

## **Genesis 43:16-34**

### **Joseph and Benjamin Meet**

The sons of Jacob had finally persuaded him. Reluctantly, and only because he believed his family would starve if he refused, did Jacob allow Benjamin to go to Egypt. His fears had been well-grounded. His sons, themselves, had told him of how they had been treated. And while they omitted the worst of it (particularly the part about being imprisoned), it was clear that Egypt was not likely to be a hospitable place. But the family had no choice, since “the famine was severe in the land” (Genesis 43:1). They had exhausted the supply of grain they had received on their first trip to Egypt, and there was nowhere else to look for food. Consequently, they made preparations, hoping to increase the chances of being received favorably by gathering some of the best products of the land as a gift. Then, “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” (Genesis 43:15).

The brothers and their father, of course, did not know that it was Joseph with whom they were dealing. To them he was simply “the lord of the land” (Genesis 42:30, 33). He was second only to Pharaoh. He controlled the distribution of the life-saving grain. And he had accused, intimidated, threatened, and imprisoned the brothers on their last trip into Egypt. But he also had promised that “<sup>19</sup>if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, <sup>20</sup>and bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified, and you will not die” (Genesis 42:19-20). So in this they trusted, and in their God. As their father sent them he had prayed, “may God Almighty grant you compassion in the sight of the man, so that he will release to you your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my sons, I am bereaved” (Genesis 43:14). Jacob’s faith was not strong, but it was faith nonetheless.

So the brothers traveled along the caravan routes to Egypt, each no doubt wondering what the outcome of their visit might be. They crossed the border into Egypt and probably spent the night near one of the places where the food was being distributed. They wanted to appear to their best advantage, so it seems likely that they rested that evening and then refreshed themselves in the morning and made the necessary arrangements with the governing officials. They then took their place in line. And as they waited, Joseph saw them.

#### **Joseph Instructs His Steward**

We can wonder how long Joseph had anticipated the arrival of his brothers. He knew that he had provided them with food for several months, probably, and that they needed to journey to Canaan and back. He also likely expected that it would not be easy for his brothers to convince Jacob to allow Benjamin to come back with them to Egypt. After all, Jacob had not allowed Benjamin to go on the first journey, and Joseph obviously knew that his father preferred the sons of Rachel above all the others. Perhaps he had waited the several months, even a year, and then began to look expectantly each day at the line of immigrants and merchants who lined up hoping to buy grain.

But at last his patience was rewarded. And since Joseph had months to plan, unlike their first encounter which had come as a surprise and had compelled Joseph to improvise, he immediately sprang into action. “<sup>16</sup>When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to his house steward, ‘bring the men into the house, and

slay an animal and make ready; for the men are to dine with me at noon.’ <sup>17</sup>So the man did as Joseph said, and brought the men to Joseph’s house” (v. 16-17). Joseph was ready.

This house steward was in a role similar to that which Joseph had held when he had been a slave to Potiphar. That is, he was at Joseph's right hand and did whatever he was commanded. He usually performed personal tasks, such as this, and was required to keep confidences. We will see that it was he whom Joseph had trusted to surreptitiously replace the silver into the bags of the brothers when they were last in Egypt.

Joseph gave this steward two specific instructions and a timetable for completing them. First, he was to approach the men as they waited, take them out of the line of petitioners for grain, and bring the men to Joseph’s private residence. Second, he was to arrange for a meal to be prepared for all. Finally, this was to be done in time to eat the midday meal at noon. Upon reading this account of the preparation of a meal for long lost relatives, we have to remember a similar action by a father who had been looking out for a lost son.

“<sup>20</sup>But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>And the son said to him, ‘father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his slaves, ‘quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet; <sup>23</sup>and bring the fattened calf, slaughter it, and let’s eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:20-24).

While the joyous reunion between the brothers and Joseph was yet to happen, and the repentance of the brothers for their actions against Joseph was as yet unstated (to him at least), the comparative emotions of the watchful father and the equally vigilant Joseph are clear.

### **The Steward and the Brothers**

The steward did exactly as he was commanded. He approached the brothers, told them to come away with him, and brought them to Joseph’s private residence. Whether the steward told them directly what the details of the plan were, or if the brothers simply followed because they knew they had no choice, they soon came to understand that they were to be taken to a private location to be confronted by the same man who had treated them so harshly before. Therefore, though one might expect that a group of weary and starving travelers would eagerly welcome a feast at the home of a royal official, in fact, “the men were afraid, because they were brought to Joseph’s house” (v. 18).

I am reminded of a story from the early years of the Roman empire. Emperor Domitian summoned various senators to his home in 89AD for dinner. Each had been told to come alone, without the typical bodyguard who accompanied important citizens about the city after dark. When all were seated, they looked at each other and noticed that all of them were advocates of the restoration of the Roman republic and the end of the rule of the emperor. Soon the emperor entered, but said nothing. Then young boys painted black (the color for funerals) entered and sat in front of each guest. Each boy carried a cushion on which lay a silver dagger. The food that was served for dinner was that usually served specifically at Roman funerals. They all ate in silence and then, without a word, the emperor gave each guest an escort

home. When each guest was safely in their home, and very much relieved, they received a knock at the door announcing a gift from the emperor. The gift was the boy, the dagger, and the leftovers from the dinner. Domitian had made his point.

So, naturally, it was anxiety and not gratitude that they felt. They must have believed they were being lured away from the masses of people awaiting their grain to a more secure location where they could be treated with impunity. Certainly the man with whom they had to deal could have had them arrested and even executed on the spot, but perhaps this way he could avoid making a scene and terrifying the others who had come to buy food.

They also believed they knew the cause of their invitation to Joseph's residence. Probably whispering among themselves as they went along, "they said, 'it is because of the money that was returned in our sacks the first time that we are being brought in, so that he may seek occasion against us and fall upon us, and take us as slaves with our donkeys'" (v. 18). They expected to be attacked, overpowered, and taken as slaves. They assumed that any arrangement that had been made regarding bringing Benjamin back to Egypt had been set aside because they were thought to have stolen the money which they had used to buy the grain.

So, hoping that Joseph's servant might be easier to deal with than the "lord of the land" himself, they pleaded for their lives.

"<sup>19</sup>They came near to Joseph's house steward, and spoke to him at the entrance of the house, <sup>20</sup>and said, 'oh, my lord, we indeed came down the first time to buy food, <sup>21</sup>and it came about when we came to the lodging place, that we opened our sacks, and behold, each man's money was in the mouth of his sack, our money in full. So we have brought it back in our hand. <sup>22</sup>We have also brought down other money in our hand to buy food; we do not know who put our money in our sacks'" (v. 19-22).

They spoke to the steward "at the entrance to the house" (v. 19). That is, they prudently chose to make their case before they were taken indoors. As had often been the case when the brothers felt anxious, they spoke as a chorus. They addressed the servant as their lord, hoping that courtesy and submission might prevail upon him to hear their case. They freely related the purpose of their first trip to Egypt when they "came down the first time to buy food" (v. 20). They then expressed surprise at finding their money returned, "behold, each man's money was in the mouth of his sack" (v. 21). The fact that it was in the opening of the sack was an added detail to assure the steward that they had not tried to sneak the money out of Egypt. They offered to return the money (v. 21), and they hoped that amends could be made for whatever misunderstanding had occurred and they might be able to buy the food they needed back home in Canaan. (v. 22). Finally, though no accusation had yet been made, they proclaimed their innocence, "we do not know who put our money in our sacks" (v. 22). Most curiously, they made no mention of Benjamin. One might think that they would have offered Benjamin as proof of their fidelity, but perhaps they thought that the unresolved money issue was more important than having kept their promise regarding bringing their younger brother to Egypt as promised.

The steward's answer must have been as unexpected as it was welcome, "be at ease, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money" (v. 23).

The brothers could not have believed what they heard. Not only were they to be at ease, but this pagan steward of Egypt attributed their experience to the blessings of their own God. The steward assured them that the money had come to him and that there was no suspicion of malfeasance. They could keep the money as a divine gift. We know what the brothers were only now trying to understand, that Joseph had told this very steward of the plan to return the money, and he had seen to it that the silver-filled bags were placed in the mouths of the sacks with the grain.

And their sense of peace must have increased when the steward “brought Simeon out to them” (v. 23). Though Scripture offers no details of the reunion, certainly the brothers must have been relieved. Though having been imprisoned for several months or maybe even a year, Scripture makes no mention of Simeon being in any distress or of having suffered any ill effects. It seems Joseph had made his incarceration as pleasant as possible, while still concealing his own identity.

And the steward continued to offer hospitality. “The man brought the men into Joseph’s house and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their donkeys fodder” (v. 24). The brothers were willing to go peaceably into Joseph’s home. They were offered some refreshment and their tired animals were cared for. They had the opportunity to wash their feet and cool off. They must have been in awe of their surroundings, for I am certain that the palace in which Joseph lived was no small and undecorated apartment. Instead it was probably a substantial dwelling, and the brothers saw not only fine ornamentation and furnishings, but bustling servants as well.

### **Joseph Receives Benjamin**

In the hopes of improving their already improved standing in the eyes of “the lord of the land” the brothers “prepared the present for Joseph’s coming at noon; for they had heard that they were to eat a meal there.” (v. 25). This must have been the items Jacob had commanded them to take, “take some of the best products of the land in your bags, and carry down to the man as a gift, a little balsam and a little honey, labdanum resin and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds” (Genesis 43:11). And so they arranged their gifts as invitingly as they could, and nervously waited for “the lord of the land” to greet them.

We do not know exactly where Joseph had passed the morning. Perhaps he was continuing to supervise the distribution of food to the travelers, but eventually he returned home. As he entered his chambers, the brothers were ready. “When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present which was in their hand, and they bowed down to the ground before him” (v. 26). Again Joseph’s mind must have returned to his dreams of so many years before. Time, enslavement, and prison had certainly not dimmed them. And we must notice that the brothers had behaved as they must. Despite the encouragement of the steward, they recognized their humble and precarious position and treated the man before them with reverence, humility, and perhaps a bit of awe.

Scripture says nothing about what Joseph thought of their gift. Likely he was unimpressed. After all, what could a few products from a famine-ravaged land have meant to the second in command of all Egypt. But Joseph *was* interested in their family. “He asked them about their welfare, and said, ‘is your old father well, of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?’” (v. 27). This may have seemed perfunctory to the brothers, merely common courtesy, but Joseph was genuinely interested, for reasons these men could not have imagined. Joseph’s reference to Jacob as “old father” gave away his meaning, though the brothers

obviously did not notice. Jacob *was* old, and the elderly are often most vulnerable during difficult times like famines. Joseph hoped to find out if his father still survived.

The brothers reassured him. “They said, ‘your servant our father is well; he is still alive.’ Then they bowed down in homage” (v. 28). Again the dreams were fulfilled. Joseph must have smiled both at the intelligence that his father was well and at again seeing his brother's faces to the ground before him. That the brothers referred to Jacob as “your servant” was yet another act of submission. The brothers recognized their dependence on this man to survive the famine, and they hoped to cultivate Joseph's good will by reminding him of it.

As the men rose, Joseph also must have raised his eyes to look the party over more closely. He was searching for a face he had not seen the previous time these men had visited him. And he saw it. “As he lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, he said, ‘is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me?’ And he said, ‘may God be gracious to you, my son’” (v. 29). We cannot be certain if Joseph actually recognized that this was Benjamin, or if he just assumed that the youngest of the men, and the one face he had not seen previously, was his brother. But to be certain, he asked. The casual nature of his question was also intended to continue the subtle role he was playing of being a complete stranger to them. But notice that he did not wait for a reply. Instead, he offered his blessing on the young man standing nervously before him.

That he called Benjamin “my son” and blessed him must have raised some eyebrows among the other brothers. The term itself was an indication of an affectionate disposition toward a subordinate, something not out of place for an older man of high position to bestow on a younger man of humble means, as was the case here. Had Benjamin replied, he would have used the phrase “my father” indicating that he understood the relationship. But perhaps this gesture also was the cause of some displeasure to the other brothers. Even in Egypt, it must have seemed to them, the children of Rachel were favored.

But finally seeing Benjamin was too much for Joseph to bear. His emotions must have been swelling ever since he had learned of his brothers' arrival. So, “Joseph hurried out, for he was deeply stirred over his brother, and he sought a place to weep; and he entered his chamber and wept there” (v. 30). The language indicates the most profound of maternal affections. Recall when two prostitutes stood before King Solomon, each protesting that a certain child was their own, Solomon said,

“<sup>25</sup>‘Cut the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other.’ <sup>26</sup>But the woman whose child was the living one spoke to the king, for she was deeply stirred over her son, and she said, ‘pardon me, my lord! Give her the living child, and by no means kill him!’ But the other woman was saying, ‘he shall be neither mine nor yours; cut him!’ <sup>27</sup>Then the king replied, ‘give the first woman the living child, and by no means kill him. She is his mother’”  
(1 Kings 3:25-27).

Thus were Joseph's feelings; like that of a mother about to lose her only child. It is no wonder that he could not control himself. For some twenty-five years or so Joseph must have wondered about his family. Despite naming his first son Manasseh, Joseph had clearly not forgotten about his family (Genesis 41:51). Interestingly, it does not seem that Joseph offered any excuse for his abrupt departure. Perhaps he did not

need to. The brothers were surprised at their welcome and puzzled at the attention Joseph showed to Benjamin. They had enough on their minds to occupy them.

### **Joseph Favors Benjamin**

Joseph no doubt took his time. He had to make certain he was composed before he returned to the presence of his brothers again. He had to maintain the façade of being the great man of Egypt, which he was, but also of being a stranger to the men he entertained, which he was not. We can only wonder what the brothers thought as time passed. But, finally, Joseph was ready to continue in his role. “He washed his face, and came out; and he controlled himself and said, ‘serve the meal.’” (v. 31).

Again these twelve brothers shared a meal. I am certain Joseph remembered the last time he had seen, or maybe we had better say heard, his brothers eating.

“<sup>23</sup>So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the multicolored tunic that was on him; <sup>24</sup>and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it. <sup>25</sup>Then they sat down to eat a meal. But as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead” (Genesis 37:23-25).

The brothers remained oblivious to what was really happening. To them, a great man of Egypt had, apparently, decided to welcome them, to show special attention to their youngest brother and, hopefully, to allow them to buy food. This was a dramatic turn of events compared with their last welcome in Egypt. But they had no idea how dramatic things would soon become.

The meal was served to three different groups. “Then they served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians, who ate with him by themselves; because the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is loathsome to the Egyptians” (v. 32). Joseph sat apart from the group, an indication of his high station. The brothers sat together. The Egyptian courtiers that were at Joseph’s house, sat by themselves. We see here the cultural taboos that were common in the ancient world. People groups were generally isolated from one another, and cultural norms regarded anyone from outside the community or culture with distrust. So while Egyptians might do business with Hebrews, they would not share a meal with them. The same cultural taboos were still present in the time of Moses, hundreds of years later.

“<sup>25</sup>Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, ‘go, sacrifice to your God within the land.’ <sup>26</sup>But Moses said, ‘it is not permissible for us to do so, because we will sacrifice to the Lord our God that which is an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice that which is an abomination to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?’” (Exodus 8:25-26).

Again, we must remember that the sharing of a meal implied relationship, even intimacy. Such a thing was not possible between Egyptians and Hebrews. Even when given permission to settle in the land by Pharaoh, Jacob and his family would be required to live apart from the Egyptians because they were herders of livestock, something the agriculturally-focused Egyptians loathed (Genesis 46:31-34).

So “they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, and the men looked at one another in astonishment” (v. 33). This verse seems out of place here, since the seating is usually done before the serving. But there is no need to quibble about details.

The point Scripture is making does not require a precise series of events. It is curious, though, that the seating of the brothers prompted them to be astonished. This may have been because Joseph, an apparent stranger, was able to seat them in the proper order according to their respective ages. They were astonished that this man, whom they had met only once before, they thought, would know the birth order of the ten brothers. No doubt the Egyptians present marveled at this as well.

If Joseph's ability to seat them according to their ages made them wonder, we can only imagine the shock when "he took portions to them from his own table; but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they feasted and drank freely with him" (v. 34). So, though it is true that Joseph sat apart, he must have still been close enough to take the food served to him and divide it among his brothers. That this Egyptian lord shared his own meal was, in itself, remarkable. But it must have been the attention paid to Benjamin that, again, gained the brothers attention.

While the brothers might be in wonder, and perhaps even a little envious, they certainly were in no position to protest. Whatever customs they might have been familiar with in Canaan were irrelevant in Egypt anyway and as beggars, they could hardly be choosers. And we must also remark that this was not just a meal. It was a feast. To those brothers who had journeyed from the famine ravished land of Canaan any meal would have been a feast, but this was a feast indeed. The language implies excess. They ate so much they became uncomfortable. They drank so much they became tipsy. They indulged as they had not done for years. Their spirits revived, and they assumed all would be well. But Joseph was not yet finished with them, and they would regret letting their guard down.

### **Takeaways**

Throughout this narrative we can see the changing situation of the brothers. At first they are humble supplicants, trying to buy grain in Egypt. Then they are accused of being spies by the "lord of the land." Then they are imprisoned. Then they are trusted. Then they are at the mercy of their father, who refuses to part with his youngest child. Then they are supplicants again.

In this passage the brothers are frightened at being taken to Joseph's private residence. Then they are relieved when the steward tells them to be at ease and that their God has protected them. Then they are puzzled at the attention bestowed on Benjamin. They do what they can, but they are at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control. So, too, are we. Like these brothers, we are often faced with events that are beyond our ability to influence, or even understand, try as we might.

We can only trust in God. He is holy and just, and He loves us more than we can understand. Our circumstances will always be changing, but our relationship with God is eternal. Let us trust in that.