

Book of Genesis – Part XVII - Genesis 42-44

“The Fateful Reunion”

A dramatic chain of events is set in motion with the spread of the famine which ends chapter 41. The famine has penetrated to Canaan. Judah sends his sons to Egypt to buy food. Here they encounter their long lost brother, Joseph. It has been twenty years since the ten brothers have seen him. While he recognizes them, they have no idea who he is. Joseph sees the fulfillment of his dream that his brothers would bow down before him. More than this, he puts them to a test to see if they will do to his full brother, Benjamin, what they did to him. It is in this context that Judah steps forward, and in a scene which foreshadows Jesus sacrificing himself for us, offers to sacrifice himself for Benjamin.

1. The brothers meet Joseph – twenty years later – chapter 42

1. The famine has penetrated into Canaan. Word has no doubt spread that there is food in Egypt due to Joseph’s conservation of food during the seven prosperous years as Pharaoh’s dream had warned him (41:25-49).
2. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food. As far as any of them knows, this will be a fairly routine endeavor. Nonetheless, Jacob fears for his youngest son, Benjamin, who, like Joseph, was the son of his only beloved wife, Rachel. He keeps Benjamin home for fear that harm might come to him (42:4).
3. The story proceeds with suspense and irony. The ten brothers come and bow before their unrecognized brother Joseph, thereby fulfilling Joseph’s adolescent dream (37:5-11). Joseph recognizes them but says nothing. Several things can be noted here.
 - a. It is not absolutely certain that the brothers knew that Joseph would be taken to Egypt. They had sold him to Ishmaelite traders with the aid of some Midianites. They did not necessarily know where Joseph would be taken.
 - b. The seventeen year old boy who had pled unsuccessfully with his brothers is now at least a thirty seven year old man and a royal Egyptian in appearance. It is not surprising that the brothers have no idea who he is. He speaks Egyptian in their presence even while knowing their language (42:23).
 - c. Joseph here illustrates the classic theme of the “secret identity.” His identity remains unknown even to people who would otherwise know him. He is therefore able to interact with the brothers having a distinct advantage over them. What is striking however in this Biblical account is that usually the disguise of the secret identity is one of weakness (Superman posing as Clark Kent). However Joseph’s disguise is one of strength and power.
4. In spite of Joseph’s great fortune because of God being with him, he still remembers the ill treatment he received from the brothers (42:21). Joseph is going to enact a measure of revenge and also test his brothers.
5. He begins by speaking harshly to them (42:7). He accuses them of being spies (42:9). This has the double irony of the fact that not only are the brothers not spies, they would probably be incapable of being effective spies.

6. Using these accusations, Joseph learns about both his father and his brother, Benjamin (42:11-17). He proceeds to lock them up in prison for three days (42:17) (three days being a major motif in scripture leading up to Christ's resurrection).
7. Joseph then demands that they bring Benjamin to him. To guarantee this he insists that one of them remain with him as a hostage.
8. The brothers somehow realize that they are enduring all this because of the evil they did to Joseph (42:21). They however have no idea that Joseph stands before them.
9. The brothers keep protesting that they are "honest men" (42:11, 31). Joseph will put this claim to the test. It is significant that Joseph says that he fears God (42:18). The brothers would not think that he knew their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
10. Joseph picks Simeon as the hostage (42:24). Simeon is bound before them and then they are sent on their way. On their journey home they open their sacks and find that the money they had paid for the grain has been returned to them (42:27-28). Totally mystified, they cry out, "What is this that God has done to us?" (42:28).
11. Returning to their father, they explain the necessity of taking Benjamin back with them. Jacob however will not hear of it (42:38). For the time being then Simeon is left in Egypt.

II. Judah's Guarantee – chapters 43-44

1. The famine persists (43:1). Jacob can no longer refuse to send Benjamin because he knows that his sons will have to return to Egypt because they all need food (we are not told if they really miss Simeon all that much).
2. Jacob/Israel laments what he can only see as a dire situation. He asks them why they had to tell "the Egyptian" about the family (43:5). The brothers answer somewhat helplessly that "the man" kept questioning them (43:7).
3. It is at this decisive moment that Judah steps forward and says that he will be the surety or the guarantee for Benjamin's welfare (43:9-10). Jacob reluctantly agrees to let Benjamin go with them (43:11).
4. When they return to Egypt Joseph starts playing with their heads. He invites them into the palace for a banquet (43:16). The brothers are then confused and suspicious. They wonder if it is some kind of trap (43:18).
5. They offer to give the money back that was in their sacks to Joseph's steward. The steward, clearly in on the plan, says that he had received their money and the money in their sacks must have come from God! (43:23).
6. Joseph arrives at noon and is overwhelmed at the sight of Benjamin. He has to leave temporarily to compose himself (43:26-31).
7. They proceed to the banquet and everything seems to be going well. The brothers, at the very least, have to be confused by what is going on. They also see that Benjamin receives five times as much as they do. Nevertheless this is better than being put in prison (43:34). "So they drank and were merry with him" (43:34).
8. The brothers leave in the morning thinking all is well. Joseph however is far from being done with them. He sends his steward to plant a special cup in Benjamin's sack. The steward begins by accusing the brothers of having

- stolen a magic cup (We are never told that Joseph actually practiced magic or “divination” in Egypt. This is all part of his pose).
9. The brothers profess their innocence. They go so far as to say that if any of their company took the cup he should be put to death and the brothers would agree to become slaves. The steward however adds that this is too severe a penalty. Only the guilty party would have to remain as a slave.
 10. To the brothers’ unabashed horror, the missing cup is found in Benjamin’s sack (44:12-13).
 11. The brothers return to Joseph. Joseph has set a perfect trap for them. He has in effect recreated the same situation as had happened to him twenty years earlier. Will the brothers again sell one of Rachel’s sons into slavery and return to their father with the devastating news (but with themselves safe)?
 12. The climax of the story now comes into view. Judah acknowledges the brothers’ guilt (44:16). He recounts the whole story of his father’s loss of Joseph. He then steps forward and tells Joseph to take him in place of Benjamin. This will overwhelm Joseph because he will realize that his brothers are not the same as they were twenty years earlier (45:1). Judah here though is prefiguring the greatest descendent of the tribe of Judah, Jesus Christ. Jesus volunteers to take our place so that we can be freed from the slavery of sin (Rom. 4:22-25; 8:2; II Cor. 5:15; Gal. 1:3-4; Titus 2:14; Heb. 2:9). In Judah’s speech we see the message of the gospel clearly being set forth. Judah is prepared to ransom himself for his brother just as Jesus will ransom himself for us (Mark 10:45). This section of Joseph’s story ends with Judah illustrating Jesus’ words, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

Questions for Us –

1. Do you see Joseph’s actions toward his brother as motivated by revenge? Why or why not? If you were Joseph would you be able to forgive your brothers? Why is forgiveness so difficult for us? What does this say about our need for a savior? Do you think the brothers are showing repentance in chapter 42:21? Is there a difference between repentance and remorse (simply being sorry that you did something wrong)? Which response best describes the brothers? Do we often confuse repentance and remorse?
2. Why do you think it is important that Jesus is born of the tribe of Judah rather than being a descendent of the favored sons, Joseph or Benjamin (Judah’s mother is Leah, the “hated” wife (Gen. 29:33))?

Next Study – Genesis 45-47 – “Israel in Egypt”