

BOB HALLMAN - THE EPIC LIFE

“The Testing Of Hearts”

Genesis 42:1-38

2003

Introduction

As I read it, God has at least four goals in Genesis chapter 42:

1. To bring Joseph's brothers to repentance
Will they come clean on their 20 year-old lie?

2. To test and affirm Joseph's heart of mercy and reconciliation
Will he exact vengeance or show mercy on his brothers?

3. To test and stretch Jacob's faith in a time of crisis
Will he continue to live his life dominated by fear or will he trust in God?

4. To advance His divine and eternal plan of salvation!

I The Adversity Of Famine

The predicted famine in Egypt arrived and affected not only Egypt but, as we're told in Gen 41:57, the entire world as well. Jacob and his family lived 250 miles from Egypt in the land of Canaan and were facing the same famine. And as the months drifted into years, their reserves were dangerously depleted and the situation became serious.

As shocking as it might be, Ps 105:16 tells us that God himself “called down famine on the land” of Egypt.

God not only uses trials and adversity in our lives -- sometimes He is the source of them. The question is, “For what purpose?”

1. To turn us away from sin and back to God
Amos 4:6-8 “I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD. "I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.”

2. To strengthen our character
James 1:2-4 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

3. To test and refine our faith

1 Pet 1:6-7 “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith -- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire -- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

“Adversity is like a knife: It either serves us or cuts us depending on whether we grab it by the handle or by the blade.”

A. Jacob learned that there was **grain** in Egypt [Verse 1]

B. Jacob sent his sons to buy grain in Egypt [Verse 2]

Acts 7:11-13 “Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit.”

C. Jacob **refused** to send Benjamin [Verse 3-5]

1. He was afraid that harm would come to him

It’s evident that Jacob was a man controlled not only by favoritism, but also by fear. He had already lost his favorite wife. Then he lost his favorite son. He was determined to prevent the loss of Benjamin who was his final link to Rachel.

II The Testing Of Hearts

A. Joseph was governor of Egypt [Verse 6]

1. His brothers **bowed down** to him

Bowed down = Shachah = “To prostrate one’s self in homage”

Without realizing they were fulfilling the prophecy of Joseph’s two dreams years before (Genesis 37:6-11).

Now, this was the moment of truth: How would Joseph respond?

He had had at least 20 years to consider what he would do if and when this moment presented itself. And now, here it was!

You see the greatest test of Joseph’s life occurred not when he was laid low by injustice, but when he was given unlimited power over his wicked brothers.

Would he use his God-given power to seek revenge against them?

Or would he use it for the purpose of saving the nation Israel from famine?

As Abraham Lincoln once said, “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.”

Application:

We all have some position of authority or power that God has entrusted to us:
How are you using it? For selfish ends? Or for the glory of God?

B. Joseph recognized his brothers, but: [Verse 7-9]

1. He pretended to be a stranger
2. He spoke harshly to them and questioned them
Prov 18:23 “A poor man pleads for mercy, but a rich man answers harshly.”

3. They did not recognize him

How is this possible?

Remember, the last time the brothers had seen Joseph he was a 17 year old boy who was in a position of weakness -- pleading for mercy as he was carried off by the Midianites who had purchased him for 20 pieces of silver.

On the other hand, the man in front of them was:

- Almost 40 years old
- The governor of all of Egypt
- Wearing the royal clothing of a king
- Confident, powerful and speaking in the language of the Egyptians

The text indicates that all of Joseph’s communication with his brothers was relayed through an interpreter.

Illustration: If you’re still not sure how they could have been confused as to Joseph’s identity, you haven’t yet been to your 25 high school class reunion!

4. Joseph then remembered his dream

As you will recall from Genesis 37:5-9, God gave Joseph two dreams indicating that Joseph would eventually be elevated to a status of authority over his father, mother and own brothers.

5. Accused them of being spies

Why did Joseph do this? Was it just a cruel act of vengeance – the product of 20 years of bitterness and unforgiveness? I don’t believe so!

I believe Joseph’s purpose in speaking harshly and accusing them of spying was not motivated by bitterness at all, but by a desire ...:

- a. To covertly discover information regarding the health and well-being of his father, Jacob, and his younger brother, Benjamin.
- b. To be used by God to:
 1. Confront his brother’s sin against him 20 years earlier
 2. Free them from their guilt by guiding them into confession and repentance
 3. Reconcile them to himself, Jacob and ultimately to God.

Application: God's discipline

Heb 12:5-7, 11 "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons ... No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

C. Joseph's brothers protested [Verse 10-13]

1. We are your servants, **honest** men, not spies

They are *not* honest men. They had sold Joseph to the Midianites out of jealousy, lied to their father about his death and held this ugly secret for over 20 years.

2. We are 12 brothers, all sons of one man

They were saying, "This is absurd! What spy would travel with his brothers and in a group of ten?" A good spy wants to blend in, be inconspicuous.

3. We have a younger brother and one is **no more**

This, of course, was a lie! They had every reason to believe that Joseph was not dead, but living a horrible life of slavery. Even 20 years of lying couldn't convince them that Joseph was actually dead.

D. Joseph put his brothers in **custody for three days [Verse 14-17]**

Joseph narrowed the possible options down to two:

1. Either they were spies and were lying about a younger brother.
2. Or they were telling the truth and could easily prove it by bringing Benjamin.

Now why did Joseph throw them in prison?

- a. To bring them to the end of themselves

Joseph knew his brothers well enough to know that it would take some serious pressure to get his brothers to crack. He knew that they would never be right until they confessed and repented of their sins.

Prov 19:23 "The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble."

Three days they thought about their situation. For three days they experienced a small taste of what they had inflicted on Joseph when they sold him into Egypt. And now they are brought before Joseph again.

E. Joseph permitted his brothers to return home with grain [Verse 18-20]

1. But they were to return with Benjamin

- a. So that their words could be **verified**

- b. So that they would not **die**

So while they were initially told that all must remain captive while one would be allowed to return home for Benjamin, now all but one could return to the land of Canaan with grain to keep the family alive.

III The Power Of Guilt

A. We are being **punished** because of Joseph [Verse 21]

1. We would not listen to him

Guilty = 'ashem = Where we get our English word, "Ashamed"

Prov 28:17 "A man tormented by the guilt of murder will be a fugitive till death."

This conversation reveals something very significant. Twenty years had past and their lives had gone on. But their past sin continued to haunt them.

It was like a paint job on a moldy wall -- you can cover the problem, but you don't get rid of it.

Illustration:

The IRS has something called the Federal Conscience Fund, which collects money people send in because they know they have cheated the government in some way. One man wrote the IRS and said, "I cheated on my taxes and can't sleep at night. Here is a check for \$100. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest I owe."

Application: Eccl 12:14 "For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

Num 32:23 "... you may be sure that your sin will find you out."

What is nagging at your conscience?

Someone you made fun of as kids? Someone you lied to or deceived?

Someone you violated in some way but never made right?

You have a choice: You can either:

1. Be plagued and haunted by your guilt, OR ...

2. Go back, confess and repent of your sin and be reconciled

B. Rueben rebuked his brothers [Verse 22]

1. They should not have sinned against the boy

2. They would have to give an account

In essence, Rueben's message was, "I told you so!"

This entire conversation took place right in front of Joseph who understood every word. All along he had used an interpreter, giving them the impression that this "Egyptian" could not speak their language.

C. Joseph's response: [Verse 23-26]

1. He understood them and **wept**

As Joseph witnesses this work of God in the conscience of his brothers, he is overcome with emotion.

Application: The joy and power of being party to a Divine appointment!

2. He had Simeon **bound** before their eyes

Why Simeon?

Simeon was the second oldest of the 12 sons of Jacob. Rueben was the oldest, but if you recall, Rueben was off somewhere when the rest of the brothers sold Joseph to the Midianites. Which would have meant that Simeon, being the second oldest, would have been responsible for their collective wickedness.

Why did Joseph want to keep one of the brothers?

As leverage and to see if they were willing to desert Simeon like they had Joseph.

3. He ordered his men to:

- a. Fill their bags with grain
- b. Put each man's silver back in his sack
- c. Give them provisions for their journey

Why did Joseph do this?

1. A test of honesty? Yes!
2. But also a demonstration of grace [Getting something we don't deserve]
Rom 12:20-21 "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

D. The brother's discovery: [Verse 27-35]

1. They found the silver in their sacks
2. Their hearts sank and they trembled with fear

Trembled with fear = Charad = "To shudder with terror"

Their fear is an encouraging sign. Wicked men would have laughed at the stupidity of the servant who evidently had misplaced the payment. But these men were terrified because they are already suspected of being spies. Now they might be accused as thieves as well!

3. They **blamed** God and told their father

Interestingly, this is the first mention of God by the brothers in this chapter. And when they do mention Him, they assume that He is the source of their problems!

Application:

Prov 19:3 "A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD."

E. Jacob's response: [Verse 36]

1. He was **frightened** and blamed his sons
Frightened = Yare' = "To be in deep dread"
"You deprived me of my children!"

I'm guessing that Jacob had nagging doubts about the story his sons had told him twenty years earlier about the tragic death of Joseph.

2. He spiraled into **self-pity**

Here is a study in contrasts:

While adversity drew Joseph closer to God, for Jacob it seemed to destroy his faith.

Jacob cried out in agony of soul, **"Everything is against me!"** Some believers are like that – very pessimistic and very negative.

But for the follower of Jesus, our cry during times of adversity should be Rom 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

F. Rueben's sacrificial offer: [Verse 37]

1. He offered his sons in place of Benjamin
2. He gave Jacob his word to return with Benjamin

G. Jacob **refused** [Verse 38]

Do you understand the high price Jacob paid for his fear?

1. He delayed sending his sons back to Egypt for more supplies
2. He prolonged the imprisonment of his son, Simeon
3. He delayed the miraculous and joyful reunion with his son, Joseph

Application:

I wonder what wonderful blessings we might be delaying in our lives because we live in fear rather than faith in God.

So, how do you overcome fear?

1. Confess your fears to God.
2. Mediate on God's past faithfulness
3. Memorize and believe in God's promises

Rom 4:20-21 "Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."

4. Remember that God is always with you

Isa 41:10 "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Conclusion

As we close our study of Genesis chapter 42, there three ways we can apply it to our lives:

1. Possibly you are like Joseph's brothers:
 - a. You have never repented of your sins – you've lied to yourself, you've lied to others and you've lied to God. Your sins and guilt have imprisoned you – it's haunted you. You'd like to be free! Today, God is offering you freedom and forgiveness. If you resist Him, He will pursue you with relentless determination. Not because He is cruel . . . but because He loves you. But if you respond, he will give you a clean conscience, new life and the promise of eternal life.
 - b. You need to go back and make something right with someone you have offended. If the Holy Spirit is speaking to you, don't resist Him. Take care of it today!
2. Maybe you are like Joseph:
 - a. You have been treated unjustly by someone in your life, but God is calling you to not "repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing." 1 Peter 3:8-9
3. Maybe you are like Jacob:
 - a. You live in fear – fear of losing loved ones, fear of God's will for your life, fear of failing, fear of completely surrendering your life to God.
Prov 3:5-6 "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."

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