

Genesis 42:29-43:15

Jacob's Decision

We saw last week that Joseph had certainly enjoyed his moment. He had watched his brothers enter the audience chamber where he happened to be orchestrating the distribution of food. As they approached him, he remembered his dreams and how they had foretold his coming to a position of authority over the members of his family. Knowing that they would never recognize him, he used his position and power to frighten, threaten, and even imprison them. But he was also determined to see his brother Benjamin, and so he devised a plan whereby he could ease the suffering of his family in Canaan and ensure that his young brother would be brought to Egypt to be reunited with him.

But this was not Joseph's plan only. God was working through every detail of these events to bring about His sovereign will for the chosen line of Abraham. It was God Who had protected Joseph when his brothers wanted to kill him. It was God Who brought the Ishmaelites to the camp at Dothan at just the right time. It was God Who ensured that Potiphar was the Egyptian who purchased Joseph. It was God Who blessed Joseph's actions in both Potiphar's house and in the prison. It was God Who sent the cupbearer, the baker, and Pharaoh their dreams. And it was God Who gave Joseph the insight into those dreams and the plan to save Egypt from the famine.

The Brothers Return to Jacob

The ten brothers had traveled back to Canaan in some state of anxiety. Remember that upon stopping for the first evening, one of them had noticed that, inside the sack of grain he had for his donkey, his purse had been returned to him with all of his money. This was immediately taken as a sign of disaster. None of the brothers assumed that the man who had intimidated them, accused them of being spies, and imprisoned them had generously decided to bless them by giving them all of the precious grain for free. Some mistake had been made, some misunderstanding had occurred, and the brothers were certain that they would look the worse for it. They would be seen as thieves as well as spies.

Knowing none of this though, Jacob surely welcomed his sons and their precious cargo. They had been gone for some time, though we cannot know exactly how long. Still they had traveled to Egypt, waited for an opportunity to present themselves to buy grain, spent three days in prison, and traveled home. They no doubt were tired, dirty, and in need of a good meal and their own beds for the night. But that had to wait while they gave their father an account of their journey.

“²⁹When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰“the man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly with us, and took us for spies of the country. ³¹But we said to him, “we are honest men; we are not spies. ³²We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is with our father today in the land of Canaan.” ³³And the man, the lord of the land, said to us, “by this I will know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me and take grain for the famine of your households, and go. ³⁴But bring your youngest brother to me so that I may know that you are not spies, but honest men. I will give your brother to you, and you may trade in the land”””
(v. 29-34).

The last time Scripture records these men giving a report to their father, they had deceived him into believing that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. This time, however, they spoke more truthfully, though ironically, and without their knowing it, they were still speaking of Joseph. They rattled off their story quickly, with each brother probably talking above another. Much of what they related was accurate, but there were things they omitted. For example, they began their narrative with Joseph's accusation. That is, they did not tell Jacob about Joseph's question regarding their origin. Neither did they say that they had volunteered the information that they had come to Egypt to buy food. This may simply have been because such information was irrelevant to the main point the brothers wanted to emphasize, which was that Simeon would remain in prison until Benjamin was permitted to journey to Egypt.

As an aside, I wonder when Jacob first noticed that Simeon was not among his brothers. Remember that Jacob and Simeon were not always on good terms, and Jacob may have assumed that Simeon was simply somewhere else attending to his own affairs while the other brothers told Jacob of their travels. On the other hand, it may be that Jacob noticed immediately (or that a servant told him) that one son was missing and that is what prompted the others to tell their tale.

The brothers tried to emphasize to their father the difficulty in which they found themselves. Twice Joseph was referred to as the "lord of the land" (v. 30, 33). That is, the brothers made the case that this was no minor official who had treated them so harshly. It is also worth noting, though, that the brothers seemed to make things sound a bit better than they actually were. So, while they did mention that they had been accused of being spies, they made no mention of being imprisoned for three days. And when they explained why Simeon was not with them, they did not say he was in prison but only that Joseph said, "leave one of your brothers with me" (v. 33). For all Jacob knew, Simeon might simply be a hostage held at court in Egypt and not in any particular danger or suffering any great hardship. And finally, the brothers did not tell Jacob that they already knew the money had been returned. Clearly they were trying to put as good a face on their journey as possible. This was wise since they needed to convince their father to let his youngest son return with them to Egypt if they hoped to see Simeon again, buy more grain, and survive the famine.

Jacob's First Answer

After their explanations to Jacob, the men began to unpack. "As they were emptying their sacks, that 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" (v. 35). This statement can seem to be out of place. After all, they already knew that they had their money returned to them. We saw last week that "27when one of them opened his sack to give his donkey feed at the overnight campsite, he saw his money; and behold, it was in the opening of his sack! 28So he said to his brothers, 'my money has been returned, and look, it is right in my sack!' Then their hearts sank, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, 'what is this that God has done to us?'" (Genesis 42:27-28).

There are two possible readings of this. First, it may be that when one brother opened his sack that first night and saw his money, the other brothers did the same. Thus they all knew that their money had been returned and that they would be seen as thieves. Upon reaching Canaan and beginning to unpack, this unpleasant truth was revealed to Jacob as well, they all shared the same conclusion and were afraid. Another possibility is that only one brother opened his sack on the return from Egypt. The other brothers

may have suspected that their money was returned as well, but were too frightened to look. Now, unpacking in Canaan, they had to look, and their worst fears were confirmed.

In either case, when Jacob heard the report from his sons and saw the money in their sacks he was overcome. Whatever success the brothers had begun to have in convincing Jacob to let Benjamin return with them vanished. We can wonder if Jacob suspected that these sons of his had sold Simeon into slavery while in Egypt. After all, Simeon was missing and the other brothers had plenty of silver. In any case, Jacob certainly believed Simeon was lost to him forever. “You have deprived me of my sons: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin; all these things are against me” (v. 36). Quite naturally, Jacob focused on the negative. He ignored the safe return of nine of his sons and the precious grain they had. He did not even wait to hear any possible explanations for why they still had their money. Like his sons, he had assumed the worst. All he could see was that after having lost Joseph, now Simeon was gone and Benjamin might be too if he went into Egypt.

One again it is Reuben who stepped forward. As the eldest son, this may have been natural. After all, it was he who had tried to intervene when his brothers attacked Joseph (Genesis 37:21). “Reuben spoke to his father, saying, ‘you may put my two sons to death if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my care, and I will return him to you’” (v. 37). This was an extraordinary offer. At the time of the family’s move to Egypt, Reuben had four sons (Genesis 46:9), so even if these two sons were lost, he still retained his lineage. And as the first-born son, Reuben’s sons, by earthly standards, would be the next in line to inherit the patriarchy. Reuben seems to find himself in the same position as Lot when the angels were assaulted at his door in Sodom. Lot had to choose between his responsibility as a host and his responsibility as a father. And he chose foolishly. So, too, Reuben choosing between his role as brother and son and his role as father makes a generous, but reprehensible, suggestion.

It is difficult to imagine how Jacob initially reacted to this offer. He may not even have taken it seriously, thinking Reuben was simply being dramatic. Certainly, as he was mourning over the loss of Joseph and now Simeon, he could not look forward to executing two of his grandchildren. It is possible Jacob believed that Reuben was acting rashly in the hopes of making amends for his past sins with Bilhah (Genesis 35:22). But as passionate as Reuben may have been, Jacob found the idea repulsive, and he said so. Categorically, “Jacob said, ‘my son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow’” (v. 38).

When Jacob said “he alone is left” he obviously meant that he was the remaining son of his beloved Rachel, though his other sons may not have heard it that way. It still stung that Jacob preferred the sons of Rachel to them. Jacob knew he would need more grain and he must have wanted Simeon back, but not at the potential cost of Benjamin. And the expression “bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow” meant that the loss of Benjamin will hasten Jacob to the grave. There is no understanding that this meant eternal punishment (what we would call Hell), but rather that having lost Joseph, the loss of Benjamin would be fatal to Jacob.

The Family Quarrel

Jacob's response had settled the issue, at least for the time. But as time passed, the food supply brought back from Egypt began to run out. And since "the famine was severe in the land" (v. 1) soon, Jacob's family was in the same situation as before. We do not know how long this took, but "it came about, when they had finished eating the grain which they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, 'go back, buy us a little food'" (v. 2). Jacob seems to state this as if a journey to Egypt was a simple thing. We cannot know exactly where in Egypt the brothers went, but it is about 225 miles from Hebron to the borders of Egypt at this time, so the journey would take at least a few weeks to get there and back.

Had Jacob forgotten the requirements laid down by the ruler of Egypt for his sons to return and buy more food? Was he simply feigning ignorance, hoping that his sons had forgotten? The provisions brought back from Egypt may have lasted months, so it is possible that Jacob's aging memory may have caused him to forget his previous conversation with his sons.

Now it is Judah who speaks for the group. He reminded his father what Joseph had said when they were last in Egypt. "Judah spoke to him, however, saying, 'the man solemnly warned us, "you shall not see my face unless your brother is with you." 'If you send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. 'But if you do not send him, we will not go down; for the man said to us, "you will not see my face unless your brother is with you"'" (v. 3-5). Judah made it clear that they would not even be permitted an audience with this powerful ruler in Egypt unless Benjamin was with them. Scripture does not record that Joseph actually said that, but he may have done. Or perhaps Judah was paraphrasing. Or he may be exaggerating in the hopes of trying to convince his father how desperate the situation was.

Judah put the case plainly. If we stay here we will die of starvation. If we go to Egypt without Benjamin it will be a wasted trip, and we will come back here to starve anyway. Judah was implying that Benjamin would be lost in either case. Only by sending Benjamin can Jacob hope to save him. But just as Joseph was the power in Egypt, so it seems Jacob was still the power in Canaan. The brothers could not take Benjamin without his consent. And Jacob was not yet willing to let him go. The lack of food had made everyone less patient than usual, and we must remember that this family did not always get along well at the best of times. A passionate exchange followed Judah's words to his father.

"Then Israel said, 'why did you treat me so badly, by telling the man whether you still had another brother?' 'But they said, 'the man questioned particularly about us and our relatives, saying, "is your father still alive? Have you another brother?"' So we answered his questions. Could we possibly know that he would say, "bring your brother down?"' "And Judah said to his father Israel, 'send the lad with me and we will arise and go, so that we may live and not die, we as well as you and our little ones. 'I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame before you forever. 'For if we had not delayed, surely by now we could have returned twice'" (v. 6-10).

Jacob is now referred to in Scripture as Israel, though there is no clear reason why. What is clear is that he sees himself as the victim in the situation. He argues that *he* has been treated badly. He accuses his sons of betraying the fact that they had another brother. Jacob, still duplicitous, is astonished that his sons were so honest with the man in Egypt. Certainly he would not have been so. Jacob had quite the

reputation for deception, and he was apparently very disturbed that his sons had been so forthright. Also, while the brothers argued that Joseph asked them about Jacob and any other siblings, no such questions are recorded in Scripture. Perhaps the brothers were trying to avoid taking responsibility for telling Joseph about Benjamin, though in fact they did volunteer the information.

It is curious that Judah referred to Benjamin as “the lad” since he was clearly a grown man. At this time Joseph was at least forty years old. He had been thirty years of age when he stood before Pharaoh (Genesis 41:46), there had been seven years of abundance, and the famine had lasted at least long enough for all the world to have run out of food. Since Benjamin was probably only a few years younger than Joseph, we can confidently state that he was at least thirty years old. It may have been because he was unmarried that Judah referred to him in this way, but I also think that it was a measure of the condescending attitude of the other brothers toward the favored children of Rachel that prompted Judah to think of him as a mere lad.

Judah tried to emphasize the extremity of the family’s situation in Canaan. Three generations would perish if Jacob insisted on not allowing Benjamin to go to Egypt, “we as well as you and our little ones” (v. 8). And Judah’s offer of himself as surety for Benjamin was much different from Reuben’s rash offer earlier. Judah “will be surety for him” (v. 9). He promised that if “you may hold me responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame before you forever” (v. 9). There was no offer of Judah’s children as sacrifices if things went wrong in Egypt. Judah, not his children, would take the consequences.

Judah concluded with a rebuke of his father. He had lost his temper and stepped back from his diplomatic approach to persuading Jacob. With passion he claimed that ‘surely by now we could have returned twice’ (v. 10). If Judah was not exaggerating, and he may not have been, several months would have passed since Jacob's family had exhausted its food supply from the first trip to Egypt.

Jacob’s Decision

Jacob’s resistance was finally broken.

“¹¹Then their father Israel said to them, ‘if it must be so, then do this: take some of the best products of the land in your bags, and carry down to the man as a present, a little balm and a little honey, aromatic gum and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds. ¹²And take double the money in your hand, and take back in your hand the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks; perhaps it was a mistake. ¹³Take your brother also, and arise, return to the man; ¹⁴and may God Almighty grant you compassion in the sight of the man, that he may release to you your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved!’”
(v. 11-14).

Jacob believed he had no other option. Not to let Benjamin return to Egypt with his brothers meant starvation for the entire family. The wives and children would suffer as much as the men. But Jacob was still Jacob. That is, he still sought to manipulate the situation to his favor. As he did when he was compelled to meet his brother Esau, Jacob sent ahead gifts (Genesis 32:13-21). We can wonder what “the best products of the land” might have been in a time of famine, but it seems that while Canaan lacked

food, it did have access to other products. The list reminds the reader of the caravan of Ishmaelites that purchased Joseph (Genesis 37:25). Thus these products were common items of trade in Mesopotamia.

Jacob also insisted that money be returned. He assumed, unlike his sons, who suspected it had been planted there to incriminate them, that the money had been returned by mistake. Some inattentive servant, loading the donkeys for the brothers, had mistakenly placed their money bags in with the grain. This must have seemed a very unlikely scenario, but Jacob was perhaps trying to put the best face on things that he could as he prepared to part with Benjamin.

Scripture shows that Jacob is in charge. He commands his sons. He instructed the servants loading the caravan. But it is clear he did not want to part with Benjamin. He gave instructions to return the money before he told his son to take Benjamin. One gets the impression that only at the end did Jacob reluctantly allow his son to leave. All the preparations had been made, the brothers were mounted on their donkeys, and finally Jacob let go.

Jacob concluded by offering a prayer. He had prayed the night before he met Esau on his return from Paddan-Aram (Genesis 32:9-12). And again he called on “God Almighty”, that is El Sahddai. This is fitting since Jacob realized he needed the power and strength of his God to overcome the obstacles that his sons could not. They were helpless and completely at the mercy of the leader of Egypt. This was the name by which the patriarchs knew God.

“¹Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him,
‘I am God Almighty;
Walk before Me, and be blameless.
²I will make My covenant between Me and you,
And I will multiply you exceedingly” (Genesis 17:1-2)

“¹So Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and commanded him, saying to him, ‘you shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. ²Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother. ³May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, so that you may become a multitude of peoples” (Genesis 28:1-3).

“⁹Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him.

¹⁰God said to him,

‘Your name is Jacob;
You shall no longer be called Jacob,
But Israel shall be your name.’

So He called him Israel. ¹¹God also said to him,

‘I am God Almighty;
Be fruitful and multiply;
A nation and a multitude of nations shall come from you,
And kings shall come from you.

¹²And the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac,
I will give to you,

And I will give the land to your descendants after you” (Genesis 35:9-12).

Jacob asked God to be merciful, and when he did so he was explicit in what he prayed for. He prayed “that he will release to you your other brother and Benjamin” (v. 14). But Jacob also recognized that God was sovereign. Reminding the reader of Job’s solemn act of worship,

²⁰Then Job got up, tore his robe, and shaved his head; then he fell to the ground and worshiped.

²¹He said,

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
And naked I shall return there.
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.
Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:20-21).

Thus, Jacob concluded, “if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved” (v. 14).

All of the arrangements made, “the men took this present, and they took double the money in their hand, and Benjamin; then they arose and went down to Egypt, and stood before Joseph” (v. 15). They must have traveled quietly, each man wondering what the outcome of their visit might be. That great man in Egypt had not seemed to believe them. Why would he believe them now? What difference would bringing Benjamin before him really make? Did the man know that they had not paid for their original purchase of grain? He could still just throw them into prison. But he had given them grain and he had allowed nine of them to return to Canaan, keeping only one behind. Their minds must have raced back-and-forth between every possibility.

Takeaways

We must appreciate that Jacob, for all his faults, was a man of God. True, he struggled with showing favoritism in his family. And yes, he could be deceitful and manipulative. But he genuinely loved his sons and he genuinely wanted the family to survive the famine in Canaan.

So recognizing that he was in an impossible position, he did what practical things he could to ensure success and then trusted in God. Furthermore, he understood that God was sovereign and he accepted God’s resolution of the matter. I think that can be a lesson for us.

We all encounter situations over which we have no control, and in those moments we usually turn to God. But do we also do whatever we can do to improve the situation? In very few moments, I think, we are completely helpless. There is always at least something we can do. So we need to learn from Jacob and not despair, but rather do what we can.

Also, when we turn to God in prayer during those times, we must do so with a sense of His sovereign will ever before us. We might think we know what is best, but He actually does know what is best. I am quite certain that Jacob did not think that his people going to Egypt and being enslaved for four hundred years was the best plan. But to God, it was.