



# Israel's Sons Return to Egypt with Benjamin

## ***Read Genesis 43***

### **Introduction**

In Genesis 42 the sons of Jacob go to Egypt for food since the famine has hit Canaan very hard. Joseph recognizes them, and he recalls the message of his dreams. He initiates a process of testing his brothers by accusing them of being spies, imprisoning them for three days, but then sending them home. He keeps Simeon in custody, telling them they may return to Egypt only if the youngest brother comes with them. He is testing them to see if they are honest men. In fact, this test stirs up feelings of guilt as they remember what they had done to Joseph many years earlier. Even more astonishing to them is finding their money — all their money! — returned in the grain sacks they brought back from Egypt. What is God doing to them?

Genesis 43 tells us about the brothers' second visit to Egypt. Actually this visit will last through chapter 45, since their return home in Genesis 44 will be interrupted when the Egyptians discover the silver cup in the sack of Benjamin, and the brothers are brought back to Joseph for judgment. This second visit to Egypt will be amazing in terms of the many things (and people) that will be revealed.

### **Continuing stress in Israel's family (43:1-14)**

The famine has dragged on, and food resources become scarce. Israel's pantry begins to thin out. We wonder whether Israel was even able to keep many (or all) of his own servants, since there are many mouths to feed in his household. Israel (the name used for Jacob in this chapter, the name he had received from the wrestling "stranger in the night") presses his sons to return to Egypt for food. Actually, the family discussions take up the first 14 verses of this chapter, and the things they discuss are basically a repeat (with some variations) of several things mentioned in Genesis 42:30-34. Judah emerges here as the chief spokesman in talking with his father.

We have not been impressed with Judah up to this point. Judah was the brother who suggested that they sell Joseph and profit financially from their collective hatred of him. Judah then leaves the family circle, marries a Canaanite, and he begins building his own family. He appears to blame Tamar for his sons' deaths, he visits without qualms a prostitute, but he is righteously indignant when his daughter-in-law Tamar is pregnant through prostitution. Yet, for all that, the statement he makes when he is confronted with the sure evidence that he is the father of Tamar's children — *"She is more righteous than I"* — suggests that there may be some change in his own heart. Maybe, just maybe, the Holy Spirit has begun to work in Judah's heart so that his life begins to take a new direction. The twins born at the end of Genesis 38 are named Perez and Zerah. Perez means "breakthrough," and Zerah means "dawn." Has God broken through to Judah, got his attention, so that a new chapter in his life might be dawning?

We do not read of Judah again until the family is hungry, and the sons of Israel must visit Egypt to get grain. Reuben still feels guilt. What about Judah? What are his thoughts and his attitudes about what had happened to Joseph? What will Judah's actions be?

Judah points out the great dilemma that Israel's family now faces. In verses 3-5 Judah begins and ends his words by reminding his father, *"The man solemnly warned us, 'You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you.'"* Either Benjamin comes along, or the family of Israel faces slow starvation. Israel lashes out by accusing his sons of telling something they should not have mentioned. But hindsight is always 20/20, and the principle of unintended consequences seems to

apply. Is father Israel being unfair to his sons? While he does not know the precise role his sons have played in the disappearance of Joseph, he is desperate to hold onto Benjamin. But the brothers can claim, with some legitimacy, that they had no idea that the questioning by "the man" in Egypt would lead to him making this demand: *"Either the young brother comes along, or you can forget about ever getting food from me again."* The family is caught between the proverbial "rock and a hard place." But the sons of Israel are caught between two other hard places: the harsh words and demand of the "the man" in Egypt, on the one hand, and the painful lament of their father, on the other hand.

Judah's speech is very striking in verses 8-10. While we cannot be sure that he is speaking for all his brothers at this point in terms of attitude and purpose, we stand amazed that Judah readily promises to protect his half-brother Benjamin. Judah assumes full responsibility for his wellbeing, and if he should fail, Judah accepts the fact that the blame and guilt for failure will be his alone.

### **Being afraid in Joseph's house (43:15-25)**

The text is deliberate in telling us what the brothers take to Egypt: gifts, twice the amount of money, and Benjamin. They also go with their father's prayer: *"May God Almighty (El-Shaddai) grant you mercy before the man..."* All of these will play a role in terms of satisfying "the man." But it is the sight of Benjamin (verse 16) that prompts Joseph to move to another phase of his test. No longer will they be subjected to intense questioning, but they will be his guests at a feast in Joseph's house.

All that the brothers know is that they have been summoned to the man's house. They fear the worst. They recognize their own helplessness, complete vulnerability, before Joseph. That "the man" might actually love them as a true brother is the last thing in their minds. They think that he remembers the "lost" money (found in their grain sacks), and now he is vengeful, fully prepared to sell them into slavery and confiscate their donkeys. Ironical, isn't it: these brothers, who had sold Joseph into slavery, are now afraid that "the man" will sell them into slavery. They are feeling anxiety similar to what their young brother Joseph had experienced years earlier.

### **Josephs treats his brothers to a banquet (43:26-34)**

Joseph arrives at home, and the terrified sons of Israel can only act in very careful manner to show their deep humility. These are the brave men who had earlier mocked Joseph as the *"lord of dreams, that dreamer"* (Genesis 37:19). They were prepared to kill him, and they thought nothing of selling him to strangers in a murderous attempt to be rid of him. But now, they are reduced to cowering in his presence. Twice the text tells us (verses 26, 28) that they bowed down before him, further serving to fulfill the dream prophecies of Genesis 37.

Joseph almost seems to be playing the so-called "good cop, bad cop" game with them. In the first visit, he makes a strong accusation against them (*"You're all spies!"*), but he then releases them to go home with grain. Their money mysteriously (at least it is mysterious to them) appears in their sacks, prompting them to think that God had miraculously put it there. When they are ordered to Joseph's house, they fear the worst, but when they are there, they are given water to wash their feet and food for their donkeys. We might think that Joseph is toying with their emotions, "playing with their heads," so to speak. The net effect that Joseph intends is for them to be kept off-guard. At the same time, it may be that he has approved and appreciates their honesty in that they did do what he had required of them: they have brought Benjamin with them. So he now wants to feast with them, although they will not yet know the reason why.

Here then is another irony: while Joseph had pleaded with them from the pit, they had eaten a meal, completely indifferent to his cries (Genesis 37:25). But now, Joseph serves them a feast, arranging them in seating order according to their ages, oldest to the youngest. This "man" must have divine knowledge!

The brothers can only look on with more wonderment at the fact that the youngest, Benjamin, gets five times as much as they received. Why him? What is Joseph's strategy here? There may be

several things going on here at once. First, it may be simply Joseph's sheer pleasure at seeing his brother again, that, though Joseph must remain incognito, he can at least show this kindness by giving his younger brother plenty to eat and drink. People like to see those they love satisfied with good food. But secondly, this may be a subtle "special coat" strategy. Just as the special coat that Jacob had given young Joseph created jealousy and hatred from Joseph's brothers, so it may be that Joseph will pile on the benefits to Benjamin as a way to stir up whatever sinful attitudes and dark feelings that may be lingering below the surface in the half-brothers' hearts. If Benjamin gets special treatment, how will they all look upon him then? Will it be something like this, "There it is again! Another son of Rachel gets treated better than we." If Joseph has this in mind, then he is further working toward his brothers' refinement. Joseph is not tempting them to sin, but he is testing them. Once more, time will tell what really lives in their hearts.

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### **Points to ponder and discuss**

1. Judah seems to have replaced Reuben as the leader of Israel's sons. Reuben had offered two of his sons to be killed if Benjamin is not brought back home (Genesis 42:37). But Judah offers himself (Genesis 43:9, 10). Is Reuben falling to the background because of his earlier sin with Bilhah (Genesis 35:22), or because he was ineffectual as the firstborn son when he failed to protect Joseph? What has happened to Judah that might explain this change in him?
2. All of us probably know of people who show indifference or even contempt for the things of the Lord and His Kingdom in their early years. Perhaps we may have been like that ourselves. The early Judah strikes us as cold and calculating. Is it too easy for more mature Christians to give up on prodigal sons and daughters of the covenant? Is there ever a point when we may give up on them? What things can we do to keep up meaningful Christian contact and witness with them?
3. Father Israel finally sends his sons to Egypt with the prayer that God Almighty may grant them mercy before "the man." Is prayer a last resort for Israel? How do faith and trust interrelate with planning and careful thinking? How will God's power and mercy play out in this story?
4. Joseph was called "*the man who is over the land*" earlier, but in Genesis 43 he is typically called "the man." From "the man" the brothers have experienced forms of judgment (accusation, imprisonment) as well as mercy (food, returned money, freedom to go home). Like it or not, the sons of Israel must deal with "the man." To what extent do these things anticipate the (royal, kingly) work of the Lord Jesus Christ later on in history? How is Christ involved with us in both judgment and in mercy?
5. Judah's speech is so striking in terms of what he is willing to risk for both his father and his half-brother. He is willing to take responsibility for a brother, and he is prepared to assume guilt in the matter. Later on Christ is made like His brothers in every way in order to be a sympathetic High Priest for us. In what ways does Judah's speech here anticipate the (priestly) work of the Lord Jesus Christ later? What will Christ actually do to be responsible for us? What does He do with our own guilt?
6. The brothers recognizing and not recognizing one another provides us readers some very powerful drama in this story. In addition, meals play a key role at certain moments in redemptive-history. Contrast this all with great meal in the new creation, the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9). What will be the mutual recognition of Christ and of each other that will occur in the new heavens and new earth? How does Jesus Christ treat us now, and how will He treat us who were once His enemies?