

## **JOSEPH TESTS HIS BROTHERS' HONESTY** **(Genesis 42:1-38)**

Time had passed. It had been twenty years since his brothers sold Joseph into slavery. During that twenty years Joseph had served as a household steward, endured prison over a false accusation, and eventually been elevated to the role of vizier. Seven years of plenty had gone by, during which time Joseph oversaw the preservation of grain in anticipation of famine. Then the famine came. It was this famine that forced Joseph's brothers to go to Egypt to secure grain and thereby sustain their lives. Joseph was but a teenager when he was sold into slavery. Now he was the second most powerful man in the world. With the arrival of his brothers, Joseph had the opportunity to exact revenge. But vengeance was never a motive in Joseph's heart. His faith in God and his godly character protected him from such petty things. Instead, Joseph took the opportunity to test his brothers, to see if their hearts had softened over that period of twenty years. By testing his brothers, Joseph could ascertain whether or not they were ready to enter into the blessings of God. By testing them, Joseph would also help his brothers see that God is still worthy of our faith—God had meant all of these events for good (Genesis 50:20). Joseph would administer three tests. He tested his brothers' honesty (Genesis 42), jealousy (Genesis 43), and loyalty (Genesis 44). In the end, Joseph's brothers received forgiveness and Joseph achieved reconciliation. Genesis 42 presents the first test, the test of honesty. When we're honest with ourselves and others, we'll experience God's blessing. Three words capture an overview of this chapter—circumstances, conviction, and challenges.

### **Circumstances—God uses life situations to confront our broken condition (42:1-5).**

Joseph may or may not have been on the minds of his brothers over the twenty years since they sold him into slavery. But their crime needed resolution. God orchestrated circumstances in such a way as to force these men to confront their broken condition.

***Jacob ordered his sons to go to Egypt to secure grain so that they might live through the famine (42:1-2).***

The famine in Egypt actually spread much wider, encompassing the surrounding countries (Genesis 41:57). This included the land of Canaan, the home of Joseph's father and brothers. News had reached Jacob that grain was available in Egypt. Within just one season of famine Jacob's family and livestock were at risk. In a belittling tone Jacob chided his sons, asking, "Why do you keep looking at each other?" Why hadn't they taken the initiative to solve their food shortage? Jacob then ordered his sons to go to Egypt and buy grain. Jacob's expressed reason was that he and his family "may live and not die." Jacob saw the situation as a matter of life and death, forgetting the promises of God's blessing. But God would bless Jacob in ways that he couldn't have imagined.

***Only ten of Jacob's sons went to Egypt because Jacob refused to risk sending his youngest son Benjamin (42:3-5).***

Ten of Jacob's sons—Joseph's half-brothers—set out for Egypt to buy grain. Jacob refused to send Benjamin, Joseph's only full brother. Jacob feared that he might lose Benjamin, having already lost Joseph. Both Joseph and Benjamin were sons of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. Jacob couldn't bear to lose both of these sons. He also couldn't trust God to protect Benjamin in Egypt. So Jacob's other ten sons joined the throngs who were on the move in search of food in Egypt. Circumstances dictated these actions. God was working through a famine to reunite Joseph and his brothers. He was working through life's circumstances to help these brothers recognize their brokenness and their need for reconciliation.

**Conviction—acknowledging our sins is  
an essential step toward forgiveness (42:6-28).**

Joseph's brothers went to Egypt for grain to sustain their lives, but they would soon receive something more—conviction over their past sinful treatment of Joseph. This sense of conviction would eventually lead to forgiveness and restoration.

***When Joseph's brothers arrived in Egypt they bowed before him, but Joseph tested them by accusing them of being spies instead of honest men (42:6-17).***

Joseph's brothers claimed to be honest men (verses 11, 31). Joseph would test their honesty (verses 19, 33, 34). In fact, in verses 14-16 Joseph states that he is testing his brothers. He needed to know if they had changed, and they needed to know that they could become trusted family members again.

Joseph was the governor of Egypt, the one responsible for distributing grain. So when his brothers arrived in Egypt in search of grain, it's not surprising that they encountered Joseph. However, because they didn't expect to see Joseph and because Joseph would have adopted the appearance, language, and customs of the Egyptians Joseph's brothers didn't recognize him. They came before Joseph as the governor of Egypt and they bowed before him! This act of homage brought to Joseph's mind his dreams in which his family would bow in his presence (Genesis 37:5-11). Joseph recognized his brothers but didn't reveal his identity. Instead, Joseph treated his brothers as he would have treated other foreigners seeking assistance. He spoke harshly to them, inquiring about their background. Joseph's brothers honestly reported that they came from Canaan to buy grain.

Joseph began to test his brothers' honesty. He accused them of being spies who were looking for ways to undermine Egypt. But these brothers denied Joseph's accusations, claiming to be the sons of the same father and honest men at that. When pressed, they gave more details. They were originally twelve brothers living in Canaan. Their youngest brother remained behind with their father, and one brother "is no more." It's interesting that Joseph's brothers retained Joseph in their memories and brought him

up at this moment. Joseph stood by his accusation and said that he would test these brothers by their own words. He demanded to see their youngest brother. They were to choose one from among them to go back to Canaan and retrieve their youngest brother while the rest waited in prison. In this way he would “test” them for the “truth.” Joseph then put his brothers in custody for three days, presumably to think over the situation.

***When Joseph released his brothers they acknowledged to one another that they had sinned against Joseph, bringing Joseph to tears (42:18-24).***

After three days Joseph released his brothers from confinement. He changed his requirement, allowing all of his brothers but one to return to Canaan. He indicated that this change was based on his fear of God. If they complied and brought Benjamin to Egypt, they would “live,” that is, they would survive the famine. By this test, Joseph would determine whether or not these brothers were “honest men.” The ten brothers agreed to these terms. Thinking that Joseph couldn’t understand them, they acknowledged among themselves that they were being punished for their treatment of Joseph so many years ago. Apparently their three days in confinement reminded them of Joseph’s confinement in the pit from which he had pleaded for his life. They’d refused to listen at that time, but now they were the ones pleading for their lives. In that day only Reuben had planned to rescue Joseph, unbeknownst to Joseph (Genesis 37:29-30). Now Reuben reminded his brothers how he had warned them not to sin against “the boy” and that they refused to listen. Reuben concluded that they now had to give an account for his blood, probably assuming that Joseph hadn’t survived slavery.

Joseph had used an interpreter in order to keep his identity secret. Upon hearing the remorse of his brothers, and probably for the first time learning that Reuben had been his advocate, Joseph stepped out and wept. He harbored no ill will toward his brothers—he was instead touched by the fact that they had come to a place of conviction over their sin. Returning to his brothers, Joseph had Simeon bound and sent away to await the arrival of Benjamin.

***When Joseph intensified his test by putting their silver back into his brothers’ sacks of grain, his brothers fearfully concluded that God was judging them (42:25-28).***

As an additional element of Joseph’s test of his brothers’ honesty he instructed his servants to fill his brothers’ grain sacks and then put their silver into their sacks as well. Joseph would receive no payment for this grain. Instead, his brothers would fret over the presence of the silver in their sacks. Possibly the discovery of this silver would remind these brothers of the silver they received for selling Joseph into slavery. After leaving Egypt, one of these brothers opened his sack of grain and discovered the silver. This brought fear into the hearts of the rest. They concluded that God had done this as an act of judgment on them. They had claimed to be honest men, but now they were in possession of the payment money for their grain. God was indeed working in their hearts, bringing them to a place of conviction for their sins. This conviction would eventually produce reconciliation.

**Challenges—when we determine to do  
the right thing we should expect resistance (42:29-38).**

Joseph's brothers had determined to do the right thing. They planned to take Benjamin to Egypt, rescue their brother Simeon from prison, and prove themselves to be honest men. However, they had to overcome their own fears as well as those of their father Jacob.

***Jacob's sons returned home and described to their father what had taken place in Egypt (42:29-34).***

Joseph's brothers returned to their father Jacob in Canaan. They described all that had taken place on their journey. The "lord over the land" had spoken harshly and accused them of being spies. They denied these charges, claiming to be honest men, twelve brothers from the same father, one of whom was "no more" and the youngest of whom had remained at home. The lord over the land forced them to leave Simeon in custody and bring the youngest brother back to Egypt in order for these brothers to prove that they were truly honest men. Then they would be able to trade freely in Egypt.

***Jacob and his sons were frightened when they discovered that each son's silver had been placed in their sacks of grain (42:35).***

Finally the brothers began to unload their grain. To their dismay, each discovered his silver in the sacks of grain. Jacob and his sons were frightened over this. Matters had not gone smoothly in Egypt, and this new development might jeopardize any further transactions.

***Jacob accused his sons of ruining his family and concluded that everything was working against him (42:36).***

At this point Jacob lit into his sons. They had deprived him of his children. Joseph was "no more," Simeon was "no more," and now they wanted to take Benjamin away to Egypt. Jacob concluded, "Everything is against me!" He had forgotten to trust the God who had prospered him in Mesopotamia and returned him safely to Canaan so many years ago. Jacob could see nothing but tragedy. He would not lose another son.

***In spite of Reuben's assurances of protection, Jacob refused to let his sons take Benjamin to Egypt (42:37-38).***

Jacob's oldest son, Reuben, stepped in to try and appease his father. He guaranteed the safety of Benjamin, even offering to let Jacob take the lives of his two sons (Jacob's grandsons) if he so desired. Reuben's offer, while extreme, was motivated by a sincere desire to protect and restore the family. However, Jacob refused to let Benjamin go to Egypt. Benjamin was the only surviving son of Rachel, or so Jacob thought. If Jacob lost Benjamin, this would bring him to the grave in sorrow. Although these brothers were determined to rescue Simeon, their father prevented their plan. When

we commit ourselves to honesty, to doing the right thing, there will be challenges. We'll be tempted to return to our old ways. We'll face fear. We'll encounter roadblocks. But God will honor our hearts. Eventually, when we're honest with ourselves and others, we'll experience God's blessing.