

**Genesis 42:1-38, No. 67**  
**“Unraveling the Tangled Web”**  
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**Text Comment**

At 42:1 we begin the next section of this riveting and very important history, the next act in the drama, if you will. This section extends through chapter 45. The attention shifts from Joseph the individual and from the Egyptian empire back to the family of Jacob from which Joseph was torn years before. As Joseph had risen to power in Egypt, now he will rise to rule over his family as, remember, had been foretold in the two dreams God had given him when he was in his teens.

The attention of the narrative now shifts back to Jacob and Canaan, where twenty years have passed. Joseph, we read in 41:51, named his first son Manasseh because, he said, “God has made me forget all my trouble *and all my father’s household.*” That is, God made him to forget the trouble he had had at home. Well, Joseph may have largely forgotten his family back home – at least so far as sorrowing over the loss of it was concerned (surely it is worth pondering that Joseph, from his new position of authority in Egypt could have made contact with his family back in Canaan, but did not) – but, whatever Joseph was thinking, we will learn in today’s reading that Jacob had been grieving for his lost son all these years (42:36-38).

The story will unfold in three journeys to Egypt. The first was made by Jacob’s ten sons (minus Benjamin) who came to Egypt to get grain. There they met and were suitably awed by Joseph, but did not recognize him. At the end of that first journey all of them returned home except Simeon, who was kept as a hostage to ensure Benjamin’s presence the next time. The second journey was made by all ten remaining sons, that is, Benjamin included, who, after certain adventures, were reunited with and reconciled to Joseph. The third journey was made by the entire family, including Jacob himself, who went to live in Egypt under Joseph’s protection (that final journey is recounted in chapter 45).

I need to make some extensive comment on the reading so that you will understand what is about to unfold and why events take the course that they do. I’m sure most Christians, reading this text, have wondered why Joseph did what he did: why he disguised himself for so long, why he placed the money back in his brothers’ sacks, why he demanded Benjamin’s presence, and so on. I am much more confident that I know the answer to those questions than I once was. The narrative art of Genesis continues to amaze and excite me as each new section of the history falls under our view.

v.1 A typical father’s remark!

v.3 Note that Jacob’s sons are referred to as *Joseph’s brothers*. The narrator is telling us in a subtle way what this history is all about: *the relationship between Joseph and his brothers*. That all ten went down to Egypt was because Egyptian grain was sold on a *per capita* basis. One person was allowed to buy only so much. [Sarna, 292]

- v.4 Right at the headwaters of this account – after all the years that have passed – we are reminded of the family dynamics which apparently have not changed. Benjamin was now the apple of his father’s eye as Joseph had been before, he being the only surviving issue of Jacob’s marriage to Rachel. The sons of Leah still, after all these years, matter much less to Jacob and he does not disguise that fact.
- v.5 “Sons of Israel” reminds us that this is the history of the nation!
- v.6 Remember, in the dreams that Joseph had been given years before Joseph’s brothers bowed down to him. It was that prospect, that prophecy that so infuriated them when first the dreams were recounted.
- v.9 That is, they would be in the employ of the Hittites or Assyrians, Egypt’s enemies, looking to find a weak point in the defenses.
- v.11 Joseph, of course, was also a son of that same father. The irony is that they hope to rebut suspicion of dishonorable conduct by asserting their brotherhood, but they are doing so to the very brother whom they betrayed in the most dishonorable way.
- v.12 The constant repetition of the charge is a technique of interrogation still very much in use today. There really is nothing new under the sun!
- v.19 They had stated that they were honest men; now that honesty will be tested.
- v.22 This may indicate that Reuben had never been told that his brother had not been killed, but had been sold into slavery. If you check back to 37:30 you will see that Reuben arrived after the deed had been done. Or, this may mean only that Reuben equated the kidnapping with murder.
- v. 23 In other words, Joseph was, in fact, creating the false impression that he could not understand their Canaanite language.
- v.24 There is a longstanding debate as to why Joseph chose Simeon as his hostage. The two greatest medieval Jewish commentators differed in their explanation. Rashi appealed to the violent streak in Simeon and Levi that was revealed in their murder of the Shechemites in chapter 34. He thought that Joseph kept Simeon in order to separate him from Levi and keep them from concocting some violent and foolish plot. Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, staying with the immediate context argued that, overhearing Reuben, Joseph learned for the first time that Reuben, the eldest, was not in on the plot to kidnap him. For all those years he had held Reuben responsible as his eldest brother. Now he knew that Reuben had actually opposed the plan of the other brothers. Simeon was kept behind then as the next oldest brother and so the most accountable. Some modern commentators have proposed another explanation, which I think is less persuasive because less obvious. They hold that because Joseph wanted Benjamin, Rachel’s second son to be brought to Egypt, he should hold Simeon, Leah’s second son, as hostage.

- v.33 The brothers put Simeon's detention in Egypt in the best possible light. They made it sound as if Simeon was the Egyptian Ruler's guest, not his prisoner. They knew how Jacob would react to this bad news. They also omitted the fact that they were imprisoned for three days. They were trying to make the situation sound less ominous. Naturally they didn't mention that the Egyptian promised to execute them if they didn't return with Benjamin.
- v.35 The simplest way to read this is to assume that only one man had so far opened his sack and found his money returned. It was only upon their return home that each one of them found his money in his sack. After all, they all brought home many more than one sack of grain. It may not have been obvious which sack would have contained the money.
- v.36 Jacob was blaming his sons for not only Joseph's loss, but now for Simeon's loss, because he believed that in one way or another they were responsible for this. That would be dramatic irony indeed. Did Jacob think that the brothers had sold Simeon into slavery and were only pretending to be dismayed at the sight of the money. That would be dramatic irony, if true! In any case, how could they possibly deny it outright – all the more now that their consciences had been awakened? It was, after all, half true. They had deprived him of Joseph. This led Reuben to his reckless outburst.
- v.37 The umpteenth dumb idea proposed by a member of this family!
- v.38 But Reuben's bold promise only raised Jacob's suspicions further. And, once again, Jacob spoke of Benjamin and Joseph in such a way as virtually to deny that he thought of Leah's sons as his own sons. He couldn't have made it clearer that he cared more for Benjamin than for all the rest of them put together. Simeon was Leah's son. He wouldn't risk Benjamin for *him!*

We have seen Joseph in the immediately preceding account of his rise to ruler of Egypt as both a godly, wise, and faithful man, and as a master administrator. What follows, I am now convinced, is all a further demonstration of those same gifts and graces. What Joseph did, he did on purpose and for the highest possible motives.

Let me demonstrate this to you.

1. In ways too difficult to explain, in several verses in this narrative, there are word plays that hark back to the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers and to Joseph's subsequent misfortunes. For example, in v. 17, the word for "custody" is the same word used for Joseph's imprisonment in 40:3, 4, and 7. In v. 7, the verb the ESV translates as "recognized" is the same verb used in 37:32 when Joseph's brothers ask Jacob to "identify" or "recognize" the bloody cloak as belonging to Joseph. And so on. The narrator, with his typical skill, is subtly setting all that happens against the backdrop of that ancient betrayal. What is now to occur has everything to do with what happened long ago.
2. The comment in v. 9 that Joseph remembered the dreams he had had about his brothers bowing down to him further indicates that Joseph recognized the Lord's hand in his brothers' appearance and that he intended by his actions to serve the Lord's interests in the whole

affair. One commentator remarks, “A comment like this [in v. 9] on a participant’s state of mind is rare in the Bible and is correspondingly significant.” [Wenham, 406] In other words, Joseph was thinking about those dreams as he made the plans that he made. But, of course, the dreams had not yet been completely fulfilled. Remember, Joseph’s first dream had all his brothers bowing down to him, but all his brothers were not yet present, Benjamin was missing. His second dream had all eleven brothers and his father bowing down to him, but Jacob was not yet present. *So, there is more to come; that was clear to Joseph.* Now, how to make the most of what God had shown him would come to pass? *That is what he had done with the dreams given to Pharaoh; now he does the same with his own dreams.*

3. You will have noticed as we read the account in vv. 15-20 that Joseph changed the demand he first made of his brothers. He began by demanding that all of the brothers remain in Egypt but one, but finally required only one to remain while all the rest returned home. While there may be other reasons for this, it does seem clear that Joseph wanted them to do the right thing and to be reconciled with his family and father and did not want to put undue burdens on them: either on the hungry part of the family still at home in Canaan – so he sent the food back to them – or on the men who must decide whether to risk a return journey. Surely it is doubtful that Jacob and Benjamin would ever have come to Egypt if nine of the brothers were already prisoners there. Joseph’s demonstration of goodwill was an indication of what he *wanted to* and *hoped* would happen.
4. Then, in v. 24, his tears indicate already at this early stage the depth of his feeling for them and his love for his family.

So, what was Joseph doing? Joseph here is once more the master administrator. What we see him doing is giving his brothers tasks by which to heal them and to reconcile them first to God and to one another and then to him. We can see Joseph’s genius in the plan as it unfolds. Joseph had to have God’s providence working with him to achieve this end, but when the providence appeared, in the presence of his brothers, come to Egypt to buy food, and when they failed to recognize him, Joseph knew what to do with the opportunity, *just as he had known in his wisdom what to do with the knowledge that there would be seven years of plenty in Egypt followed by seven years of famine.* Worldwide famine created the backdrop against which the family drama of repentance, spiritual restoration, and reconciliation could unfold. Joseph exploited the opportunity that God provided. Because of his spiritual insight he was able to be the instrument of the renewal of his brothers and, remember, that is the great story here, for it will not be Joseph, worthy man that he was, but Judah his brother who will receive the climactic blessing at the end of the book; Judah who was told that the Messiah and the King of Kings would be *his* descendant.

So what did Joseph the master planner do? Well, he began by putting his brothers on the defensive with aggressive questioning and cross-examination. As his brothers revealed more and more to him, he seized the opportunities the information provided to test them, to draw from them the sorts of thoughts and actions that were needed. They claimed to be honest men, he contrived to test that claim.

Benjamin was the key. If the sons of Leah could feel brotherly love for Benjamin, if they could act as true brothers to Benjamin, if they could show a proper concern for Benjamin, Jacob’s favorite – that he *was* Jacob’s favorite was a fact obvious enough to Joseph from the fact that

though his brothers told him that Benjamin was still alive, he did not come with the others to Egypt – then spiritual healing would have come to these men.

Throughout this entire plan as it unfolded through this and the next two chapters, Joseph treated Benjamin as his surrogate. Later he will give Benjamin preferential treatment precisely to see how his brothers will react. His testing of them was the means to lead them to a right state of mind and heart.

And, then, Joseph put the money back in their sacks of grain. What was this but another test of their integrity? Will they come back and face the music? Will they be honest when honesty seems dangerous? Will they fear God and keep his commandments when their lives will be at stake? And how will they handle the matter in conversation with their father back home? *It is so obvious that Joseph was placing these men precisely in that situation where they must come to terms with the men they have been and the evil they have done.* What will be the result of that? You noticed, perhaps, that Joseph’s plan as outlined in 18-20, was not simply a punishment that fit their ancient crime, but that, in detaining one brother and making them return to their father without him, he was making them relive their actions of twenty years before.

This was so obvious that the brothers themselves immediately picked up on the similarity of situation. Indeed, they realized this so immediately, that they commented on it while Joseph was still close enough to overhear them. “Surely we are being punished because of what we did to Joseph...” Nothing had been said about Joseph, but the brothers couldn’t miss the obvious connection between what was happening to them now and what they themselves had done then.

And then as final proof that Joseph, by this elaborate strategy, was seeking the spiritual renewal of his brothers and reconciliation of his family, that is exactly what we see beginning to unfold here in chapter 42. It is not complete in this chapter, but the signs of what was to come are already visible.

1. You have, first, in v. 21, and apparently for the first time, the brothers acknowledging their sin long ago against their brother. What is more, we see them there connecting their sin against God and its consequences. God was now dealing with them according to their sin of long ago. Not Joseph; *God*. And they now knew it. And in that spirit, they did not seek to mitigate or extenuate. They admitted that what they did was unforgivable. Indeed, we learn here for the first time, *in the brothers’ own report of their crime*, that Joseph had cried for mercy at the time and they had turned a deaf ear to his cries. For the first time, these men put sin and death together and pointed the finger at themselves.
2. You have the same response again in v. 28. When one of them found the money back in his sack, they *all*, not just he, but all together cried out, “What is this that *God* has done to us?” They were not blaming their brother, “What is this that *you* have done to us. How is it that you have gotten us into this mess?” – which is what we expect of these men. Not only were they now reckoning with the justice and the hand of God, but they were doing so *together*. No recriminations against the brother who found his money returned – No, “What have *you* done to us now?” – but what has *God* done to *us*?

Take careful note. We now have present the key elements of all true spiritual restoration and eternal life: the person's genuine, sincere acknowledgement of his or her sin and wrong and that person's reckoning with God and his judgments and taking personal responsibility for what he or she has done and must now do. Americans, for example, will never find this healing until we own up, as a society, to these twin facts of God and sin, really own up to them. But these are the two things that at present Americans will never acknowledge, never own up to come wind, come weather. we will not own up to come wind, come weather. It's the last thing they will think about themselves or about God.

We have been months tracing the course of the sins that have brought us to this point in the history of the sons of Israel. Some of you may remember the famous fiasco some years ago when the World Health Organization tried to help the residents of Borneo exterminate houseflies, which were widely suspected of carrying disease. The insides of the houses were sprayed with DDT, an action that triggered an unforeseen and deadly chain of events. As the flies died, the lizards (their natural predator) feasted on them and sickened from the DDT they ingested. Their sickened condition made them easy prey for house cats who, in turn, sickened and died from ingesting the DDT in the lizards they ate. The loss of the cats gave free run to the rats. When the rats began to eat house food and threaten the population with bubonic plague, panicked officials resorted to parachuting large numbers of imported cats into the area to mend the break in the food chain. [Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 118-199]

Well this was something like that but worse. It didn't begin with an innocent error but with a crime against God and man. It started with Laban's deceiving Jacob and giving Leah, whom Jacob did not love or want to marry, to him as his wife. In that way commenced a sequence of events that was to consume Jacob's family with jealousy and hatred. Joseph's betrayal and kidnapping and enslavement were but the bitter fruit of that longstanding jealousy and competition in Jacob's household which Jacob never did anything to remove. How easily the momentum of sin is begun; with what difficulty it is reversed. It was a very tangled web that Joseph had to unweave. It took years to weave, it would not be untangled in a day.

Now, what Joseph will do, with his very elaborate strategy, is to unravel that jealousy and that long history of selfishness and hatred and restore the family to covenantal integrity. They didn't know what was happening, of course. But Joseph was wise enough to know that too much needed to happen in their hearts for him to imagine that disclosing himself immediately to his brothers would produce the repentance and reconciliation that his brothers so needed. They needed to be placed under very much more severe pressure. That work had still to be done in their hearts.

And how true to life. God was at work through Joseph and was about to bring to pass the most wonderful and remarkable changes in these men, but they didn't know that. Jacob was but months away from the happiest and most satisfying moment of his life, a moment that will make up, more than make up, for the misery and bitterness of the past twenty years, when he says, "*Everything is against me!*" The brothers themselves think that all that had happened to them in Egypt and on the way back was God's punishment. They were waiting for and expecting the other shoe to drop. At least by then they knew they would deserve it when it came. No wonder they were frightened in v. 35!

But those days in Canaan were like the person who comes into a room where an important football game involving your favorite team is being shown on the television, but the sound is turned off. You watch as four successive plays go badly for the home team. Three times they lose yards and then their punt is blocked. Doesn't look good. But, then, you turn up the sound and learn that it is the fourth quarter, your team is up 55-0, and the fourth string is on the field. How little we see and understand of God's ways with us, or of how much must first occur, how our hearts and minds have to be battered before God can give us what we long to have and what he longs to give us from his hand.

This is what Samuel Rutherford meant when, with his uncanny genius, he wrote to one of his suffering, confused, and despairing correspondents.

“Madam, when ye are come to the other side of the water, and have set down your foot on the shore of glorious eternity, and look back again to the waters and to your wearisome journey, and shall see, in that clear glass of endless glory, nearer to the bottom of God's wisdom, ye shall then be forced to say, ‘If God had done otherwise with me than he hath done, I had never come to the enjoying of this crown of glory.’” [*Letters*, XI, 52]

Now what is important about this episode is not only the pivotal role it plays in the history of Israel or even in the family of Jacob and Joseph. What we have illustrated here – as so often in the biblical narrative, the histories of the Bible – is a paradigm or pattern; a lesson in the nature of life and of believing life especially. You see, in one way or another, to one degree or another, you and I are *always* where the brothers were that first time in Egypt and on their trip back home and upon their reunion with their father Jacob. We cannot, any more than they could, see what was really happening or why. They couldn't see, as we cannot see, the end from the beginning. They were at first disheartened, later terrified, but only because they couldn't see how events were going to unfold. On the other hand, if they had been able to see how the events were going to unfold they never would have experienced the depth of repentance and of reconciliation that was eventually to be their lot. We have been given this history in so much detail, allowed, as it were, to feel with the brothers the hammer blow of one seeming catastrophe after another, to feel with them the weight of the troubles that descended upon them, so that we might never forget that something is always going on behind the scenes, something that we do not recognize or understand, something that God is doing to us and for us and so something that will work to our good. Always we Christians are the brothers when first they came to Egypt. That is, we are always the brothers, *if* we respond as they did, *if* we acknowledge our sin and guilt, and begin honestly to deal with God.

Such are the ways by which God teaches us to trust and obey him, to repent of our sins and to grow in his grace. Let there be such an acknowledgement of our sin and a reckoning with God himself and there is no telling what surprising, happy, and satisfying things lie just around the corner!