



Joseph's Test Continues in Jacob's Household

Read Genesis 42:29-38

Introduction

The first audience of the ten brothers with Joseph did not go smoothly at all. It almost certainly did not occur to them as they had entered Egypt that they would be singled out and accused of being spies, held in custody, with Simeon arrested before they are permitted to return to Canaan. The harsh treatment comes from this mighty ruler of Egypt who says that he is concerned for the security of the Egyptian homeland. It is nowhere in the mind of the brothers that this harsh ruler is their own younger brother Joseph, and he has recognized them very well. Their bowing before him reminds him of the dreams of several decades earlier. The rough treatment has awakened certain thoughts in their conscience, and their hearts are heavy as they return to their father Jacob.

Jacob's sons report to their father (42:29-34)

The Biblical text gives a rather lengthy description of what the ten brothers report to their father. It is important to listen to them speak, both in terms of what they say and what they do not say. They have no proper name of the Egyptian official who spoke so harshly with them. He is called "*the man who is lord over the land*" (verses 30 and 33).

There is one enormous gap in the brothers' report to Jacob. We do not hear any hint in their words of a pricked conscience. There is no hint that something from their past, hidden in the depths of their hearts but now resurfacing, should be reported. How wonderful it would sound if we read something like the following at the end of their travel report: "Father, there is something else that we have to tell you. Please sit down, for this is something that happened years ago, something very sad, and we have to confess to you a terrible thing that we did." But those words we do not hear. In Egypt, their consciences have been tested and awakened. They even talk about it with each other. But they cannot bring themselves to confess their dirty deeds to their father. Instead, they dutifully tell Jacob what they had said to the harsh Egyptian lord, "*We are honest men...*" (verse 31).

Some ironies stand out in all this. First, though they claim they are "honest," we know that they have not been wholly honest. They stand in Joseph's presence and declare that they were "*twelve brothers, sons of one father*" (verse 32). How true! Joseph — unrecognized by them — is also part of that group of "twelve." Also, in Genesis 37 they came home with money, that of their sale of Joseph. They will again come home with money, this time with their returned money in their grain sacks.

Sad confusion in Jacob's household (42:35-38)

After they have finished telling Jacob the story of their harrowing trip to buy grain, they all discover something in their grain bags, something that only one of them had found earlier on the return trip (verse 27). We read this part of the story before we hear the reaction of Jacob. The earlier discovery of the money had shaken them, but now they all — the ten brothers and their father — are frightened. We usually feel good when a store clerk gives us back too much change ... just before we point that out and return the money we should not have (if we are "honest" people!). But the household of Jacob is furthered frightened by this discovery of money. They know that they had handed over the silver to buy the grain that they have taken back from Egypt. That part was clear. But now, how in the world had that same money returned to them in their sacks of grain?

Surely the Egyptians were not so foolish as to put the money of every brother back in each grain bag. If this is truly an act of God, then what is God saying to them? Why did God do this? We might well conclude that the brothers and Jacob their father are all spooked by this.

Jacob's reaction is not first of all about his uneasiness over the returned money. For him, the crucial thing is the loss of his sons: Joseph is gone, Simeon is likely gone as well, and the loss of Benjamin now threatens. He blames his existing sons for all this: *"You have deprived me of my children!"* (verse 36). Is he implying somehow that the loss of Joseph should also be placed at their feet and accounted against them? *"Everything is against me!"* he cries out in anguish.

Reuben steps forward with a most clumsy offer. He had tried to protect Joseph earlier, almost certainly out of loving respect for his father. Now he offers to be the protector of Benjamin, holding out the prospect of his own sons as security. But how is this any comfort to Jacob? Says Reuben, *"You can kill my sons if I fail to bring Benjamin back in safety."* Most unlikely! Jacob would never be satisfied if, having lost Benjamin, that he then turns around to kill two grandsons. What is Reuben thinking?

We should not downplay the terror and fear that Jacob experiences here. He has already lost his favorite son, Joseph, and there is no promise that he will ever see Simeon again. On top of that, this harsh Egyptian lord is demanding to see his very youngest son Benjamin. Even more, Reuben offers to have his two sons executed if Benjamin does not return. Jacob's words come very close to an actual accusation against his sons when he says, *"If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in sorrow."* In effect, Jacob says that the proposed actions of his sons may well kill him. Jacob is at an advanced age, and we should not dismiss these words as overly melodramatic: his heart has been scarred, and it would not take much more for tragic events to hasten his death. The question about their guilt had actually come up earlier in a comment made by father Jacob when he cries out in verse 36, *"You have deprived me of my children; Joseph is no more ... you would take..."* His cry is almost Job-like, but with this difference: Job does not know why all this has happened in terms of what he has lost.

The mercy of the 'court'

The trouble Joseph gives his ten brothers highlights their guilt. Joseph is seeking honest men. That is what they had said they were. So now they must prove or substantiate their claim. His tests are seeking to draw out where they are really at. But Joseph also shows them mercy. Consider these facts:

1. If he really thought they are spies, he would have killed them. What ruler in the ancient world would have given it a second thought about killing people that he thought were spies?
2. Only Simeon is imprisoned after the three-day imprisonment. Again, if they are all spies, put them all in prison. But Joseph singles out only one man. This should appear merciful to them.
3. He allows grain to go with them on their return. Okay, a somewhat tolerant ruler in the ancient world might let suspicious characters go free, but what ruler would still sell them any grain at all?
4. He returned their all their money. Joseph is not after their money. He wants to know their heart. The brothers do not know that Joseph returned the money, but the readers know it, and we can only conclude that Joseph is not, in the end, displaying a selfish kind of meanness.

Joseph is testing their words for truth value. After all, they claimed that they were honest and upright men! They can easily "talk the talk," but have their lives in the past been honest and upright? We readers know otherwise, and Joseph knows otherwise. So Joseph had said in verses 15 and 16 that he would put them to through a test, an ordeal, to see whether their talk was genuine or whether it was just so much "hot air."

Joseph has two purposes in all this testing:

1. He is testing the ten men to see if a genuine *attitude* of remorse and repentance is alive in their souls. Do they see how awful their sin against Joseph had been?
2. He is also testing his brothers to see if there are *actions* of repentance as well. Will they follow through and own up to their responsibilities by bringing forth fruits that go with repentance? For example, will they later abandon Benjamin? Time will tell.

Thus Joseph's whole treatment of his ten brothers serves as a kind of sifting, a form of discipline. While Jacob does not know their crime (although he may be suspicious), Joseph does know it. By placing their money back in their grain, he has given them a trial in a kind of "take-home test." The discovery of the money serves only to keep the agitation alive in their hearts and consciences. The goal is spiritually therapeutic: if they allow their real guilt to come to the surface where they might deal with it, the healing of their hearts and their spiritual growth in holiness might move forward. If Christians wish to live and die in the joy of their only comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ, they must first know how great their sin and misery really is (see Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day one, Q/A 2). Then the splendors of grace in Christ appear so radiant and amazing. And then we are free to live the new life of thanksgiving in the joy and power of Christ's Holy Spirit.

The knowledge of God's grace is never well-known unless there is a right knowledge of our own sin and misery. The flood of joy comes when it breaks through our sin and into our dull hearts. Unconditional election by God is not the sovereign call in grace of those people who by nature are good, but of those people who are unrighteous. God justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5). Consider the power of these passages:

1. Luke 7:47: Jesus tells the Pharisee Simon, *"Her many sins have been forgiven — for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."* Horrible sins are dealt with by means of even greater grace, and that in turn draws out of us even greater love.
2. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11: Paul reminds us that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God. He also notes that through God's grace *"such were some of you."* A genuine change takes place in the lives of God's elect so that they are washed, sanctified, and justified *"in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."* Grace overcomes any kind of sin, even those that are so disgusting.
3. Ephesians 2:8-10: there is no room for human boasting, since salvation is by grace alone, not upon the basis of human works. Sin prevents our good works, even our best works, from ever being the reason that we are saved. Instead, we are God's workmanship, created for those good works in Christ Jesus. Grace alone is the firm foundation for a healthy life of good works.

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Points to ponder and discuss

1. Jacob says to his sons, *"You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more..."* How might that statement have affected these sons? Did this likely press the test of conscience even more for them? Could they now wonder if their father is suspicious about their involvement in the disappearance of Joseph?
2. Joseph has put his brothers on a kind of trial, and these are men guilty of heinous crimes. We want judges, juries, and the court system to be just. However, if we are the ones aggrieved, how easy is it for feelings of revenge to take over? Do we rejoice when the guilty are found guilty? What role does mercy play in the whole question of administering justice?

3. What is meant by "cheap grace?" If Joseph had simply welcomed his brothers with a "let bygones be bygones" attitude, would that have cheap grace? Would there still be important matters unresolved?
4. Read Psalm 32. What does it say about the sinner when he does not confess his sins? What are the blessings of confession? Isn't confession "good for the soul?"
5. Why do people allow sins to go so long without confession? What happens in families in such cases?