

Average Joes

Faithful When Wronged:
Genesis 42-50

Joseph Tests His Brothers

Apart from chapter 37, which painted Joseph as a precocious and uppity teenager, the Bible generally portrays him as a model, a faithful, chaste, wise, far-sighted, energetic, and, above all, God-fearing man. Yet in his initial interactions with his brothers he comes off in a different light. He seems bent on revenge, intent on setting them up and arresting them on a completely trumped-up charge. It appears that he only relents when Judah points out the suffering his injustice will cause to the elderly father back home. But though Joseph may have appeared the heartless foreign tyrant to his brothers, the narrator makes it plain that this is not the way he views Joseph's actions nor the view Joseph had of himself. In dealing with his brothers Joseph was deliberately putting on a hard front, which he could only maintain by sometimes withdrawing to weep (42:24; 43:30), and when at last he is convinced of their change of heart, he weeps freely over them (45:1-2; 14-15). During his slavery and imprisonment, the narrator had said that the Lord was with Joseph (39:2, 21, 23). Now Joseph makes the same point himself; four times he describes himself as God's agent: "God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5); "God has made me lord of all Egypt" (45:9) (Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 431-432).

Joseph uses his brothers' appearance in Egypt to test their character. By keeping Simeon (42:24) he gives them the chance to abandon one of their brothers to prison and slavery as they previously did to him. The text does not indicate why Simeon is chosen. Perhaps Simeon is one of the more hardened brothers and is therefore the most deserving of imprisonment. Given the nature of the test, however, it may be more likely that, for whatever reasons, Simeon is the one who will be most readily abandoned by the others (since that had been Joseph's situation). The test will be most effective if there is no strong motivation to bring the brothers back except their own sense of mercy (if they have found any).



Digging
Deeper

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*You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for
good to accomplish what is
now being done, the saving
of many lives.
Genesis 50:20*

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Joseph also requests that they bring Benjamin back with them. He needs to have Benjamin there for the test he has in mind to discover whether his full brother (they share the same mother unlike the other brothers) is being treated in the same way he was.

In 42:21-23 we discover that in the thirteen intervening years the guilt and recriminations experienced by Joseph's brothers have enslaved and imprisoned them no less than Joseph's chains had done to him. They clearly recognize their culpability and acknowledge that punishment is therefore due. They confess to hard-heartedness (42:21) and murder (42:22). Though their confessions bring an emotional response from Joseph, he is determined to see the test through to the end to test the depth of his brothers' remorse (John Walton, *NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, Zondervan, 678).

Joseph claims in 44:5 that the silver cup found in Benjamin's sack was a cup used for divination. Divination in Egypt was generally only accessible to people of high status. Not much is known concerning the most popular techniques. From Mesopotamia we are familiar with a couple techniques that use liquids. One method observes the shapes oil makes when poured into water. Another method gains information from the ripples or reflections in the water itself. The brothers would not be surprised that a high official uses such methods.

But it is possible that Joseph insinuates more than this. Divination involves knowledge and interpretation of signs. In the immediate context, Joseph is reading the omens of their behavior to determine whether they are changed men. Indeed, he is using the silver cup for divination- but not in any sort of pagan way. Joseph has begun to see God's plan. In the larger scheme of things, his early dreams had indicated the destiny that he has now fulfilled, and he is beginning to understand what God is doing through him (Walton, 681).

Joseph's Economic Policies

Though it may appear as if Joseph's policies are economically repressive, hard times require hard solutions. The text documents the sequence of how the people were impoverished by the famine (not by the government). First they spent all their money buying food (47:14-15), then they traded away their livestock (47:18-20). Their rent for the land was 20 percent of the produce- a lower than normal percent in the ancient world. This was a progressive tax in that it was proportioned according to income. Theoretically, then, a prosperous farmer could have rebuilt his wealth when the famine ended. This policy turned Egypt into a state in which all the wealth was centralized in the government. Despite the personal hardship and servitude that resulted, the people are grateful for their lives (47:25). Once more, then, the point is made that through Joseph, the representative of Abraham's family, people are experiencing deliverance and blessing (Walton, 687-688).

Joseph's Death

With Jacob dead, Joseph's brothers feared that Joseph's congenial attitude toward them might change. They had, however, underestimated the genuineness of Joseph's affection. Not only had Jacob forgiven them, as indicated by his lack of reference to their sin in his last words, but Joseph had as well. He told his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (50:20). This is one of the clearest declarations of divine providence anywhere in Scripture. It serves as an important reminder that while the evil of men may appear to be to the disadvantage of God's people, the purposes and plans of God's will ultimately prevail.

Joseph died at age 110, which the Egyptians considered an ideal age. Joseph was unable, apparently, to be buried in Canaan upon his death. But he envisioned the time when God would lead Israel back to the promised land and asked to be buried there at that time. For his faith in God's promises to return His people to Canaan, Joseph is called in Hebrews 11:22 a great man of faith. It is the testament to God's faithfulness in his life and the faith he had in God's promises that still speaks to us today (John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis*, Baker, 303-304).

Though his words are few, Joseph's final statement to his sons gives the clearest expression of the kind of hope taught in these narratives. Again, like his father Jacob, Joseph wanted his bones returned to the Promised Land. Also like Jacob, he saw to it that his sons swore to return his bones when they returned to the land. Though he knew he would die and not see the time when his sons returned to the land, he expressed clearly the hope and trust that he had in God's promise: "God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (50:24). He so concretely believes in this that he repeats it a second time, thus demonstrating his trust in God's promise: "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place" (50:25) (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch As Narrative*, Zondervan, 239-40).

A quick reading of the end of the Joseph story might make us think that all family dissension came to an end when Joseph reveals himself and reconciliation happens between the brothers in chapter 45. But the past is not so easily forgotten, and with their father's death, the brothers start to worry again that Joseph will seek his revenge. For the first time, they frankly confess their sin and plead for forgiveness (50:17). Not for the first time, they fall down before him and offer to become his slaves (50:18). And this gives Joseph a chance to explain what is the purpose of all his sufferings. He says in effect, "The evil that you planned against me, God turned to good so that many people may live." The idea that God overrules the plans of the wicked to achieve his own purposes of good is of course an assumption that pervades Scripture. Indeed, it seems to be suggested that, through the suffering of the righteous Joseph at the hands of his wicked brothers, life was brought to the world. This principle of salvation being brought to all through the suffering of the one finds its clearest expression in the NT in the life, death, and exaltation of Jesus (see Mark 10:45) (Wenham, 493).

The Blessing of Judah

In blessing his sons, Jacob foretold a future for the tribe of Judah that pictured him as the preeminent son (49:8-12). This is especially surprising in the context of the Joseph story since one would think that as the favored and blessed son Joseph would be the recipient of God's blessing. But it is not to be. Though he did not have the right of the firstborn, Judah had been chosen over all the others as the royal tribe. This passage, in many details, anticipated the future rise of David and his descendants to Israel's throne.

Judah is described as a victorious warrior who returns home from battle and is greeted by the shouts of praise from his brothers. The statement that "your father's sons will bow down to you" clearly alludes to the dream of Joseph (37:10). In other words, that which has happened to Joseph is now being transferred to Judah and is a picture of what will happen in the future. Judah is described as a victorious warrior who is king. He holds the "scepter" and the "ruler's staff." The point of Jacob's words is that Judah will hold such a status among the tribes of Israel until one comes "to whom it truly belongs." Those who reign from the house of Judah will do so in anticipation of the one to whom the kingship truly belongs.

Later biblical writers drew heavily from the imagery of this short text in their portrayal of the reign of the coming Messiah. Isaiah 63:1-6 envisions the coming of a conquering king whose clothes are like those of one who has treaded the wine presses. His crimson clothing is then likened to the bloodstained garments of a victorious warrior. He is the one who has come to carry out the vengeance of God upon the ungodly nations (Isaiah 63:6). The book of Revelation applies this same image to the victorious return of Christ (Revelation 19:11-15) (Sailhamer, 234-235).

Home Group Questions

1. What evidence is there in the story that Joseph's brothers have changed since they sold Joseph?

2. Why does Joseph wait to reveal himself to his brothers? Was this right of Joseph? Why or why not?

3. How is Joseph able to forgive his brothers?

4. Read Ephesians 4:32. How does this verse help us think about forgiveness?

5. Can you forgive someone even if they don't accept your forgiveness or they are no longer around? How?

6. What are consequences of being unforgiving?

Questions for Personal Application

7. Is there anyone who you need to forgive? How has bitterness prevented you from forgiving this person? How can Ephesians 4:32 help you forgive this person?