

THE THINGS GOD USES

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



Catalog No. 20210411
Genesis 42
Eighth Message
Scott Grant
April 11, 2021

Genesis 42

After graduating from college, I set up an interview with a newspaper in San Francisco. Wanting to make a good impression, I dressed in the only suit I owned and made sure I arrived for the interview on time. As a matter of fact, I made too sure that I arrived on time: I got into the city about an hour early.

In order to kill time, I sauntered into a nearby pub, sat down, and watched a baseball game on the television. A gentleman next to me, who looked as if he had a few too many, decided this young guy in a suit needed a little advice.

He turned to me and said, “I’m seventy-seven years old. I’m a survivor. All my friends are dead.” He made it sound as if the death of his friends was something to boast about. Finally, he advised me, “Be a survivor!”

At that point in my life, I was pretty sure that I wanted to be more than just a survivor, and, to say the least, my new friend didn’t put me off that notion. Nothing in the ensuing years has changed my outlook. In fact, at this point in my life, I’m even less interested in survival and more interested in faith, the coronavirus notwithstanding.

In Genesis 42, a family teeters on the brink of survival. Might something more be at stake than mere survival?

Setting out for Egypt

Genesis 42:1-5:

When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you look at one another?” 2 And he said, “Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.” 3 So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt.

4 But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. 5 Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan.

The famine in the land of Canaan prompts Jacob to light a fire under his sons, who lack initiative, “so that we may live and not die.” The Lord, however, has more than mere survival in mind. By the way, the words “that we may live and not die” play a key role in the Joseph story, appearing three more times.

Jacob favors Benjamin, keeping him back from the journey to Egypt, just as he favored Joseph. Jacob hasn’t seen Joseph since sending him to check on the welfare of his brothers twenty years ago (Genesis 37). Therefore, he has no intention of parting with Benjamin, presumably the only remaining son of his favored wife, Rachel.

The brothers reacted to Jacob’s favoritism of Joseph by selling him into slavery and convincing their father that he had been killed, which raises the question, “How will they react to Jacob’s favoritism toward Benjamin?” At first, they are not said to be bothered by it: they simply set out for Egypt.

What comes of deprivation

Jacob and his sons were victims of a famine. What do you do when deprivation is thrust upon you and perhaps also on your family? You might take action to provide for yourself and your family so that you may “live and not die,” and you would be right to do so.

However, might God have something more in mind? Indeed, in the narrative, he uses a famine to reunite estranged brothers and put them on the road to reconciliation. Perhaps God would use your deprivation in ways beyond what you can imagine.

What will the brothers find in Egypt?

The tables are turned

Genesis 42:6-9a:

Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. 7 Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." 8 And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. 9 And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them.

The ten brothers haven't seen Joseph in twenty years, since he was seventeen, and have no expectation of seeing him again, so they don't recognize him. Joseph, however, recognizes them.

What is Joseph thinking when he first sees them? What's been running through his mind all these years? Has he been rehearsing in his mind what he would do to them if he ever saw them again? On the other hand, after Pharaoh promoted Joseph to governor of Egypt and after he had two sons, Joseph said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house," and, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction" (Genesis 41:51-52).

Twenty years ago, when Joseph was at the mercy of his brothers, they treated him roughly—more than roughly. Now, the tables are turned. The brothers are at the mercy of Joseph, and he treats them like strangers and speaks roughly to them.

Joseph remembers his dreams

Joseph not only recognizes his brothers, he also remembers his two dreams from twenty years ago. First, he dreamed that his brothers' sheaves of grain "bowed down" to his sheaf. Second, he dreamed that the sun, moon, and eleven stars, symbolizing his parents and his brothers, were "bowing down" to him (Genesis 37:7-11). Joseph has forgotten all the hardship brought on by his brothers, but he now remembers his dreams.

As they were plotting against Joseph, the brothers mused, "[W]e will see what will become of his dreams" (Genesis 37:20). Having sold him into slavery, they

assume they've already seen what has come of his dreams: nothing. However, twenty years later, as they bow themselves before Joseph, they're seeing something different, even if they can't see it yet. Those who sought to kill the dreams are in some ways beginning to live them out.

The dreams, apparently God-given, serve as a test for Joseph and his brothers as the realization of those dreams, or at least their partial realization, looms. What will the brothers do, now that the tables are turned? What will Joseph do, now that the tables are turned? What has happened in the hearts of these men in twenty years?

What comes of abuse

Joseph was abused by his brothers, both physically and emotionally. What do you do when you've been abused, either physically or emotionally? You might question why God would allow you to suffer in such a way and even rage at him, and you would have biblical precedent for doing so.

However, might God have something more in mind? Indeed, in the narrative, Joseph eventually concludes, after many years of sorrow and strife, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house," and, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." Perhaps God would use the abuse you've suffered in ways beyond what you can imagine.

What will Joseph do now that his brothers are standing before him after so many years?

Joseph accuses his brothers

Genesis 42:9b-14:

And he said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land." 10 They said to him, "No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. 11 We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies." 12 He said to them, "No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see." 13 And they said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan, and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is no more." 14 But Joseph said to them, "It is as I said to you. You are spies.

Joseph accuses the ten men of spying out “the nakedness of the land”—that is, its undefended parts—in order to take advantage of it, just like they took advantage of Joseph twenty years ago, by the way. As readers, we assume that Joseph knows they’re not spies. Even so, he doesn’t just speculate that they’re spies, he acts convinced that they’re spies, and he hammers home his accusation multiple times.

Joseph’s accusation has the effect of teasing out more information from his brothers. They defend themselves by identifying themselves as sons of one man, implying that a family wouldn’t risk so many sons simply to spy out the land. They claim to be “honest men,” but that wasn’t the case twenty years ago, when they deceived their father into believing Joseph had been killed. Are they now honest men? Are they repentant men? Perhaps Joseph wants to know.

Finally, the ten brothers admit that they left one brother, the youngest, back in Canaan, and that another brother “is no more.” It is, of course, more than a bit ironic that they are talking to the one whom they assume to be no more. Joseph, of course, knows that Benjamin is the missing brother, but he doesn’t know whether his brothers are telling the truth about him. They threw Joseph into a pit and then sold him into slavery. How does he know they didn’t do something similar—or worse—to Benjamin?

They feel what he felt

Genesis 42:15-17:

By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. 16 Send one of you, and let him bring your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. Or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.” 17 And he put them all together in custody for three days.

Apparently in order to test the brothers and see if they are telling the truth, Joseph demands that one of them get the youngest brother, whom he knows to be Benjamin, and bring him to Egypt. He throws them in prison, just as he had been thrown in prison in Egypt and just as he had been thrown into a pit by his brothers before that. They feel what he felt—what he felt because of their treatment of him.

Joseph changes course

Genesis 42:18-20:

On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear God: 19 if you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households, 20 and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die.” And they did so.

Joseph, after thinking things over for three days, changes course. Now he offers to send nine of the brothers back with grain to Canaan while detaining only one of them until they return with their youngest brother. Now, only one brother will remain imprisoned, echoing Joseph’s imprisonment.

Unknowingly, Joseph echoes Jacob’s words to the brothers. Jacob had urged his sons to go to Egypt and buy grain so that they “may live and not die.” Joseph offers to send them back to Canaan so that they “will live” and “not die.”

Joseph adds, intriguingly, that he fears God. Joseph is assuring the men that he is trustworthy. Are the brothers trustworthy? Do they fear God? Twenty years ago, when they sold their brother into slavery, they didn’t show much fear of God.

If they fear God, they won’t lead their father to believe that brother they left behind is no more, the way they led him to believe that Joseph is no more, and they’ll return for their brother instead of abandoning him the way they abandoned Joseph. Also, if they return with Benjamin, Joseph will know that they haven’t done away with his brother as they did away with him.

The reason for their distress

Genesis 42:21-22:

Then they said to one another, “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.” 22 And Reuben answered them, “Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.”

The brothers had claimed to be speaking honestly, and as readers we know they are telling the truth, but we also know they left out some important details, such as: if one of their brothers is no more, how did it come to be that he is no more? Joseph's machinations have now brought them to the point where they both recognize their guilt in the matter and conclude that their current plight constitutes divine retribution. If "distress" has come upon them, they conclude that it's because of the "distress" they caused Joseph.

Moreover, we only learn now that Joseph had pleaded with them and that they ignored him. The narrator has withheld this detail until now in order to show us that the brothers are coming to terms with their guilt, which is even worse than we thought.

Reuben, though not distinguishing himself with his "I told you so" routine, recognizes that they're getting what they deserve—or at least that his brothers are getting what they deserve.

Joseph listens in

Genesis 42:23-25:

They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. 24 Then he turned away from them and wept. And he returned to them and spoke to them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. 25 And Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, and to replace every man's money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. This was done for them.

The brothers thought they were talking among themselves, and as readers, so did we. Now we know that Joseph literally "listened" to them. The brothers did not "listen" to Joseph's pleas twenty years ago, but now he listens to their confession about what they did twenty years ago. Joseph hears what he wants to hear—and sees what he wants to see in his brothers.

What Joseph hears goes straight to his heart. If his dreams from long ago served to test his response to his brothers, it looks as if he's passed the test. The tears are not those of one who is bent on revenge. Nevertheless, Joseph isn't ready to reveal himself to his brothers, so he turns away to weep.

The test for the brothers continues. Simeon is selected, either by the brothers (verse 20) or by Joseph (verse 24), to stay behind.

Joseph continues testing his brothers by ordering that their money, literally their "silver," which they used to purchase grain, be placed back in their sacks. Now if they return, they will return as apparent thieves. If they had thought of abandoning Simeon, as they abandoned Joseph, they now have even more motivation for doing so. Of course, if they return, they deserve to return as criminals, not because they stole the money, of course, but because of what they did to Joseph. Returning for their brother will be a test of character.

Twenty years ago, the brothers sold Joseph for twenty shekels of silver (Genesis 37:28). When Joseph puts the silver back in their sacks, is he hoping that his brothers will remember how they profited from selling him?

What comes of dreams

Joseph had dreams. What do you do with your dreams, either the kind that come when you're asleep or the kind that come to you when you're awake, when you're hoping for something better? You might wonder how they will or won't be fulfilled, and there's no reason why you shouldn't.

However, might God have something more in mind? Indeed, in the narrative, God uses Joseph's dreams to both test and transform the hearts of Joseph and his brothers. Perhaps God would use your dreams in ways beyond what you can imagine.

The brothers set out for the return trip to Canaan, but what will they do when they discover the money in their sacks?

Their hearts fail them

Genesis 42:26-28:

Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. 27 And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money in the mouth of his sack. 28 He said to his brothers, "My money has been put back; here it is in the mouth of my sack!" At this their hearts failed them, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?"

Their hearts sink because they realize that they'll likely be taken for thieves if they return to Egypt to retrieve Simeon and buy more grain. If Joseph imprisoned all of them apparently because he didn't trust them, what will he do once he discovers that they more or less stole the grain? And what are their chances for buying more grain from a man they apparently cheated?

They wonder, "What is this that God has done to us?" For the first time since they sold Joseph into slavery, they invoke the name of God. On the one hand, we know that Joseph did this to them, ordering that their silver be returned to their sacks. On the other hand, the brothers speak more than they know, because God is working out his purposes for this family. Joseph said he fears God. Do his brothers fear God?

They will have trouble making anything good of this themselves. God, whom they now recognize, will have to do something.

The brothers report back

Genesis 42:29-34:

When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, 30 "The man, the lord of the land, spoke roughly to us and took us to be spies of the land. 31 But we said to him, 'We are honest men; we have never been spies. 32 We are twelve brothers, sons of our father. One is no more, and the youngest is this day with our father in the land of Canaan.' 33 Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, and take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. 34 Bring your youngest brother to me. Then I shall know that you are not spies but honest men, and I will deliver your brother to you, and you shall trade in the land.'"

The brothers, who were dispatched to Egypt by Jacob, now report back to their father, leaving out, of course, how one of the brothers came to be no more. Perhaps the brothers are beginning to come to terms with what they did to Joseph, but they're not ready to come clean with their father. They also leave out the fact that one of them found his money in the mouth of his sack.

Jacob collapses in self-pity

Genesis 42:35-36:

As they emptied their sacks, behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack. And when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were afraid. 36 And Jacob their father said to them, "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me."

Joseph was testing his brothers to see if they are "honest" men, and when Jacob sees the silver he gave his sons to buy grain pouring out of their sacks, he has to be questioning their integrity. Jacob's sons come off as guilty as sin.

Jacob now all but implicates them in Joseph's apparent death when he says, "You have bereaved me of my children"—meaning, Joseph and Simeon. Moreover, even though his sons said Simeon was being held in Egypt, Jacob suspects them and assigns Simeon to the same fate as Joseph: "Simeon is no more." If he refused to part with Benjamin before his sons' trip to Egypt, Jacob has all the more reason to keep him back now.

Jacob collapses in self-pity, saying, "All this has come against me." "All this"—and he still doesn't know what his sons did to Joseph and how they lied to him.

Joseph won't part with Simeon or sell the family more grain unless the brothers produce Benjamin, but Jacob won't part with Benjamin. The brothers are caught between Joseph and Benjamin, both of whom have their heels dug in. Can anyone break this stalemate?

Reuben tries to break the stalemate

Genesis 42:37-38:

Then Reuben said to his father, "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." 38 But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol."

Reuben tries to break the stalemate with an outrageously foolish proposal. Why does he think his offer to possibly kill his two sons, Jacob's grandsons, will persuade his father, who has just accused Reuben and his brothers of bereaving him of two of his sons?

Jacob, not surprisingly, rejects Reuben's proposal out of hand. He also betrays his favoritism again, saying that Benjamin "is the only one left" and the only son whose loss would cause him to grieve the way he grieved when he discerned that he had lost Joseph (Genesis 37:35).

What about Jacob's charge to his sons at the beginning of Genesis 42 to go to Egypt so that "we may live and not die"? Jacob, thinking only of himself, now chooses death over life, and though he may think that Simeon is a lost cause, in reality he is letting his son languish in prison in a foreign land.

Whatever Joseph hoped to accomplish by holding Simeon for ransom, putting the brothers' money back in their sacks, and demanding the presence of Benjamin is going nowhere fast.

What comes of loss

Jacob suffered loss. What do you do when you suffer loss? You might say something like, "All this has come against me," and you might take measures to guard against future loss, and you would have lots of company in doing so.

However, might God have something more in mind? Indeed, in the narrative, God uses Jacob's loss to teach him to loosen his grip on what he held so tightly and to deepen his faith. Perhaps God would use loss in ways beyond what you can imagine.

God uses everything for something

Both Joseph and his brothers make mention of God in Genesis 42. Joseph says, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God." The brothers ask, "What is this that God has done to us?" They at least acknowledge God, which means, especially from the perspective of the narrative, that God is up to something.

When I left the Bay Area in 1990, I thought I'd never come back. Three years later, though, I came back—

temporarily, I thought—for a relationship. While I was trying to make the relationship work out, a church was looking for a pastor. The relationship didn't work out, but the church worked out pretty well. Twenty-seven years later, I'm still at that church. That church is this church. I like to say that God pulled the old bait and switch. God used my "temporary" return in ways beyond what I could imagine.

God is always up to something, and he's always up to something more than we know. If we can believe that he's up to something more than we know, we can live with a sense of hopeful anticipation instead of a sense of impending doom. God uses everything for something. In this narrative, he uses famine, abuse, dreams, and loss.

Twists and turns

The famine prompted Jacob to dispatch his sons to Egypt with these words: "so that we may live and not die." However, God had something more than mere survival in mind. No doubt he had many things in mind.

Most importantly he was moving the story of Abraham's family forward so that, through countless twists and turns, stops and starts, dead ends and false finishes, some two thousand years later, the family would give birth to a child who would grow up to say these words: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

God had, and has, more than survival in mind; more importantly, he also had, and has, eternal life in mind.

All those who believe in Jesus are children of Abraham, according to the Scriptures (Galatians 3:29). God continues to move the story of Abraham's family forward, through countless twists and turns, stops and starts, dead ends and false finishes, and even famines and pandemics, until the day Jesus comes again and we hear these words coming from the throne of God: "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). Who knows how God is using the current pandemic, even now, to get us to that day?

God uses everything for something—in the end, something eternally good. Therefore, live hopefully.