

LESSON 5

The Brothers Come to Egypt

We saw his deep distress when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen.

— Genesis 42:21

Genesis 42 brings ten brothers to Joseph's feet, and before they carry home a single sack of grain, God hands them back the day at the pit.

Introduction

THE LAST TIME THESE TEN MEN WERE NEAR JOSEPH, THEY WERE EATING LUNCH BESIDE THE PIT where they had thrown him. That was twenty years earlier. Since then, Genesis has followed Joseph and let his brothers drop out of the story. We have watched Joseph bought, promoted, falsely accused, imprisoned, forgotten, and finally raised to the second chariot in Egypt. The brothers received only one chapter, and it belonged to Judah and didn't flatter him. Otherwise, Genesis has been silent about them. We haven't been told whether they ever talked about the pit, whether they lost sleep over it, or whether the guilt grew lighter with time.⁷⁶

Genesis 42 gives us the answer. *The guilt never went away.*

The famine Joseph predicted had reached Canaan (42:5). Jacob looked at his grown sons and told them to go down to Egypt. Ten of them went. They stood in line with all the other hungry foreigners, came before the man who controlled the grain, and bowed with their faces to the ground. He recognized them immediately. They had no idea who he was.

Can guilty men change? Genesis 42 doesn't settle that question, and we shouldn't try to settle it either. But this chapter does begin to bring the truth to the surface. Before the brothers get home, they will say out loud what they have kept quiet for twenty years. They will leave one brother in chains in an Egyptian guardhouse, and they will speak of God for the first time in the story. No one is forgiven in Genesis 42, and no one fully repents. The brothers remember, and that is more than they have done since the day at the pit. Joseph remembers too. Previously, we left him holding a baby he had named *Forget*. Watch what happens to him in verse 9.

Why Do You Keep Looking at Each Other? (42:1–5)

When Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, the first thing he did was scold his sons: *Why do you keep looking at each other?*

Try to picture the scene. Ten grown men, some with gray in their beards, stand in the middle of a famine, each waiting for someone else to mention Egypt. It was the one country they would rather not think about, because they knew who had been taken there.

Jacob said it for them: *Go down there and buy some for us so that we will live and not die*. Verse 3 says that ten of *Joseph's* brothers went down. Genesis hasn't referred to them that way in a long time, and it is a title they had spent two decades trying to forget. Notice the word *down* again. Jacob first used it in 37:35, when he said he would go down to Sheol mourning his son. Now he sends ten sons down to Egypt, and he will use the word again before the chapter ends.

Benjamin stayed home because Jacob said *Something might happen to him*. Benjamin was not a child. He was probably in his twenties, older than Joseph had been when Jacob sent him alone to Dothan. But Benjamin was the only other son of Rachel, and Jacob wasn't about to let him out of his sight, especially in the company of these ten. Kidner understands the old man well. Jacob had no facts about what had happened to Joseph, but where his sons were concerned, he no longer needed any.⁷⁷

Verse 5 reads almost like an entry in a ledger: *The sons of Israel were among those who came to buy grain*. They were just ten more faces in a long line of hungry strangers. Nothing set them apart, and no one in Egypt was expecting them.

No one, that is, except Joseph.

Faces to the Ground (42:6–9)

Joseph was in charge of the land, and every sack of grain that left Egypt went through him. Then verse 6 tells us, *His brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the ground*.

How many times do we read of someone bowing in chapter 42? Only once, right here, and it is a moment twenty years in the making. Go back to Joseph's first dream. He saw sheaves of grain in a field, and his brothers' sheaves bowed down to his (37:7). Herdsmen had no reason to dream about sheaves of grain. But here they were, bowing to the man who controlled the grain, and they were bowing because they needed grain.⁷⁸

Next comes something the English can't fully show us. Verse 7 says Joseph *recognized them, but he treated them like strangers*. Verse 8 says, *Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him*. In Hebrew, all four of those verbs come from the same root, *nkr*. Joseph recognized them and made himself a stranger to them. He recognized them, and they did not recognize him.

We have seen that root before. In 37:32, these same men handed their father a robe dipped in goat's blood and said, *Examine it*. In Hebrew, that is *recognize it*, and Jacob did recognize it (37:33). Twenty years earlier, they made their father recognize something that wasn't true. Now they stood before the very truth they had buried, and they couldn't recognize it at all.

Joseph spoke harshly to them: *Where do you come from?*

They answered, *From the land of Canaan to buy food*.

Then verse 9 quietly tells us that *Joseph remembered his dreams about them*.

The word *remembered* is *zākar*, the same verb that failed Joseph in prison when the cupbearer *did not remember Joseph; he forgot him* (40:23). Joseph had named his firstborn Manasseh because God had

made him forget all his hardship and his whole family (41:51). Here is the man who said he had forgotten, and one look at ten bowed heads brought all of it back.

Kidner notices something else. The dream was not yet completely fulfilled. In the second dream, there were eleven stars, along with the sun and the moon (37:9). Only ten men bowed before Joseph. Benjamin wasn't there, and neither was their father.⁷⁹

Joseph was the first person in this chapter to remember. Then he set out to make his brothers remember too.⁸⁰

He said to them, *You are spies. You have come to see the weakness of the land.*

Honest Men (42:10–20)

The brothers were horrified. *No, my lord. Your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man. We are honest; your servants are not spies.*

They called themselves honest. The last time these men had a story to tell, they told it with a bloody robe, and technically they didn't lie then either.

When Joseph repeated the charge, they started talking. *We, your servants, were twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no longer living.*

Think about who was listening. Joseph was hearing his own death announced by the very men who had arranged it. *One is no longer living.* It was a carefully worded sentence, and it said nothing about how he died.

No one had asked them for their family history. They offered it on their own, because frightened men often say more than they need to.⁸¹

The charge of spying wasn't unreasonable in Egypt. The Egyptians had long held a low opinion of the Semitic peoples who came across their northeastern border whenever the rains failed. Ten herdsmen, all brothers, showing up together at the grain stores would have looked suspicious. The Egyptians in the room would have thought the governor was simply being careful.⁸²

Joseph laid out a test. One of them would go home and bring back the youngest brother, and the rest would stay locked up until he returned. *As surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!* Joseph meant what he said. *So Joseph imprisoned them together for three days.*

Joseph knew something about three days. In prison, he told two men what the third day would bring.

On the third day, Joseph changed the terms, and he said something no one expected: *I fear God.* An Egyptian official, clean-shaven and dressed in Pharaoh's linen, told ten Hebrews that he feared God.

These ten men hadn't mentioned God once in the entire story. Yet the man they took to be a pagan was the only one in the room who had feared God all along (39:9).⁸³

The new terms were easier. One brother would stay behind in custody, and the other nine would take grain home to their hungry families and return with Benjamin. *Then you won't die.*

The brothers agreed. They had no other choice.

The Man Who Understood (42:21–24)

What happened next was said in Hebrew, among the brothers themselves, in front of a man they believed couldn't understand a word of it.

Obviously, we are being punished for what we did to our brother. We saw his deep distress when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this trouble has come to us.

In Lesson 1, we stood beside the pit while Genesis said nothing about what Joseph did down there. Here, at last, Genesis lets us hear it, and we hear it from the brothers themselves. Joseph pleaded with them. They saw his distress, and they refused to listen. Twenty years later, they could still describe the look on his face.

Two things in this verse are hidden by the English translation. The CSB's "*we are being punished*" translates the Hebrew *ʾāšēmîm*, the word for being guilty. The word includes both the guilt and its penalty, so the translation isn't wrong, but the first thing the brothers say is that they are *guilty*. Also, *deep distress* and *this trouble* translate the same Hebrew word, *šārâ*, used twice. The brothers put Joseph's distress then and their own distress now side by side.⁸⁴

Reuben added something, but it wasn't a confession. *Didn't I tell you not to harm the boy? But you wouldn't listen. Now we must account for his blood!*

The oldest son's contribution amounted to "I told you so." What he said was true as far as it went. It is also exactly what a man says when he wants everyone to know it wasn't really his fault.

But consider what Joseph learned in that moment. He had never known what went on at the top of the pit while he was at the bottom. Now he knew that one of his brothers had tried to save him.⁸⁵

Joseph was standing right there listening. *They did not realize that Joseph understood them, since there was an interpreter between them.*

Then he turned away from them and wept.

This is the verse of weeping you were asked to find, and it is the first of seven. Through five chapters of slavery, false accusation, prison, and neglect, Genesis never records Joseph shedding a tear. What finally broke him was hearing his brothers admit that they remembered.

Joseph composed himself and turned back to them. Then he took Simeon, the next oldest after Reuben, and had him bound in front of the other nine. Genesis doesn't explain why he chose Simeon. It does tell us that Joseph had just heard Reuben say he tried to stop what happened.

Simeon was bound *before their eyes*. This time the brothers would have to watch as one of their own was taken away from them.⁸⁶

Silver in the Sack (42:25–28)

Joseph gave three orders. His servants were to fill the brothers' bags with grain, give them provisions for the journey, and return each man's silver to his sack.

Genesis doesn't tell us why Joseph returned the silver, and careful readers disagree. It may have been an act of kindness, or the cruelest trap in the chapter. Kidner makes the sharpest observation. If Joseph had wanted revenge, he could have done it more easily. He could have sent them home with sacks full of chaff. Instead, he sent them home with something they couldn't explain.⁸⁷

The brothers loaded their donkeys and headed north. When they stopped for the night, one of them opened his sack to feed his donkey and found his silver sitting on top of the grain.

These men had once sold their brother for silver. Now silver kept turning up where it didn't belong.

My silver has been returned! It's here in my bag. The CSB translates the next line very well: *Their hearts sank. Trembling, they turned to one another and said, "What is this that God has done to us?"*

This is the first time in the entire story that the brothers speak of God.⁸⁸

It took an accusation from a governor, three days in custody, a brother in chains, and a handful of unexplained silver to get them to say His name. Note what they didn't ask. They never asked who put the silver there. They knew someone had done it, and they were certain God was behind it.

They were wrong about what God was doing, but they were right that He was doing something.

Everything Happens to Me (42:29–38)

When they got home, they told Jacob everything, or nearly everything. Their version included the harsh words, the charge of spying, and Simeon being left behind. It left out the three days they spent locked up. It left out the threat of death. And no one mentioned the silver they had found at the lodging place.

Then they began emptying their sacks, and each man found his bag of silver. Every one of them had it. Now their father saw it too, and *they were afraid*.

Jacob didn't ask a single question about the silver.

It's me that you make childless. Joseph is gone, and Simeon is gone. Now you want to take Benjamin. Everything happens to me!

The Hebrew is even blunter than the CSB: *Me you have bereaved. Upon me are all these things.* Everything in Jacob's sentence centers on himself. Simeon, the son sitting in an Egyptian prison that night, gets only a passing mention.⁸⁹

Consider who Jacob was saying this to. *It's me that you make childless.* Genesis never tells us how much Jacob knew or suspected. But his words fell on the very men responsible, and each of them felt the weight of what he said.

Reuben tried again. *You can kill my two sons if I don't bring him back to you.*

It was a desperate thing to say to a grieving grandfather. Reuben was offering two of Jacob's grandsons to make up for the loss of a son. Jacob didn't even respond to the offer.

Instead, he said, *My son will not go down with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left.*

He alone is left. Jacob said that to nine living sons standing in front of him with grain on their donkeys, while a tenth sat in chains in Egypt. By *my son* he meant Benjamin. The rest of them heard what they had always known about where they stood with their father.

The chapter closes with Jacob's words: *If anything happens to him on your journey, you will bring my gray hairs down to Sheol in sorrow.* Here we see the word *down* again, along with *Sheol*, the same words Jacob spoke over a bloody robe in 37:35. Judah will repeat them in 44:29, standing before a man they still won't recognize.⁹⁰

That is where Genesis leaves the family. Simeon is in custody in Egypt. The grain is in the sacks, but it won't last. Benjamin is staying home. The silver is lying on the floor where they poured it out, and no one knows what to do with it.

The question the brothers asked at the lodging place still hangs over everything: *What is this that God has done to us?*

Genesis doesn't answer that question yet, and we won't either.

Looking to Christ

Stephen tells this part of the story too. Standing before the council in Acts 7, he walks through Israel's history in order. When he comes to the famine, he describes it as two separate visits. Jacob *sent our ancestors there the first time. The second time, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers* (Acts 7:12–13).

The first time the brothers came, they didn't recognize Joseph, and that is exactly the point Stephen was making. He develops the same idea a few verses later when he tells about Moses, a deliverer who assumed his own people would understand that God was rescuing them through him, but they didn't understand (Acts 7:25). Then Stephen looked at the men in front of him and told them they had done the same thing again (Acts 7:51–52).

This is the same pattern we traced in Lesson 1, and here it goes a step further. The brother the brothers rejected was now the one they had to come to for bread. They bowed before him and asked him to keep them alive, without knowing who he was.

We shouldn't press the details. Joseph speaks harshly, takes a hostage, and plays a game with silver that Jesus never plays with anyone. But the order of events holds. The first time, the rejected one stood among them unrecognized. It took a second visit for them to see who had been in charge of the grain all along.

Applying the Text

What you have buried is not gone. If you did something long ago and have simply stopped talking about it, don't mistake the silence for a resolution. The brothers had twenty years of silence, and it held only until they spent three days in an Egyptian guardhouse. Yours may not hold that long.

Confessing to each other is not the whole confession. What the brothers said in 42:21 was true, and it was the most honest thing they had said in the entire story. But they said it in their own language, among themselves, where they thought no one who mattered could hear. Then they went home and gave their father an edited version. It is possible to admit something to the people who were involved and never say it where it would cost us anything. Who in your life has heard only the edited version?

Be careful about saying *I told you so*. Reuben was right, and saying so didn't help anyone. When something goes wrong in our families or in the church, it is tempting to use our first words to make sure everyone knows it wasn't our fault. Reuben had twenty years to think about what he would say, and that is what he chose.

Be careful about *everything happens to me, too*. Jacob was grieving, and his grief was real. But it had also taken over the room. One son was in chains and nine others were terrified, and Jacob's words still kept coming back to *me*. Pain has a way of putting us at the center of every story. Remember that someone else in your home may be hurting too.

When the silver turns up, ask the brothers' question. *What is this that God has done to us?* The brothers were afraid when they asked it, and they had the details wrong. Still, their question pointed in the right direction. When something happens that you can't explain, ask what God is doing, even if you aren't sure you want to hear the answer.

For Discussion

1. You were asked to mark the bowing in chapter 42 (42:6) and the verse of weeping (42:24). The dream of 37:7 comes true in verse 6, but not completely. Who is missing, and why might that matter to Joseph?
2. What exactly do the brothers admit in 42:21–22, and to whom are they speaking? Compare that with what they tell their father in 42:29–34. What do they leave out, and why?

3. Joseph speaks harshly, imprisons all ten brothers, keeps Simeon, and hides their silver in their sacks. Is he testing them, punishing them, or protecting himself? What in the chapter supports your answer?

4. Jacob says *he alone is left* while nine living sons stand in front of him. How do you think those words affected the men who heard them?

5. Is there something you did years ago that you have never talked about but could still describe in detail today? What would it take for you to tell someone about it?

6. If someone who hurt you badly showed up needing something only you could give, what would you need to know about that person first? How would you find it out?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 6: Testing the Brothers (Genesis 43)

The grain runs out, and Jacob can't keep Benjamin at home forever. The man who once asked *What do we gain if we kill our brother?* stands before his father and offers himself as the guarantee for his brother's life. In Egypt there is a feast with a seating arrangement no one can explain, and Joseph has to leave the room to weep.

Before you come, read Genesis 43 and pay close attention to Judah. Mark the verse where Benjamin receives more than his brothers, and notice how the brothers respond.

⁷⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 41:46 he notes that the story began when Joseph was seventeen (37:2) and reaches its climax nine years after he entered Pharaoh's service (45:6), more than twenty years after the first breach with his brothers. Borthwick, *Life of Joseph*. On 45:6 he works the arithmetic to twenty-two years between the dream and Joseph's disclosure, which puts the first visit of chapter 42 a little before that. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 42:1–38 they speak of twenty years having passed since the brothers dropped him in the pit.

⁷⁷ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:1–5 he hears a touch of asperity in Jacob's opening words, and reads his refusal to part with Benjamin as revealing what he had come to suspect: about Joseph's fate not a fact had come to light, but about the brothers' guilt little doubt remained. Under a father's eye their crimes might be covered up, but not their character. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 42:4 they judge Benjamin likely to be in his twenties, older than Joseph was when Jacob sent him alone to Dothan.

⁷⁸ Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 42:5–6 they picture the brothers as ten anonymous faces among the many foreigners seeking food, and note that it was grain, which Joseph possessed and they needed, that brought them to bow, as the sheaves had bowed in his first dream (37:7). Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:6 he observes that the word the CSB renders *in charge* is a strong Hebrew term, emphasizing Joseph's complete mastery.

⁷⁹ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:9 he argues that the memory of the dreams was more than a confirmation, since the present scene fell short of their full promise, and that this may have moved Joseph to press for the presence of the whole family. He takes to see the weakness (literally nakedness) of the land as a forceful way of saying to pry into our private affairs. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 42:7–11 he makes the same observation, that the dreams included eleven brothers and both parents.

⁸⁰ Borthwick, *Life of Joseph*. On 42:9 he cites Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 139. Volf reads the forgetting named in Manasseh (41:51) as a backgrounding of memory, and argues that the journey toward reconciliation still required a good deal of remembering: Joseph was reminded of what his brothers had done, and he made them remember it too (42:21–23).

⁸¹ Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 42:10–14 they note the irony of men who last appeared deceiving their father now protesting that they are honest, and observe that the brothers offered Joseph more family history than the charge required, though they later tell Jacob that the official asked for it (43:7). Kidner, *Genesis*. In his additional note to chapter 42 he treats the two reports as complementary extracts from the same interview.

⁸² Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 42:9 they note that sending a few men to gauge an enemy's weakness was ordinary military practice, that Egypt watched its northeastern border for it, and that Egyptian texts of the early second millennium, among them the Prophecies of Neferti and the Instruction for Merikare, speak scornfully of the Asiatics who descended into Egypt looking for food. The Egyptians present would have found Joseph's suspicion entirely reasonable.

⁸³ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:18–20 he regards the three days together in custody as ample proof of the governor's power, and judges that his concern for their families and his confession *I fear God* could not fail to be thought-provoking. The new decision may have been an actual change of mind. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 42:18 he points out that the ten brothers had never once mentioned God, and that it was the supposed pagan who did.

⁸⁴ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:21 he observes that the victim's cries go unheard in chapter 37 and are heard only here, ringing again in ears that had been closed to them, and he catches the repetition in *distress ... this distress*. A taste of retribution was awakening feelings that a brother's and a father's tears had left untouched. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 42:21–22 he notes that the brothers who once called Joseph *this dreamer* (37:19) now call him *our brother*.

⁸⁵ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 42:21–22 he notes that Joseph learned here, for the first time, that Reuben had not consented to his sale. Borthwick, *Life of Joseph*. On 42:22 he describes Reuben as resorting to blame, and elsewhere characterizes the speech as an *I told you so*. The CSB margin gives the literal sense of Reuben's last sentence: *Even his blood is being sought!*

⁸⁶ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 42:23–24 he reads the tears as grief Joseph had to hide from the brothers, and lists the weeping to come at 43:30, 45:2, and 46:29. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:24 he notes that a hostage was needed to ensure their return and that Simeon, eldest after Reuben, was the obvious choice. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 42:18–24 they frame the test as a question: would the brothers abandon Simeon as they had abandoned Joseph?

⁸⁷ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:6–17 he argues that the harshness only looks like vengeance: a vindictive Joseph could have sent his brothers home with worthless sackloads, or tantalized them at a feast as they had tantalized him (37:24–25), and his enigmatic gifts were a kinder and more searching test. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 42:25 they leave the question open, noting that the narrative supplies no motive and that the returned silver can be read as generosity or as a desire to frighten them further.

⁸⁸ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 42:26–28 he identifies this as the first time in the narrative that the brothers mention God. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:25–28 he calls their question, as far as it goes, a model of fruitful reaction to trouble (cf. Ps 60), while Jacob, in the scene that follows, can see no farther than the trouble itself.

⁸⁹ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 42:29–34 he lists what the brothers leave out of their report: the three days in custody, the threat of death, and the silver found at the lodging place. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:36 he renders the Hebrew *Me have ye bereaved ... upon me is all this*, and calls the emphasis understandably but instructively self-oriented.

⁹⁰ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 42:37 he calls Reuben's offer an absurd promise. Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 42:21–38 he allows that Reuben meant well but judges the gesture not very reassuring. Kidner, *Genesis*. In his additional note to chapter 42 he finds it true to character that Jacob refused the ill-timed offer of a son he distrusted (cf. 49:4). On 42:38 he prefers *Sheol to the grave* and notes that the words left a deep impression on the family, who quote them back at 44:29, 31, and 34.