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The Family of Abraham: Part 32—The Brothers Go Down to Egypt

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Today, I discuss Genesis 42 and Joseph's brothers' first journey down to Egypt.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 32nd in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 42 of the book of Genesis, in which Joseph's brothers travel down to Egypt, and there Joseph encounters them for the first time since he was sold into Egypt, and he presumes by them. As we read this narrative, we need to pay attention to the way in which characters are switched in their roles.

And so people are placed in different positions, but in positions that recall the positions that they put others in. Now, partly this is by divine providence, but also it's by human design, specifically that of Joseph, that Joseph places his brothers in a position where they are in a position similar to the one that they placed him in. They're also

experiencing a position similar to the one that they had originally when they sold him into slavery.

And the question is, how will they act in this situation? Will they follow the same pattern of behavior that they did formally, or will they change their behavior? The chapter begins with the situation of the family in the land. Jacob's sending his sons down to Egypt to buy grain. He wants to buy, not just beg grain.

They have money to bring. They're not going to be just dependent upon the Egyptians, but they will bring money. And he sends 10 of his sons, all of his sons, except for Benjamin.

Benjamin, he keeps near to him. He knows that he's already lost one son. He does not want to lose another.

That's quite possible. Benjamin has been born after Joseph went down to Egypt. The chronology is not always linear within these chapters.

He goes down, he sends these 10 sons down to Egypt, and presumably Benjamin is kept back, in part because he doesn't trust the brothers, in part because he doesn't want any accident to befall him. And Benjamin has become the apple of his eye. Now that Joseph is gone, Benjamin is all that remains to him of Rachel, all that remains of the loved wife, and he's not going to let Benjamin out of his sight.

And so Benjamin is protected at this point, and the other brothers are sent down to Egypt. At that point, Joseph is now the governor of the land, and all the people around about come to Joseph to buy bread. And Joseph's brothers see him, and then they bow down before him, their faces to the ground.

And he recognises them, but they do not recognise him. We've seen this theme of recognition in previous chapters, recognition and disguise. Joseph here is disguised to his brothers, but he recognises them.

Think back to the story of Judah and Tamar. There is a sort of disguise and deception, or the story of Esau and Jacob, and the blessing of Isaac, or the story of the sale of Joseph, where they present the bloody garments to their father and say, recognise please. Now, they are in a similar position now, they do not recognise, but Joseph recognises.

We need to think back on that previous story and see the way the themes are being inverted and played with here. And at this point, he remembers his dreams, and his remembrance of his dreams is significant. It doesn't necessarily mean that the dreams don't necessarily stipulate what's going to happen.

What they do is they present that particular event, that particular occurrence as one that is of divine design. And the question that Joseph must ask at this point is, what is the

meaning? God is clearly at action, at work in this. God clearly has intentions in this encounter.

What are God's intentions? How should I handle this situation? The dreams do not answer that question. Now, if he thought back to the dreams of Pharaoh, perhaps he would find some answers. And I mentioned that in the previous discussion, that within those dreams to Pharaoh and the ugly cows eating up the beautiful, attractive cows, there is the hope, a way of thinking about that, that the good cows are devoured by the ugly cows, not in order that all might be lost, but that all might make it through.

And that's the way that in relationship to the famine, Joseph interprets things. He interprets the famine and the dream in relationship to the famine as the good years providing for the ugly years, and that through the provision made by the beautiful years to the ugly years, all might pass through and survive. And in a similar way, he can interpret his dreams in that light.

So his brothers bow to him. He recognises that this is a moment where divine intention is foregrounded. God has an intent, a purpose within this event, within this encounter.

What is he going to do? And so he starts off by bringing an accusation against them. Clearly he's playing a part here. He says, you are spies.

You have come to see the nakedness of the land. That accusation, why might he bring that particular accusation? What was the first thing that set his brothers against him? He was accused of bringing a bad report against the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. And in that bad report, he was acting as a spy, as someone who is inspecting them for his father and bringing back a bad report.

And that led to them turning against him. Now they are accused of being spies. And they protest.

No, we're all one man's sons. We're honest men. Your servants are not spies.

No, but you have come to see the nakedness of the land. And he insists. And at this point, what he's doing is he's putting them in a position where they have to disclose and be open with him in order to deliver themselves from this charge.

He's not just inquiring. He's putting them in a position where they have to protest their innocence, where they have to present the truth of the situation. And through that, he will get information from them without actually putting them on their guard.

They still think he's the ruler of the land. If he was speaking to them as if someone who's trying to get information out of them in a more direct way, they might cotton on that this is a strange set of questions to be asking. Why is this Egyptian official taking such an interest in our family? But presented this way, they are going to disclose information

because they have to prove their innocence.

And so the fact that they are all sons of the one father, that they're brothers, and giving more details about their family, that helps establish their innocence. And Joseph is savvy in taking this sort of approach. It leaves them, they're not witting as to his identity.

It doesn't put him in a position where he's trying to get information in a way that is more direct that might expose his true identity. But it also puts them in a position where they want to disclose as much as possible that might establish their innocence. And so they present themselves as all the sons of the same man.

And then they give more information about their family. Your servants are 12 brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan. And in fact, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more.

And Joseph insists, it is as I spoke to you saying, you are spies. In this manner you shall be tested by the life of Pharaoh. You shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here.

Why is he asking them to bring Benjamin? Is it just to establish the truth of their story? To an extent it is. Is that son still with their father? Or are they lying about that? We saw how they dealt with the other son of Rachel. And we saw how Reuben slept with Bilhah after Benjamin was born and Rachel died.

That he's trying to usurp the position of Benjamin within the family. They've usurped the position of Joseph and the favoured sons of Rachel. So at this point, maybe Joseph is thinking in part, is Benjamin really safe? They've come, all of them, without Benjamin.

Where is Benjamin? Has he been killed too? Has he been sold into slavery? Or is he really at home with father? And that question is probably one that weighs heavily upon Joseph at this point. And so he puts them in prison and says, one of you will go collect your brother and bring him back here. And that tests their words.

It will see how they act towards that brother. And maybe just for Benjamin's safekeeping, that if they prove to be of the same disreputable character, that he has all of them in prison. One of them goes back, brings Benjamin, and he takes Benjamin and keeps him safe while the other brothers have to go back to Canaan.

That might be part of his plot, part of his plan. Just as a contingency option, having Benjamin in hand might be a way of protecting him. So he puts them all in prison three days.

Again, three days. We've had three days in the case of the baker and the butler or cut bearer. And we have three birthdays of Pharaoh referenced.

And now we have three days that they are placed in prison. Three days as a period of where they will be raised up on the third day, or there will be some change of status on the third day. And Joseph said to them the third day, do this and live for I fear God.

If you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined to your prison house, but you go and carry grain for the famine of your houses and bring your youngest brother to me so that your words will be verified and you shall not die. And they did so. And then they start talking among themselves.

We are truly guilty concerning our brother for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us and we would not hear. Therefore this distress has come upon us. And Reuben answered them saying, did I not speak to you saying, do not sin against the boy and you would not listen.

Therefore, behold, his blood is now required of us. Recall the meaning of Reuben's name. Reuben's name means the Lord has surely looked on my affliction.

Now, therefore, my husband will love me. And his name literally means see a son. It's a sign that God has shown compassion to her, that God has seen the position that she's in and taken notice.

And this is the meaning that Reuben has to his name. Will he act in a way that reflects that meaning? Now, when he saw Joseph, he did take compassion upon Joseph. He sought to deliver him and it did not work out.

He was foiled by the Midianites. But at this point, as he can talk with the other brothers, he reveals his character and Joseph hears. He doesn't know that Joseph understands, but Joseph understands what he is saying.

And then he chooses to take Simeon. Simeon's name means, because the Lord has heard that I am unloved, he has therefore given me this son also. His name is Simeon, meaning heard.

Now, Simeon was a key one of the brothers. He was the second in line to Reuben. Reuben's really been ruled out because of his actions with Bilhah.

But Simeon seems to be next in line. How is he going to behave? Well, he was someone who didn't really take any notice. God had that his mother had been unloved.

God had heard and seen that she was unloved and taken action. And that's the meaning of Simeon's name. And yet he does not live out the meaning of his name in respect to Joseph.

He took no notice of Joseph and was quite happy for him to be killed and then sold into slavery. So Simeon is kept. It's also probable that there are two other factors here.

First, Reuben has shown himself to be a bit slightly better character than Joseph might have expected. Joseph knows that Reuben is the oldest and Reuben, he might have pinned the blame upon Reuben, but now he knows that Reuben actually interceded for him, wanted to protect him. And so Simeon's next in line.

He's the one who would be seen as the next leader of the brothers. Although as we read the story, it seems Judah was the one. And we've read in chapter 38 how Judah plays out these things.

So we have Reuben, Simeon, and Levi is not mentioned, but Judah next in the line. Simeon is also the second son of Leah. And so the second son of Leah in exchange for the second son of Rachel, do they value the second son of their mother as much as he values the second son of his mother? Will they bring Benjamin back to him if he takes the second born of their line of the family? So there may be part of that going on as well.

Joseph gives a command to fill their sacks with grain and to restore every man's money to his sack and to give them provisions for the journey. And he does that. And they load their donkeys and on the way at the encampment, one of them opens his sack to feed his donkey and finds that his money there is there in the mouth of his sack.

And they're all afraid when they see this. Something's gone wrong. Now there may be a number of things going on there, but I think one of the things that it would bring to mind is the fact that they've left one brother behind in Egypt and they're coming back with money in their sacks.

What is their father going to think about this? Have they sold Simeon? Another question might be how are they going to return when they've got this money put in their sacks? How are they going to return and get Simeon when they may look like not just spies but thieves? What is going on in that? And they may be concerned about that. Also the way that this seems to be a trap set for them and they know that if they go back to Egypt to get their brother, they may be in trouble. From Joseph's perspective, it might also serve the purpose of giving them an incentive not to come back.

They've got money. Why would they return for their brother? And so it's a test. Will they return even though they've got money for the supposed sale of their brother? Are they prepared for their gain to leave their brother behind or will they be honest and return with the money? That is perhaps another part of the test.

Then they arrive at the house of Jacob and they tell him about the man who's the lord of the land, the man who is this figure who tested them and this figure who's unknown to them. They don't know that it's Joseph of course and talk about all his accusations and everything. And they mention that they were 12 sons etc and the requirement that the youngest brother is brought to them.

And then they empty their sacks and it's not just one of them but every single one of them has the money in their sacks and they're afraid. And they're probably afraid for different reasons. They are afraid for some reasons and their father is afraid for other reasons.

He has already sent a brother out to these brothers and ended up receiving just a bloodied coat in return. Now he sees the brothers come back with all this grain and with lots of silver as well. Where did this silver come from? They have a story to explain it that they must have put it back in our sacks.

But there are two parts to their story. There's the part of the story where Simeon is taken and put in prison and then there's the part where oh the Egyptians put this money back in our sacks. It's a mystery both of them but Jacob might put those two things together and think have my sons sold Simeon into slavery and taken this money back? Am I actually seeing evidence that what did they take me for? Do they think I'm a fool? Do they think that they can hoodwink me this easily? That it's just I'm going to take their word for the fact that oh this man of the land had a great interest in our family kept back Simeon and oh put lots of money in our sacks as well.

It's a strange story and that strange story does not sit well with Jacob as I think we'll see as we go through. Jacob responds to them you have bereaved me of my children. Joseph is no more.

Simeon is no more and you want to take Benjamin away? All these things are against me. So at this point Joseph has been taken. Simeon has been taken and he says you have bereaved me of my children.

The suggestion is this is not just Simeon that you've taken from me. You've also taken Joseph and as I look back I will cast the blame on you for that as well as for this. It casts that previous event in a new light.

Maybe Jacob had not thought about it that way before but originally he thought it was a wild beast that had torn Joseph and now he's seen it. He sees them returning with money and Simeon left behind. Suddenly he considers the other possibility.

He puts two and two together in the case of the money in the sack and Simeon being left behind and then he adds that with the situation with Joseph and this horrifying picture emerges and in this horrifying picture he realises something about the character of his sons. Reuben the firstborn tries to speak into the situation. 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. Again think about what's taking place there. He's offering to kill Jacob's two grandsons in exchange for Benjamin if he does not bring Benjamin back.

That's a strange sort of bargaining. I mean it's not maybe Reuben isn't the sharpest tool in the box. He means well perhaps but this is not the best bargaining ploy and as he speaks to his father there's also a bind that he's in here.

Can he honestly say we are innocent in the case of Simeon and protest also innocence in the case of Joseph? No. The fact that there's guilt with respect to one of those disappearing sons makes it very difficult to protest innocence in both of those cases and so this extreme statement has to be made. Two sons be killed in exchange for Benjamin because he knows that they are complicit in at least the loss of Joseph.

Another thing to notice here that there are two sons that are seemingly taken. Two sons that seemingly die and one son has to be given to this masked person. This masked person in the hope that they might get at least one of those sons back.

Think back to the story of Judah and Tamar because there we see a similar theme playing out. There are two sons that die and then there's this figure of Tamar who seems to be this black widow character. Is this widow just the bad luck of the family? Maybe keep her well away because everyone she seems to be in relations with dies.

She's already taken two of my sons thinks Judah. Why should I give her Sheila as well? But yet he has to give that final son to Tamar to get back those two sons at the end. Now of course it plays out slightly differently because he has relations with this masked figure and again there are themes of recognition and return within that narrative.

And Jacob at this point his eyes are more open to what his sons are like and he says my son shall not go down with you for his brother is dead and he is left alone. If any calamity should befall him along the way in which you go then you would bring down my gray hair with sorrow to the grave. Listen very carefully to the words that Jacob uses.

At this point I think it's clear to him that there is something very ugly going on with his sons but the way that he speaks about Benjamin is quietly devastating. My son shall not go down with you for his brother is dead. Think about what he's saying.

My son, not your brother and my son over against you. This is my son. You I'm not even sure what to consider you as anymore.

I'm disgusted by you and I'm appalled and I'm fearful of you. You're destroying my sons. You're destroying my family and seeking to usurp me.

I'm not going to entrust Benjamin to you. His brother is dead. Not your brother, his brother.

Again there's this shrinking down to just Rachel and her children. It's as if the other half of the family is disowned. They've acted in a way that is so wicked that it seems that they're cut off at this point.

At least in his emotions and his mind. He no longer sees them as his sons in the same way. His family has been shrunk down to Benjamin alone.

He's the only one and he is not about to send him into Egypt with these awful brothers. These sons that would devour his other sons. So he's got two sons that are seemingly lost.

He's had the firstborn of Rachel and the second born of Leah and the first born of Leah is now saying kill my two sons. This exaggerated offer suggests why would he make such an exaggerated offer unless something of his guilt was clear. Unless his father suspected that he was involved in the whole affair.

At this point the brothers are placed in a very difficult position and I think in part by Joseph's design. The question is will they be prepared to leave Simeon in slavery in Egypt and have the gold in their possession or the silver in their possession just as Joseph was sold for pieces of silver or will they return to get their son or get their brother? Will they return with Benjamin proving that they have not destroyed him too? Will they show that they are telling the truth or will they prove themselves to be the characters that they have suggested that they are previously? And the question is also there for Jacob too. He has to test his sons.

He does not know where he stands with his sons now. He suspects very strongly that they have devoured his family, that they are devouring his family and now he's asked will you trust Benjamin? These questions are also questions that put them in a very different position. As I mentioned at the beginning we are seeing similar stories playing out with the roles being switched.

It's like a sort of musical chairs and as the roles are switched the question is placed in the position that you place someone else how will you act? Will you act in a way that shows recognition of what you did to them? Will you act in a way that shows that you want to set right what you once did? Now the brothers recognize that in what's happening to them they are receiving something of a return for what they did to Joseph. The question is how will they act? Recognizing that symmetry will they respond in an ethical a righteous way or will they seek their own gain? Will they act in accordance with the character that they manifested back in chapter 37 or will they be people who seek to repent and set things right? When their sin is disclosed to their father or at least suspected by their father how will they act in that situation as it's disclosed? Will they show a concern for Benjamin that they did not show in the case of Joseph? And all of these questions are being posed to them by the situation that Joseph places them in. But behind this we also need to notice that God is placing Joseph in a position.

Not only is Joseph placing the brothers in a position God has placed Joseph in a position and at that very moment God gives Joseph that flood of memories coming back. Suddenly he remembers his dreams. He's forgotten his father's house.

He speaks about that as he names his sons. But now suddenly these memories flood back. His brothers bow to him and suddenly he's plunged into the world that he was in as a 17 year old.

What is going to happen? What is he going to do? God's intent is clearly here but will he be able to act in a way that fulfills the purpose for which God has sent him? Will he be one who has the devoured beautiful son is able to bring life to the ugly sons and through putting them in a particular situation provide for their redemption? As we read I think we'll see the answer to this question. Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow.

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