might ask why the brothers could not recognize Joseph. It has been a minimum of twenty years since they last saw him (cf. 37:2; 41:46, 53-54). He is speaking through an interpreter (vs 23). He is probably completely shaved and is dressed as an Egyptian in an official role. He is also bearing an Egyptian name (41:45). Additionally, they have no idea he could possibly be in front of their eyes!

Then Joseph spoke harshly with them, demanding where they came from. They answered truthfully. Then, Joseph remembered the dreams he had had as a boy (37:5-11). Why the memory of the dreams compelled Joseph to accuse them of spies, we do not know. We cannot judge Joseph’s motivations, one way or the other. It does not appear that he was seeking revenge. From passages like 42:24; 45:1 and 45:5-8, Joseph seems to have loved and, to some degree, already forgiven his brothers. We can guess that he wants to find out their clear motivations; after all, the last he saw them, they had sold him for money!

I have translated Joseph’s accusation in verse 9 with an exclamation mark because the main verb (“you have come”) is thrown to the end of the sentence for emphasis. Entering Egypt from the northeast, Jacob’s sons come through the most vulnerable border of the country. Real invaders actually did come through this pass quite often. Joseph will accuse his brothers of being spies four times, the word itself appearing seven times: 42:9, 11-12, 14, 16, 20, 30-31, 34. Yet, how serious is the accusation - ten men with their entourage walking through Egypt in clear day light? Just how much would they have learned, “scouting” in this manner?

In verse 13, the brothers get more specific about their identity. There were twelve brothers at one time. They were all sons of a single man who lived in Canaan. The youngest brother is still with their father; one is “no more.” They state this, ironically, looking into the eyes of Joseph!

To further his test of their motivations, Joseph swears by the life of Pharaoh that they will not leave unless the youngest brother is brought before him. At this point, he intends to keep nine of the brothers in custody and one would go back and bring the youngest, so their word can be verified. Otherwise, they will be punished as spies.

Perhaps to seek a little revenge, he puts them in prison, as he was, but for only three days.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - We ought to be careful judging Joseph's motivations one way or another. We have to judge him based on his words and his actions; his intentions are in his heart. But, we can guess that he wonders how they are treating Benjamin. Perhaps, remembering his dreams, he wants to get his father down to Egypt as well. At this point, he imprisons them with the stated intention of sending one back to Canaan to bring Benjamin.

NT writers - Stephen will refer to this event, through the end of the book of Genesis, at Acts 7:11-16.

TRANSLATION - 42:18-25:

18 Then Joseph said to them on the third day, "This you will do and you will live. God I fear. **19** If honest you [are], bothers, one will be confined in the house of prison and you all, go, take grain from the famine for your house. **20** And your youngest brother, bring to me and your words will be verified and you will not die." And they did thus.

21 And they said, a man to his brother, "Surely guilty we [are] because of our brother when we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded to us but we did not listen. Therefore this distress has come over us!"

22 Then Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not say to you all, saying do no harm to the lad? But you all did not listen and now, even his blood, behold, it is seeking...!" **23** But they did not know that Joseph was listening because one interpreting [was] between them. **24** Then he turned from them and wept and he turned to them and spoke to them and took from them Simeon and confined him before their eyes.

25 Then Joseph commanded and they stuffed their bags with grain and to restore their silver, a man, to his sack and to give to them provisions for the way and he did for them thus.

WORDS:

"Verified" (verse 20) is the verb related to "truth." The verb is used 97 times; "truth" is used 127 times; "truthfulness," 49 times and the related word "amen," 30 times. "Guilty" (verse 21) is not found elsewhere in Genesis and only three times in the OT. "Distress" is used 70 times; it means "distress, anxiety, trouble." It is used in Genesis at 35:3; 42:21. "Soul" is the word we saw often in Genesis 1 (beginning at verses 20-21) and Genesis 9. It is used 757 times in the OT; 43 times in Genesis. It can mean "soul, life, person, neck, or throat." "To plead" is a verb form of the noun "grace." This form carries the idea of "pleading for grace, or imploring one's favor."

"Harm" (verse 22) is the word for "sin" but here, it probably does not carry its spiritual connotations but more a physical idea. The verb is used 240 times; in Genesis, at 20:6, 9; 31:39; 40:1; 42:22; 43:9; 44:32. The verb "to seek" is used 165 times; in Genesis, at 9:5 (also in the context of "blood"); 25:22 and here. Here, Reuben likely means blood is "seeking vengeance" or "accounting." "Provisions" (verse 25) is only used 10 times and means "food or, more broadly, provisions."

COMMENTS:

On the third day, Joseph calls them into his presence. He states that they will live if they do what he commands. That warning could be viewed two ways. He might put to death one or more of them if they turn out to be spies. Also, they could die from starvation if they do not cooperate with him. He then tells them that he fears "God." Since the word "God" can be understood as "gods," the brothers might have understood Joseph to be referring to the Egyptians' false gods. However, we know Joseph fears the true God.

Joseph has changed his plans, however. Whether this was his original intention or not, we do not know. Now, he says he will confine one brother and let the rest go back to Canaan, with the grain for their households. Perhaps he realized that this was the best plan if he wants to send lots of food supplies to his family. So, the brothers are to bring the "youngest" back to him, to verify their words, and they will not die. The brothers agreed to Joseph's plans.

Beginning in verse 21, we get some insight into the brothers' thoughts and attitude toward Joseph. First, they realize and acknowledge they are guilty of their brother, speaking of Joseph. We were not told this in chapter 37, but Joseph cried out in distress and pleaded with them but they would not listen. Reflecting the idea that God repays evil for evil, they see this distress coming on them for that reason.

Then the eldest, Reuben, spoke up and reminded them that he tried to stop them from doing harm to Joseph (37:21-22, 29-30). Yet, they would not listen. Reuben also expresses an understanding that God is bringing justice back on their own heads. Joseph had to leave their immediate presence and weep (42:24), which he will do again (43:30) and again (45:1-2) and again (45:14-15) and again (46:29) and again (50:1) and again (50:17). Joseph was clearly an emotional person, especially as it relates to the reconciliation with his brothers.

Joseph heard Reuben's touching words. To maintain the facade, Joseph was speaking to them through an interpreter. Based on Reuben's words, perhaps, Joseph went to the next-to-the-oldest son, Simeon, to confine until the brothers return with Benjamin. Of course, based on Simeon and Levi's behavior back in chapter 34, Simeon may have had a personality that motivated Joseph to confine him! He bound Simeon before their eyes, which impressed on them the seriousness of the situation.

Reflecting the forgiveness in his heart, Joseph commanded their bags to be stuffed with grain and for their money to be given back to them, clandestinely. He also commanded provisions for the journey to be given to them.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Again, we do not know all of Joseph's motivations but we can imagine that he is conflicted relative to his brothers. He loves them and wants to help them, but he's not sure he can trust them. Will they sell out Simeon - take the money and run? Or will they show themselves to be "honest" men (vs 11) and return with Benjamin, and perhaps Jacob, to fulfill Joseph's dreams?

We also note the brothers' belief that God is punishing them for what they did to Joseph (41:21-22). This is called, in biblical theology, "retribution." It is true that God *will* punish man for his sins but *not always* in this lifetime. The book of Job serves as a balance to this idea; bad things don't always happen as a result of sin.

Contemporaries of Moses - Moses will reflect the idea of retribution in Numbers 32:23.

Later Hebrew writers - Solomon will also suggest the idea of retribution in Ecclesiastes 11:1.

NT writers - The apostle Paul teaches the idea of retribution in Galatians 6:8. Yet, all the Bible teaches on retribution should also be balanced by the clear teaching of Job. Sometimes bad things happen to good people *because* they are good people, as in Job's situation.

TRANSLATION - 42:26-28:

26 Then they loaded their grain on their donkeys and went from there. **27** And one opened his sack to give fodder to his donkey at the lodging and he saw his silver and behold it [was] in the mouth of his sack. **28** Then he said to his brothers, "My silver was returned and even, behold, in my sack and their heart sank and a man trembled to his brother, saying, 'What [is] this God has done to us?'"

WORDS:

"Fodder" (verse 27) was found back at 24:25, 32. It is also used here and 43:24. The only other place is at Judges 19:19. The word for "sack" is found in this chapter (42:27-28), in 43:12, 18, 21-23; and at 44:1-2, 8, 11-12. This is its only use in Scripture; fifteen times in all. The verb "to sink" (verse 28) is the normal verb "to go out," used 1,076 times but here "to sink" seems to be appropriate relative to the brothers' hearts and the context. "To tremble" is used 39 times.

COMMENTS:

The brothers load up all the supplies which Joseph had given them and they leave for the journey home. At the campsite that night, one opened his sack to provide for his donkey when his own money fell out! The brothers do not know what this means, other than the idea that God is doing something to them, punishing them in some way.

TRANSLATION - 42:29-38:

29 They came to Jacob, their father, in the land of Canaan, and reported to him all [which] happened to them, saying, **30** “The man spoke, the lord of the land, with us severe things and he gave us [as] spies of the land. **31** And we said to him, ‘Honest we [are]. We are not spies. **32** Twelve brothers we [are], sons of our father, one is not and the youngest today [is] with our father in the land of Canaan. **33** And the man, the lord in that land, said to us, ‘I will know that honest you [are], brothers of one... You all leave behind with me and the famine of your houses, take and go. **34** You will bring your youngest brother to me and I will know that not spies you [are], that honest you [are] your brother I will give to you and the land you all will trade.”

35 Then they were emptying their sacks and behold a man, his bundle of silver in his sack, and they, themselves, saw the bundle of their silver and their father, and they feared.

36 So Jacob said to them, “Me, you have bereaved. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more and Benjamin, you will take from me all these things!”

37 Then Reuben said to his father, saying, “Two of my sons you will kill if I do not bring him back to you; you will give him on my hand and I, myself, will bring him back to you.”

38 But he said, “My son will not go down with you all because his brother [is] dead and he [is] alone left. If an accident happens on the way which you go, to him, then you all will bring down my gray hairs in torment to Sheol.”

WORDS:

“Leave behind” (verse 33) is the *hiphil* of a verb used 140 times, related to the name “Noah.” The form of the verb used here suggests “cause to rest” or “leave behind.” “To trade” (verse 34) mean to “pass through, travel about, trade.” It is used 21 times. The word “sacks” in verse 35, is not the same word used but this word is found at verses 35, 27, and 35. “Gray hairs” (verse 38) is used half a dozen times: 42:38; 44:29, 31; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Ruth 4:15. “Torment” is used 14 times and means “grief, sorrow, agony.” It is used at 42:38; 44:31. “Sheol” was first seen at 37:35. It is used 65 times in the OT, four times in Genesis (37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31), notably in Isaiah (10 times), Psalms (16 times), and Proverbs (9 times). It means the dwelling place of the dead which inherently carries with it the idea, I believe, of a continued existence. It is an existence beyond death but not “annihilation” or non-existence.

COMMENTS:

The journey ends when the sons return home to Jacob in the land of Canaan and they report, substantially though not in detail, all that had happened to them. They report that Joseph was the “lord of the land,” that he spoke “harshly” with them and that he assumed they were spies.

They relate how they responded, that they were honest men, brothers, sons of a single father, and that one brother was no longer alive and Benjamin had remained behind with Jacob. This information will be used by Jacob against the brothers in the next chapter (43:6). The ruler would accept their story, if they brought the youngest back to Egypt (41:33-34).

As the brothers were unloading and emptying their sacks, each brother’s money came tumbling out of the sack and they were all surprised and dismayed! Jacob lamented how things had turned out (41:36). He was “bereaved” of his children, Joseph and Simeon. Now, they are suggesting to take Benjamin back to Egypt with them! You can just see Jacob’s fear and frustration.

Reuben speaks up and offers to give the life of two of his sons if he does not bring Benjamin and Simeon back alive, two lives for two lives. We commend Reuben for his willingness to sacrifice; indeed, according to 46:9, Reuben had four sons so he is willing to sacrifice half of his children. But the reality is that his sacrifice would do nothing for Benjamin, Simeon, or Jacob. In fact, it would only make things worse. Jacob resounds to that effect also. Benjamin will not go to Egypt. Joseph is dead. Only Benjamin, among Rachel's sons, is left. If something were to happen to Benjamin, Jacob would mourn himself to death, into the world of the dead.

This will be the last time Reuben assumes leadership. He will have no more speaking roles in the Bible. In the subsequent interactions, Judah will take center stage (43:3, 8; 44:14, 16, 18).

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - It may be Judah's actions here contributed to God choosing Judah to be the tribe through whom Jesus would come (49:9-10; Matt. 1; Luke 3; Rev. 5:5).