

Genesis, Part 35

Our last session began with Joseph in one of Pharaoh's prisons and, as he had done in Potiphar's house, he demonstrated administrative abilities. The jailor recognized that and soon gave him additional responsibilities where he became a powerful person inside the prison system and an able assistant to the jailor. Both Pharaoh's cupbearer and chief baker were accused of some unstated offense and joined Joseph in prison who was given the responsibility of caring for them.

The two had dreams one night that troubled them, and Joseph offered to interpret them. He told the cupbearer his dream meant he would be restored to his former position in three days. The baker, however, would lose his head in three days. And both happened just as predicted.

In a lapse of his trusting God, Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh and his wrongful imprisonment once he was restored. But the cupbearer forgot, and Joseph languished in prison for two more years. God had more to teach Joseph about faith and patience.

Two long years passed before Pharaoh had two dreams that troubled him greatly. None of his "magicians" or the "wise men of Egypt" could interpret his dreams, and that is when the cupbearer remembered his promise to Joseph and spoke up, telling him of how Joseph had so accurately interpreted his and the baker's dreams.

Pharaoh immediately summoned Joseph out of prison. He reported being clean-shaven and freshly clothed in a manner respectful to the king. There is a tremendous message in this. This is a new life that is coming to Joseph. It is like a resurrection – he is raised up. Now he goes to the Gentiles.

Joseph gives God the glory. He wanted the king's focus on the message and not the messenger. He wanted to make sure the king understood that the interpretation would not come from any ability of his, but that God would interpret the dreams in a way that though the dream interpretation was disturbing, Pharaoh would find the solution comforting.

The child of God must be careful that God gets the glory. If what we do is a blessing, it is because God is doing it through us. I do find compliments from those hearing these messages encouraging, but I am also just a bit uncomfortable because of them. It isn't me; it is God working through me despite my limitations which are many. To God be the glory!

After Pharaoh related his dreams to Joseph, he replied the two dreams were really about the same subject, and God had revealed to Pharaoh what He was about to do. The fact that the dream was repeated adds to their importance. Joseph tells Pharaoh there will be seven years of bounty in Egypt when the harvests will be plentiful. That will be followed by seven years of famine when the harvests will not be enough to sustain the population.

Joseph then offered a solution and said to Pharaoh that grain should be stored from the bounty of the first seven years for use during the seven years of famine. Pharaoh was impressed and wondered aloud where in all of Egypt he might find a man who was capable of managing this process – “a man with whom was the Spirit of God”? Joseph was obviously who Pharaoh had in mind for the job, and he appointed him to have the authority to do as God had shown him. His authority was to be so great that he would answer only to the king, and all others would answer to Joseph as second in command of all of Egypt. And as part of the package, Joseph was given a wife who bore him children.

Genesis 41:46 Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. ⁴⁷ During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, ⁴⁸ and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. ⁴⁹ And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.

⁵⁰ Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, bore them to him.

⁵¹ Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. “For,” he said,

“God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.”

⁵² The name of the second he called Ephraim, “For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.”

⁵³ The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, ⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. ⁵⁵ When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do.”

⁵⁶ So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. ⁵⁷ Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.

Some 13 years after he was sold into slavery, Joseph was prosperous and one of the most powerful men in the world at the time. God worked all things together for good in the life of Joseph.

Joseph is 30 years old, the same age that Jesus started His ministry. Note that he has two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Their names are meaningful for Joseph. Manasseh means “forget” or “God made me forget”. The Hebrews wore beards but we see Joseph clean-shaven and dressed as an Egyptian. He had laid aside his old life and began a new life. He looks like an Egyptian and talks like an Egyptian; he lives like an Egyptian. He says “God made me forget”. J Vernon McGee suggests we can call him “Amnesia”. Ephraim means “fruitful”. McGee suggests we can call him “Ambrosia”. So we have Amnesia and Ambrosia as free English translations. Joseph gave them these names because God made him forget his father’s house and made him fruitful in the land of Egypt.

We pick up the story now about 9-11 years after his appointment to his new position. The seven years of plenty have passed, and we are maybe 2-4 years into the famine. Joseph has built a system of warehouses and stored a portion of the harvests from those seven years of plenty and is administering the distribution of the stored food. Since there was a famine in Canaan also and hearing there was grain available to purchase in Egypt, Joseph’s brothers went there to purchase some.

What purpose does God have in accomplishing all this? He is using this famine and Joseph's position in the government of Pharaoh to get the family of Jacob out of Canaan, away from the sins of the Canaanites, and to bring them to Egypt to settle in the land of Goshen where they will be insulated from the evil influence of the Canaanites and even the Egyptians because of their disdain for shepherds.

God's children must live in this broken world, but we are not called to be influenced by it and become a part of it. We are called to influence it, not the other way. The Hebrews in Canaan were being drawn into that heathen world of idolatry as testified by some taking Canaanite wives and worshiping idols. There are many years to go, some 400 before God will build a nation out of this bunch, and He wants to keep them racially and spiritually as pure as possible until they have grown enough in population to become a nation.

Dramatic events in the life of Joseph are unfolding. A pattern of God using Joseph to preserve the race during the famine and the removal of Jacob and his family to Egypt begins to emerge in clear detail. In that dry cistern, in bondage to the Ishmaelites, as a slave in Potiphar's house, and even in prison, Joseph was a man of faith and remained optimistic.

You can probably see where this is going. All over the region, there is famine because of crop failures, and families are starving and coming to Egypt to buy grain. And guess who is coming for dinner? The famine forced Jacob to send his sons to Egypt to buy grain.

Joseph's Brothers Go to Egypt

Genesis 42:1 When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" ² And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." ³ So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴ But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. ⁵ Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan.

Jacob asks his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" They had no solutions to offer to the family's starving. Jacob tells them there is grain available to buy down in Egypt. "Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die."

Notice that Jacob would not allow them to take Benjamin with them? Some expositors take this as an indication that he did not trust them with Benjamin, who was now his favorite son after the loss of Joseph. Though he did not know what they did to Joseph, perhaps Jacob's lack of trust was because he understood the character of the older sons.

So the ten sons went to Egypt to buy grain. They had to come to Joseph if they wanted food, but Joseph is costumed and clean-shaven like an Egyptian, and they do not recognize their brother whom they last saw some 15 years ago.

Gen 42:6 Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." ⁸ And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. ⁹ And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them. And he said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land." ¹⁰ They said to him, "No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹ We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies." ¹² He said to them, "No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see." ¹³ And they said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan, and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is no more."

Joseph recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him. Why? First of all, they thought Joseph was long dead, so they were not looking for him. They never expected to see him again, but he did expect to see them. Furthermore, Joseph had shaved his face and head and was dressed in the attire of an Egyptian. Joseph was around 17 when they last saw him

and is in his early forties here. Joseph speaks to them not in their Hebrew tongue but in Egyptian through an interpreter, and “he spoke roughly to them”.

Joseph is trying to get as much information about his family as he can without revealing his identity. He tests his brothers by accusing them of being spies. Their presence in Egypt confirmed the truth of his dream about the brothers bowing down to him but not the fulfillment. Joseph knew that all the family must come to Egypt under his rulership. He demanded that they bring their little brother as proof that they were not spies. Retaining them in prison was an interesting turn of events since the brothers had previously put Joseph in a “cistern prison.”

Gen 42:14 But Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you. You are spies. ¹⁵ By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶ Send one of you, and let him bring your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. Or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.” ¹⁷ And he put them all together in custody for three days. ¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ if you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰ and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die.” And they did so. ²¹ Then they said to one another, “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.” ²² And Reuben answered them, “Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.” ²³ They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. The brothers see this as reaping what they have sown ²⁴ Then he turned away from them and wept. And he returned to them and spoke to them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes.

If there is anything that might have given Joseph away was his statement in verse 18, “...for I fear God”. Apparently in that day, there were people other

than just Jacob and his family who knew God. While it did not excite the suspicions of his brothers, in that statement, we see Joseph give God the credit, something he never fails to do. It should have encouraged the brothers to feel that they would be treated fairly.

Joseph orders the brothers to send one to retrieve the missing Benjamin. The others will remain behind as hostages in prison pending the return of the brother with Benjamin.

To perpetuate this deception, Joseph is speaking through an interpreter, and they do not know he understands Hebrew and what they are saying. In verse 23 Reuben says, “Did I not speak to you, saying, ‘Do not sin against the boy’; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us.” When Joseph heard this admission of guilt, he turned away and wept.

After composing himself Joseph changes his demands. Instead of holding 9 brothers and sending one to retrieve Benjamin, he proposes to hold one as a hostage and send the other 9 back for Benjamin. I suspect he thought the multiple voices could more likely convince his father to release Benjamin.

Gen 42:25 And Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, and to replace every man’s money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. This was done for them.

²⁶ Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. ²⁷ And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money in the mouth of his sack. ²⁸ He said to his brothers, “My money has been put back; here it is in the mouth of my sack!” At this their hearts failed them, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, “What is this that God has done to us?”

Joseph had their silver (with which they had purchased grain) put into their sacks. Whether he meant the money to be discovered on the way home or at home, its initial shock was effective. They felt that Joseph would accuse them of theft which would support his contention that they were spies. The question, “What is this that God has done to us?” suggests they see this as retribution for what they did to Joseph years before.

Why did they not go back right then and return the money? Perhaps they feared the anger of the “Egyptian” and his retribution for stealing the money. They decided to go home instead of returning abandoning Simeon in the process. I think they felt Jacob would never allow them to return with Benjamin and, thus, would avoid ever facing the wrath of the “Egyptian”. Fear leads to questionable decisions. Sorry, Simeon.

Gen 42:29 When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰ “The man, the lord of the land, spoke roughly to us and took us to be spies of the land. ³¹ But we said to him, ‘We are honest men; we have never been spies. ³² We are twelve brothers, sons of our father. One is no more, and the youngest is this day with our father in the land of Canaan.’ ³³ Then 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 your way. ³⁴ Bring your youngest brother to me. Then I shall know that you are not spies but honest men, and I will deliver your brother to you, and you shall trade in the land.’ ” ³⁵ As they emptied their sacks, behold, every man’s bundle of money was in his sack. And when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were afraid.

The returning brothers relay the story of their encounter with this “man, the lord of the land” and how he charged them with being spies. They explain that to convince him they are not spies and to sell them more grain, they must return with Benjamin. And then they discover the money carried by all the brothers has been restored to their bags. “And when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were afraid.”

Gen 42:36 And Jacob their father said to them, “You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me.” ³⁷ Then Reuben said to his father, “Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.” ³⁸ But he said, “My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.”

The deal offered by Joseph was not well received by Jacob. He mistrusts the “Egyptian” and fears the loss of Benjamin were he to send him to Egypt. He pretty much writes off poor Simeon as dead when he says, “Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more.”

Ruben offers his own two sons, “Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.” This is ironic since Reuben had failed to prevent the loss of Joseph (37:21–22). Even with this guarantee of protection, Jacob steadfastly refuses to allow them to take Benjamin back to Egypt.

Joseph’s tests were important in God’s plan to bless the seed of Abraham. God planned to bring the family to Egypt so that it would grow there into a great nation. But the people who entered Egypt needed to be faithful to the Lord. The brothers needed to be tested before they could participate in God’s blessing. Joseph’s prodding had to be subtle; the brothers must perceive the hand of God moving against them so that they would acknowledge their crime against Joseph and their previous unbelief in his dreams. But one test was not enough; there must be two.

Joseph’s Brothers Return to Egypt

Genesis 43:1 Now the famine was severe in the land. ² And when they had eaten the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, “Go again, buy us a little food.” ³ But Judah said to him, “The man solemnly warned us, saying, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’” ⁴ If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. ⁵ But if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, ‘You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.’” ⁶ Israel said, “Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?” ⁷ They replied, “The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, ‘Is your father still alive? Do you have another brother?’ What we told him was in answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he would say, ‘Bring your brother down?’” ⁸ And Judah said to Israel his father, “Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. ⁹ I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set

him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. ¹⁰ If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice.”

Some time passes and they do not return, but the famine gets worse and they have exhausted the grain brought back on the first trip. Jacob tells the brothers to go to Egypt to buy more grain, but they refuse to go without Benjamin. They remind Jacob that “the man” has told them he will not even meet with them again unless they bring Benjamin.

Jacob, of course, remains reluctant. His scolding, “Why did you tell the man you had another brother?” was an effort to escape the decision he dreaded to make. Yet he must release Benjamin so they can return to Egypt, otherwise, they will all die from starvation.

Judah offers to be responsible for Benjamin and pledges his safety. He reminds his father that had they not delayed returning as they did, they could have made the trip twice and Benjamin would have been home. Interestingly Judah was the one who had come up with the plan to sell Joseph to Egypt (37:26–27).

Jacob was full of apprehension about Benjamin’s safety, and his sons were worried about heaven catching up on their sins. Whenever anything unexpected occurred, panic overtook them. Their uneasy consciences interpreted every development as a sign of judgment.

Gen 43:11 Then their father Israel said to them, “If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds. ¹² Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks. Perhaps it was an oversight. ¹³ Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man. ¹⁴ May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.”

¹⁵ So the men took this present, and they took double the money with them, and Benjamin. They arose and went down to Egypt and stood before Joseph.

Facing starvation Jacob is forced to relent and send his sons down to Egypt for grain and take Benjamin with them. They lacked grain for bread but did have some fruit, honey, and nuts not generally available in Egypt which they took along with some spices. He has them take these gifts for “the man” to appease his anger and discourage him from doing anything that might jeopardize Benjamin. With that, he sends double the money that they had found in their grain packs.

That word translated as “bereaved” in verse 14 is *shakol /shaw·kole/* and means to be made childless. Jacob fears the loss of all of his sons. He is not acting like a man of faith here. God has made promises to him regarding his descendants, and he should be putting his faith in that promise.

Gen 43:16 When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, “Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon.” ¹⁷ The man did as Joseph told him and brought the men to Joseph’s house. ¹⁸ And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph’s house, and they said, “It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may assault us and fall upon us to make us servants and seize our donkeys.” ¹⁹ So they went up to the steward of Joseph’s house and spoke with him at the door of the house, ²⁰ and said, “Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food. ²¹ And when we came to the lodging place we opened our sacks, and there was each man’s money in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight. So we have brought it again with us, ²² and we have brought other money down with us to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks.”

When they arrived in Egypt they were invited into the “Egyptian’s” house, and that made them afraid suspecting some sort of trap because they had “stolen” the money they had found in their grain packs. They then attempted to explain the money and indicated they brought it back plus more money to buy food.

Gen 43:23 He replied, “Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your

money.” Then he brought Simeon out to them. ²⁴ And when the man had brought the men into Joseph’s house and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and when he had given their donkeys fodder, ²⁵ they prepared the present for Joseph’s coming at noon, for they heard that they should eat bread there.

²⁶ When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present that they had with them and bowed down to him to the ground.

²⁷ And he inquired about their welfare and said, “Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?” ²⁸ They said, “Your

servant our father is well; he is still alive.” And they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. ²⁹ And he lifted up his eyes and saw his

brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, and said, “Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!”

³⁰ Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there. ³¹ Then he washed his face and came out. And

controlling himself he said, “Serve the food.”

Joseph’s servant assured them the money came from “Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you.” The wording seems to suggest the servant has had a conversion experience to faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Such might be expected since he was Joseph’s servant.

They were taken into Joseph’s house where they washed and the donkeys were given fodder. When Joseph came home they gave him the presents sent by Jacob, and Joseph asked about “the old man” they had spoken of. They replied in good health.

Joseph bowed and when he looked up he saw his younger brother Benjamin and “his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep.” Moved by seeing his brother he could not hold back his tears and had to leave the room to weep in private. Remember, that Benjamin is Joseph’s full brother; the others are half-brothers. It should come as no surprise that this is a very emotional moment for Joseph.

Gen 43:32 They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians

could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. ³³ And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth. And the men looked at one another in amazement. ³⁴ Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. And they drank and were merry with him.

After composing himself, Joseph returned to the others and ordered the food to be served. Cultural norms in Egypt did not allow Egyptians to sit at the same table as the Hebrews, for such was "an abomination to the Egyptians." Because of his exalted position in the land, Joseph sat at a table of his own.

At the dinner, Joseph demonstrated something ominous to them. He had arranged the seating in order from the firstborn to the youngest. The brothers were amazed at this and wondered how this "Egyptian" knew this. Had they not been so afraid they might have suspected the truth. Instead, it increased their uneasy sense of exposure to divine intervention.

He sent food to the table for the Hebrews and gave Benjamin five times what he served the others. And everyone ate, drank wine, and was merry.

Yet in all the events of this visit, the brothers were confronted with gracious dealings from God through this "Egyptian". The chapter is a foretaste of future things for, as Joseph said later (45:5), God sent him down before them to provide for them during famine.