

The Preserver of Life

Genesis 42-50:26

Joseph Meets His Brothers

1. The ten brothers, sent to buy grain in Egypt by their father, came to meet Joseph, whom they did not recognize, although he did still know them. Apparently he kept control of foreign sales in his own hands. The conflict was still there, but he left the time and manner of its resolution in the hands of the LORD. That he cared about his father's house, and still loved it, is shown by the name Manasseh. That he would see them again had been shown in his dreams.

The way Joseph acted shows his wisdom. He was not spiteful, but willing to forgive, particularly since the LORD had made His providence clear; but he expected to find a different attitude among his brothers.

For this reason, he began by testing them. He accused them of being spies, and demanded that one of them get the youngest brother of whom they had spoken, while the others stay behind as hostages; and to give his words strength, he imprisoned them until the third day. On the third day, however, he altered his demand, letting them depart, with grain, and keeping only Simeon in custody as a hostage until the youngest should be brought before him.

Along the way, one of them opened his bag of grain, and found the money that he was sure he had paid. Having returned to their father's camp they told of their "adventure," and, emptying their sacks, they all found their money back. A strange business, probably a mistake.

2. When they returned to Egypt, forced by the desperate situation, with Benjamin accompanying them thanks to Judah's powerful plea, they could not suspect what was in store for them this time. Had they already been driven to fear the first time, this time Joseph utterly terrified them. Although the steward of Joseph's house had welcomed them in what appeared to be a friendly manner, the way in which they were arranged around the table had amazed them; it had to cause suspicion that Egypt apparently had people who knew hidden things—not a particularly comforting thought. Benjamin was given a portion of honour, undoubtedly to test them, to see whether they still lived in hatred and envy. The hardest test, however, was that they were overtaken, after their departure, by men who wanted to drag Benjamin back as a thief, because he had supposedly stolen the silver cup used by Joseph to forecast the future—enough reason for the others to rend their garments. The test had reached its climax, and, although they were allowed to go free, they all returned, with Benjamin, to Joseph's house.

Judah pleaded that it had been very difficult to get permission for Benjamin to accompany them, and that this would probably mean the end for their father. He himself had become surety for the youngest one, and how would he be able to return to his father? He would not be able to bear the sorrow that would strike his father. Wisely, he avoided what they had done to Joseph. In this way it became clear to Joseph that, indeed, their attitude had changed.

3. Then Joseph could no longer control himself. Twice already he had left the room because of his emotions, on their first visit and on the second, but now he broke down, weeping loudly, and, as soon as none of his staff was present, he made himself known: "I am Joseph; is my father still alive?" Speechless amazement. In dismay they retreated, but Joseph told them to come near, and repeated that he was Joseph, their brother, not forgetting, though, to let them know that he still realized that they had sold him. This, however, was not an accusation, but a statement of *God's work to preserve their lives*, in view of the five years of famine still to come. No recriminations, no desire for revenge, but only comfort, sealed with a kiss for each of them. Benjamin first.

Furthermore, the LORD made it easy for Joseph to continue helping his brothers, for Pharaoh, hearing of it, commanded Joseph to let his family come to Egypt.

Jacob goes to Egypt

The good tidings, that Joseph was not only still alive, but also ruler of all of Egypt, caused the light to break through again in Jacob's darkened life. Convinced of the truth of this almost unbelievable message by the Egyptian wagons and gifts, Jacob had but one desire: to see Joseph.

Thus Israel and his now many children (as we are told later: seventy), with all his goods and cattle, migrate. At Beersheba, on the southern border of Canaan, he brings sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac, as he could remember them from his youth and later years, at the place where his fathers had brought them. There the LORD revealed Himself for the first time since the appearance at Bethel. It was during the night, in a vision. The LORD encouraged him; and promised to make a great nation of him there, bringing him up again (in his descendants); and Joseph's hand would close his eyes. Once again, Jacob was given perspective; a window, as it were, was opened, through which he could view a wonderful future.

Goshen was given to him as a dwelling place: separated from the Egyptians, to whom shepherds were an abomination. True, this was not Jacob's only source of income, but it was the major one; this the five brothers who were presented to Pharaoh had to tell him, in order to obtain this fertile area.

Jacob also met Pharaoh, and blessed him (probably temporal blessings). When asked, he said that he was 130 years old, and confessed his status as sojourner, as Abraham had done before the Hittites at Hebron.

There, in the land of Goshen, Jacob's household lived, supported during the years of famine by Joseph.

Joseph's Social Measures

Chapter forty-seven relates how Joseph took measures to preserve the famine-stricken population of Egypt. The money was gone, but he allowed them to trade their cattle and even their land, for food; finally, the men themselves excluding the priests, became Pharaoh's servants, so that from then on all of Egypt had to lease their land from Pharaoh at the cost of one-fifth of the produce. We will not judge these terms by modern standards. Scripture means to reveal Joseph as the preserver of life, also for the Egyptians, and to show him as ruler over Egypt. Not only was the church preserved, but also the world in which it lived.

Jacob's and Joseph's Last Years

For an additional seventeen years Jacob lived in Egypt, reaching the age of 147. Shortly before his death, he made Joseph swear that he would be buried with his fathers near Hebron. Joseph swore, upon which Israel bowed in prayer upon the head of his bed—bowing his head because he could no longer pull his body upright. In Hebrews 11:21 we read that in doing so he leaned upon his staff. As a father in Israel he sent up praise in prayer. The LORD received the praise due to His works.

Through faith Jacob, when his strength started to leave him, blessed Joseph's sons, having adopted them as his own sons. Other sons, however, would not be counted as sons of Jacob. Thus two tribes would come from Joseph—he would receive the portion of the first-born, twice that of the others. In blessing them, Jacob crossed his arms, to put his right hand on the head of the youngest, Ephraim, and his left on the head of Manasseh. Joseph, thinking it was a mistake tried to correct it, but Jacob refused. Manasseh would also become a people, but Ephraim, a multitude of nations.

So it happened. Joseph also received the slope of a hill, which Jacob had taken from the Amorites with his sword and his bow. The Amorites had probably taken away the piece of land that Jacob had bought from the sons of Hemor for 100 pieces of money (33:19), only to lose it again to a victorious Jacob. This is the piece of land on which Joseph was later buried (Joshua 24:32).

After this Jacob blessed his sons, each receiving his own blessing, in which the future was revealed.

Reuben did not occupy a position of leadership, never brought forth a judge, king, or prophet; his place was in the south of the Transjordan. He had sinned with Bilhah.

Simeon and Levi were the violators of Shechem. They would not receive their own portion, but would be scattered. Levi became the tribe of priests, without a tribal area; Simeon would live in the area owned by Judah.

Judah became the royal tribe, from which the LORD Jesus would come according to the flesh, Who here is called *Shiloh*—”he to whom it belongs.” In the history of this tribe, it has had priority over the others.

Zebulun later gained access to the sea, although his portion did not extend to the coast.

Issachar is called a strong ass. Perhaps this refers to this tribe’s position as trader between Phoenicia and the South.

Dan would judge Israel, because part of the tribe lived on the border with the Philistines, against whom particularly Samson fought, who began to rescue Israel. In connection with this Jacob said that he waited for the salvation of the LORD, referring to Dan’s struggle. In the background could also be Jacob’s hope for the LORD’s salvation in the last moments of his life.

Gad would pursue his pursuers. We know little of the historical fulfilment of this. The only liberator we know is Jephthah, from Dan.

Asher would inhabit a fertile area—Carmel.

Naphtalli is a hind, let loose. Neither the translation nor the explanations are clear.

Joseph is portrayed in his fruitfulness, two tribes, and the beautiful central part of the land.

Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, an indication of his brave warriors. After speaking of his funeral, Jacob died. Particularly Joseph mourned deeply, who obtained Pharaoh's permission to bury his father, with his brothers, and even the elders of Pharaoh's household and of the land of Egypt—a princely funeral, honoured in this by God.

After this, the brothers came to bow down before Joseph, offering themselves as slaves for fear that Joseph would now take revenge; at which time (a little late!) they asked for forgiveness, as (they claimed, perhaps untruthfully) Jacob had commanded them. Joseph, however, took away their fears. He would continue to support them. God had meant everything for good.

Then also Joseph died, at 110 years of age, after having made his brothers swear to carry his embalmed body back to Canaan when God would bring them up; this also happened.

The coffin in which he was laid was a sign, until the exodus, that God would fulfil His promises.

Genesis concludes with bright expectations for the future.

According to the flesh, the Christ came out of a church corrupt in itself, was cast out by His own people, and nevertheless was made a Ruler over Jacob's house; for He made reconciliation for their guilt.

This last part describes God's laughter at seeing that Christ, Who was revealed already in the actions of Joseph, both in suffering and in exaltation.

Questions

1. Joseph was ready to forgive, but would it have been right to just say, "Forget it!"? Should conflicts be hidden or resolved? Who is the important one, he who is insulted or he who insults?
2. (42:9) Does this mean that Joseph had completely forgotten them, or that he suddenly called them to mind?

3. (42:15) Was Joseph to be reprimanded for this oath?
4. (42:24) Why Simeon?
5. (42:27) What can have been Joseph's purpose in returning the money?
6. (43) Didn't Joseph "tighten the thumbscrews" a little too much?
7. (44:45) Was this a lie, or did Joseph really divine?
8. (46:3, 4) Why was Jacob afraid?
9. (46:3, 4) What does "closing the eyes" mean?
10. (47:6) Does the last sentence not conflict with the conclusion of 46:34?
11. Aren't the first three sons' blessings really curses?