

What is this that God has Done? (Gen. 42:1–38)

By Jacob Gerber

Joseph has been through an extraordinary ordeal, suffering innocently at the hands of his own brothers and then by various Egyptians during his captivity. By the end of Genesis 41, however, Joseph has risen as a ruler over Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself (Gen. 41:40). Joseph's rise to power in Egypt, however, is not the end of his story. The next section of the story of Joseph's life will recount the way in which Joseph becomes reconciled with his whole family. This story begins here in Genesis 42 as some of Joseph's brothers come to buy grain in Egypt; however, this story will stretch over multiple chapters—and multiple years—as the Lord brings these estranged brothers back together. Here, we see that *the Lord tests his people to confront their sins and to overcome their fears*.

The Lord Tests His People (Gen. 42:1–17)

Genesis 42 begins with an abrupt question that highlights Jacob's frustration with his sons: "Why do you look at one another?" (v. 1). Jacob's question is ironic in two ways. First, the abruptness and frustration of Jacob's question highlights the desperation of Jacob over the situation. The irony of this comes as we contrast Jacob's frustration here over the inactivity of his sons, against the sons' previous frustration that Jacob himself did nothing about Dinah's rape (Gen. 34:31).¹ Second, there is perhaps some irony in the way that the word "see" appears at the beginning and the end of this first verse. So, we read that Jacob "sees" (ESV: "learned") that there is grain for sale in Egypt, so he asks his sons, "Why do you look at [“see”] one another?" (v. 1). Here, Jacob sees the situation clearly, in spite of his deteriorating eyesight as he grows older in age (cf. Gen. 48:10).²

The situation is dire indeed. Jacob continues, explaining that they must buy grain in Egypt so that the family "may live and not die" (v. 2). While food shortages are always a matter of life and death, the book of Genesis has a special interest in the connection of food to life and death. In the beginning of Genesis, God gave Adam and Eve food to support their life, but warned them against eating from one particular tree, for in the day they ate from that tree, they would surely die (Gen. 2:16–17). Here, we see Joseph as the one who holds the power of life and death in his own distribution of food.³ Through Joseph, God is working out his plans to save the whole world.

When the brothers go down to Egypt to buy grain, we should notice that they are no longer called Jacob's sons, as in v. 1. Now, they are called "Joseph's brothers" (v. 3), a description that prepares us for their reunion with Joseph.⁴ Nevertheless, it is not all the brothers who go. Jacob

¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 514.

² Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:774.

³ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 216.

⁴ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 515.

refuses to send Benjamin, the only other son born to Jacob's favored wife Rachel, since Jacob fears that harm may come to Benjamin. It is possible that Jacob's paranoia simply manifests his ongoing grief from losing his beloved son Joseph, as he refuses to take any risks whatsoever with Benjamin.⁵ On the other hand, this may be a hint that Jacob has some suspicion of what his sons actually did to Joseph.⁶ Jacob may not have smoking-gun evidence against his sons, but he is also unwilling to risk Benjamin's life with sons he does not trust. This possibility gains more credibility later, when Jacob blames his sons for bereaving him of both Joseph and Simeon (v. 36).

In v. 5, once more the designation for the brothers changes: "the sons of Israel." To some degree, changing from speaking of "Jacob" to "Israel" may simply be stylistic variation; however, Gordon Wenham points out that "Israel" seems to be the preferred name when Israel and his offspring are entering into Egypt (cf. Gen. 43:6, 8, 11; 45:28; 46:1, 2, 29, 30; 47:27).⁷ More generally, Victor Hamilton argues that "Jacob" refers to the private side of the man as a "suffering and feeling human being," while "Israel" refers to the public side of the patriarch as the head of a nation.⁸ Here, Israel has sent a delegation to represent him in Egypt as they seek to acquire food for the whole nation. As the sons of Israel enter into Canaan because "the famine was in the land of Canaan" (v. 5), we should remember that famines also drove Abraham and Isaac toward Egypt to find food (Gen. 12:10; 26:1).⁹ When Abraham went down, he sinned in Egypt by lying about his wife's being his sister. In Isaac's case, the Lord prevented Isaac from carrying out his plan to go down to Egypt. Here, Jacob himself does not go down to Egypt, but only sends his sons to buy grain to bring back to Canaan.

When the brothers arrive, they immediately meet their long lost brother. Joseph is both a governor in the land, and the one who is selling the grain to the people of the land (v. 6a). So, when Joseph's brothers come to Joseph, they bow themselves before Joseph, with their faces to the ground (v. 6b). This is a striking fulfillment of the dream that Joseph had so many years earlier, a dream that deepened their hatred of Joseph (Gen. 37:8). The connection to the dream is not immediately made explicit until v. 9, however.

Instead, the narrative explains that Joseph "recognized" (נָכַר; *nakar*) his brothers, and then, using a different form of the same word, explains that he made himself unrecognizable to them (ESV: "treated them like strangers"; נָכַר; *nakar*). The word appears twice in v. 7, and then twice again in v. 8: "And Joseph *recognized* his brothers, but they did not *recognize* him." This twofold doubling of the word "recognize" is important, since it reminds us of the twofold doubling of the same word back in Genesis 37 and Genesis 38.¹⁰ First, Joseph's brothers tricked Jacob into believing that Joseph had died by asking him to "identify" (נָכַר; *nakar*) Joseph's coat, which Jacob did "identify" (Gen. 37:32–33). Then, Tamar exposed Judah as the father of her child by asking him to "identify" (נָכַר; *nakar*) his signet, cord, and staff (Gen. 38:25–26). Here, the twofold doubling takes place across two verses, not two chapters. Joseph is now the one disguising himself and tricking his brothers.

This story, then, raises the important question of how we should evaluate Joseph's actions. Some

⁵ Hamilton, 516.

⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 210.

⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 406.

⁸ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 516–17.

⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 406.

¹⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 519.

argue that Joseph had largely good motivations for disguising himself from his brothers. John Calvin, for example, explains that Joseph does this because he sought to find a way to be reconciled to his brother Benjamin, and he worried that making himself known to his brothers could endanger Benjamin.¹¹ Others see more sinister motives for Joseph to seek to get even with his brothers by this trick. Mern Sternberg is probably right to suggest that no single explanation for Joseph's motivations is enough, and that probably Joseph does this from a variety of motivations.¹²

Still, we should acknowledge that the narrator only gives us one reason for why Joseph does what he does: “And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them” (v. 9a).¹³ This does not mean that he forgot them altogether, even if he may have lost some degree of comfort from his dreams until this point.¹⁴ Joseph had named his son Manasseh by stating that “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house” (Gen. 41:51). Now Joseph remembers not the hardship, but the promises that God held out through the dreams.¹⁵ We should also remember that Joseph received two dreams. In the first dream, only the brothers bowed down to Joseph, as represented by the sheaves of grain (Gen. 37:7). The second dream, however, included also Joseph's parents, as represented by the sun and moon, in addition to his brothers, the stars (Gen. 37:9). By remembering his dreams, Joseph seems to be bolstered in confidence to push for the complete restoration of his entire family, including his father.¹⁶

Importantly, though, this does not mean that we should imitate Joseph's actions. This passage is telling us about God's plans for accomplishing his will among the sons of Israel without giving us a positive ethical model on how to deal with those who have hurt us. The text is not making an ethical point, but only describing how the Lord tested these brothers in order to bring them to repentance and reconciliation with Joseph.¹⁷ Specifically, Joseph put their words to the test (v. 16) by accusing them of being spies. This the brothers deny, insisting that they are all sons of the one man, and that their youngest brother is with their father, while one of their brothers is “no more” (v. 13). Joseph challenges their story, pushes them to reveal information about his family that he must have desperately wanted to learn, and then demanded that they prove their story by having one brother return to Canaan in order to fetch Benjamin and bring them back to him (v. 15–16). To let them think about this deal, Joseph puts them into custody for three days (v. 17). This begins a process of reflection, remembrance, and remorse that will carry through the rest of this passage.

The Lord Tests His People's Sin (Gen. 42:18–28)

After three days in prison, Joseph returns to his brothers and offers them a deal (v. 18a). In

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:338–339.

¹² Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 286.

¹³ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 216.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:340–341.

¹⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 520.

¹⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 210.

¹⁷ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:768.

contrast to the stern posture he took when he first met his brother, he becomes kinder and more sympathetic with his brothers.¹⁸ In other words, he now plays good cop to his previous bad cop. Joseph cites the reason for this: “for I fear God” (v. 18b). Previously, Joseph had told them to select one brother to go back to Canaan in order to bring back Benjamin, while the others would remain in prison (v. 16). Now, Joseph reverses the order, so that only one of the brothers will remain in custody, while the rest will go to bring Benjamin. Importantly, Joseph also insists that they carry back grain for the famine of their households (v. 19). We should notice that Joseph echoes the words that Jacob spoke earlier about “live” and “not die” (v. 18, 20; cf. v. 2). Jacob had expected the grain to give them life, and not death, while Joseph insists that life and death will be determined by this test.

The brothers speak amongst themselves in their own language. The Lord is using this trial to expose their sin to them, and we can see the sin rising back to their consciousness and awareness.¹⁹ So, they speak to one another about their guilt concerning Joseph. The ESV does a good job of showing that the same word is used to describe the “distress” of Joseph’s soul (distress that they ignored) and the “distress” that they are now experiencing (v. 21). This statement gives a chilling window into the scene from many years earlier. Back in chapter 37, we did not read anything about Joseph’s response to his brothers’ violence against him, but now we hear that the brothers have not been able to forget the appeals of Joseph that they ignored.²⁰ Reuben articulates what they all seem to be fearing: that they deserve a “reckoning” for Joseph’s blood (v. 22). This time, Joseph pretends not to listen to the distress of his brothers, letting his brothers think that he can only speak through his interpreter (v. 23). Nevertheless, where Joseph’s brothers were hardhearted and recalcitrant toward Joseph’s distress, Joseph is overwhelmed and must turn away from them to weep when he hears all this (v. 24). Joseph’s weeping and his concern to send back grain and money with his brothers (v. 25) proves that Joseph has a soft heart to his brothers, in spite of the seemingly hard exterior posture that he takes toward them.²¹

Even so, the discovery of the money in their sacks comes as quite a shock. When they discover it, they ask, “What is this that God has done to us?” (v. 28). Already distrusted by the governor, they worry what will happen if it is discovered that they did not leave the money with the Egyptians. Remarkably, they do not suspect Joseph. Instead, they recognize the sovereign hand of God in all this. This is an important lesson for us: When we suffer because of our sins, we must immediately do whatever business with God we must, since our temptation is instead to rage and complain against others who are circumstantially involved in our suffering.²²

The Lord Tests His People’s Fears (Gen. 42:29–38)

When the brothers return to Canaan, they report to Jacob their father all that had happened to them (v. 29). While we have already read the original account of this story, there is one interesting change from the actual events to the report of the events. Originally, the brothers had told Joseph

¹⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 408.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:343–344.

²⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 408.

²¹ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:781.

²² Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:347–348.

first of the youngest brother who remained with Jacob, and *second* of the brother who “is no more” (v. 13). Now, the brothers tell Jacob that they had spoken *first* of the one who “is no more,” and *second* of Benjamin. It is possible that this is a deliberate tactic to delay the information that will be the most upsetting for Jacob until last.²³ Instead, I think the better argument is that this is a subtle hint that what they had done to Joseph “was beginning to grate on their conscience.”²⁴ They could not help but trace their distress back to the distress they inflicted upon Joseph, and they know that God is doing something to them. God is bringing Joseph to the forefront of their minds.

This only becomes more pronounced when all the brothers open their sacks. Previously, only one brother had seen his money back in his sack (v. 27), but now that all of them open their sacks at the end of their journey, they realize that all of them have also had their money returned. When they see this, they become afraid (v. 35). Specifically, the text says that *both* the brothers *and* their father saw the money and were afraid. The best explanation to explain this is to recognize that the brothers and Jacob may be afraid for different reasons. Joseph’s brothers are becoming increasingly afraid of what God may be doing to them (cf. v. 28), but Jacob may be afraid by believing that they have gained this money by selling Simeon into slavery, just as they sold Joseph into slavery.²⁵ Further evidence for this comes when Jacob accuses the brothers for their responsibility in bereaving him of his children: Joseph, Simeon, and (if they had their way) Benjamin too.²⁶ Where previously Jacob may have been a bit paranoid to worry about sending Benjamin with the brothers (v. 4), he now sees his worst fears come true. His sons have now sold *two* of his other sons into slavery.

At this point, Jacob falters. The word order of the Hebrew have Jacob putting himself at the beginning of his statements in order to emphasize Jacob’s self-pity: “*Me* you have bereaved of my children....Against *me* all this has come” (v. 36). Where the brothers saw the providential hand of God, Jacob can only see what is happening to “me.”²⁷ Reuben attempts to offer his own sons as substitute whom Jacob may kill if Benjamin does not come back safely (v. 37), but this brings now comfort to Jacob. (How could the prospect of killing his own grandchildren offer him any comfort?) So, as the scene ends, Jacob draws a line in the sand, insisting that Benjamin will not go down to Egypt, lest Benjamin should be harmed and Jacob experience sorrow leading to death (v. 38). It will take more time and less food for Jacob to change his mind (Gen. 43:1).

Discussion Questions

1) This passage describes yet another famine in Canaan (v. 1–5; cf. Gen. 12:10; 26:1). Why do you think that God’s people so often face trials, even when they are living obediently? How does this particular trial begin the process of reconciling Joseph with his brothers and his father, Jacob? What trials have you gone through in your life? What have you seen God accomplish through those trials for your good? How might those experiences strengthen your faith for future trials?

²³ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 410.

²⁴ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 217.

²⁵ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 298.

²⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 536.

²⁷ Kidner, *Genesis*, 211.

2) What do you make of how Joseph prevents himself from being recognized by his brothers (v. 7–8)? What do you think that Joseph is trying to accomplish by pretending not to know or to understand his brothers? Why should we be careful about using this story as an example of how to treat those who have been cruel toward us? How does this passage instead show God's work in addressing the sins of Joseph's brothers, and the fears of Joseph's father, Jacob?

3) How does this narrative slowly build up the sense that God is beginning to convict Joseph's brothers for their sin? Where does this growing awareness begin? Why does this growing awareness of sin lead to fear (v. 28, 35)? In the past, how has God impressed upon your conscience a growing awareness of your sin? How does God use his word to lead us to conviction of sin? How does he use our circumstances? What is God seeking as he leads us to face our sin?

4) How does this narrative develop the theme of Jacob's fear for the safety of his beloved son, Benjamin? What traumatic event has left the once-confident Jacob so fearful? How does this narrative suggest that Jacob may have worked out what his sons did to Joseph? Why does God lead his people through situations where they must face their different fears? How has God confronted your fears in the past? How did that experience teach you to trust him more?