

# Lesson 21

## Genesis 42, 43, 44, 45

### Chapter 42

At least 20 years have passed since Joseph has seen his brothers, yet he recognizes them. The change has been greater in Joseph, who was just 17 when they last met, than in the others, who had been men already. Even had they expected to see Joseph, it would not have been as the Governor of the land, looking like an Egyptian and speaking through an interpreter.

**Why is it important that we hear that when the brothers arrived, “they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground”?**

However unknowingly, the brothers are doing what Joseph saw them do in his dream. This provides a link to that long-ago event and lets us know that what has been only anticipated will now come to pass. In an enormous irony, the very thing that the men thought would make it impossible that they should ever bow before their brother—selling him into slavery—put him in a position relative to them that made it inevitable.

**Why do you suppose Joseph pretended to be a stranger and questioned them so harshly? How do you explain his reaction to the brothers he hadn’t seen for so long?**

One of the most remarkable things about Joseph is the way he reacts to his brothers. It must have been a huge shock not just to see them again after so long, but to see them bowing before him as they were in his dreams. Joseph can now afford to be generous, yet surely the temptation would be to get even. Perhaps he used the power of his position and its authority to distance himself and control his emotions while he decided how best to respond.

Joseph’s response is worth a close look: he speaks roughly to them and accuses them of being spies. On first glance he seems to be playing with them; perhaps giving back some of what they’d given him. But is he? They were completely at his mercy. If Joseph had wanted revenge, he could have denied them food and thrown them all into prison forever. He could have made them his slaves, told them who he was and rubbed their noses in the fact that they were in his power. The surprising thing here is that he does not do that. There is no evidence of bitterness or vengeance on his part. Apparently he has forgiven them, even before seeing them and discovering whether they had repented.

So why does he pretend to be a stranger and question them harshly, if not to punish them? It is clear from his questions that before telling them who he is, Joseph wants to learn more about them and test them. No doubt he has wondered all those years how things have fared with his family. Have his brothers changed in all those years? How is their relationship now with their father? Joseph is also concerned about his brother Benjamin, who is not with them. Have they done away with him, too? And if not, will Jacob trust them enough to send Benjamin? Joseph must know these things before they can be reconciled.

So Joseph tests his brothers not to taunt or punish them, but with the aim of bringing them to true repentance and ultimately to reconcile them with himself and with their father. In this, he gives us a picture of what Christ will do one day for his brothers: not just forgive them and free them from sin for their own sakes, but restore them to friendship and into the family of God (See CCC #1443)

**Joseph tested his brothers by demanding they return with their youngest brother, but before sending them back for him (and without Simeon, whom he held against their return), he put them all in prison for three days. What do you think Joseph hoped to accomplish with this test?**

All Joseph’s testing aims to bring them to repentance and reconciliation. Three days in prison gave the men real time to worry about their predicament. They were being asked to bring their youngest brother to Egypt, and if they had never sold Joseph, Benjamin would be with them now. They were confined in prison, which may have reminded them that they held Joseph in a pit regardless of his pleas and sold him into the prison of slavery. Their consciences began to accuse them. They realized that they did wrong against Joseph and

deserve this punishment, which they see as coming from God. They have acknowledged their sin, which is the first step toward repentance. Evidence of true sorrow and a changed character remain to be seen.

As much as Joseph must have longed to see Benjamin, sending his brothers to get him posed a further test as much as it would bring about a reunion. Were the brothers still jealous, divided against their father's favorite? Had their relationship with their father improved? Would he trust them with Benjamin? These questions remain to be answered.

**Although Joseph spoke roughly to his brothers, what shows his true feelings for them? Does he seem to have harbored thoughts of revenge?**

In private, Joseph wept to hear his brothers' anguish. He did not keep all of them in jail, but only Simeon. He may have spoken roughly and imprisoned them, but he sent them home amply provided with food for their families, provisions for the journey and—unknown to them—their money as well. Joseph was motivated not by spite or revenge but by love, or he might have used his position to make them pay for all he'd been through.

**How does the brothers' report to their father in vss. 27-34 compare to their report after selling Joseph (Gen. 37:31-35)? Does anything give you hope that they may have changed in the intervening years?**

A guilty conscience is worth little if it does not lead to change. A comparison of the two homecomings reveals that Joseph's brothers are not the proud, selfish, jealous brutes they were when they sold Joseph.

The first thing to notice is the increased sense of family. The brothers seem to see themselves as all in this together, no longer every man for himself. Judah, who left after selling Joseph for a life in Canaan, is back in the picture. And whereas before throwing Joseph in the pit they called him "this dreamer" and to Jacob they called him "your son," now they call Joseph "our brother" and "the lad" and say to Joseph "we are 12 brothers." Even though Joseph is thought dead, they consider him part of the family.

Second is the lack of jealousy or anger at Jacob's favoritism. Even though Jacob obviously prefers Benjamin now that Joseph is gone, there is no sign of resentment among the brothers about this or that Jacob kept him behind or that his absence endangers them.

Perhaps most telling is the sons' honesty with Jacob. When they "lost" Joseph, they were heartless liars; now they are honest. On the earlier occasion they offered no information, but allowed Jacob to come to his own grisly conclusion. This time they tell everything that happened on their trip. And the first time they offered insincere comfort, whereas this time they are clearly distressed.

Finally, there is a genuine effort to make good. When Jacob accuses them of bereaving him of his children, Reuben doesn't just try to offer comfort, he offers his own sons if he fails to bring Benjamin back. His solution may not move Jacob, but he is at least trying to make things right. When Joseph was lost no one seemed to consider their father's feelings, but now they take care not to cause their father any more grief than he already has experienced.

These may be small things, but they are significant. We are glimpsing the possibility of changed hearts and have hope for reconciliation.

**Over 20 years before, Reuben and Judah stepped forward to save Joseph from death. Who steps forward this time to ensure Benjamin's safety, and how?**

First Reuben offers to kill both his own sons if he doesn't bring Benjamin back—an offer that understandably has little effect on Jacob's resolve to keep his youngest son in Canaan. As their food runs low and the time comes that they must return to Egypt, Judah steps forward and offers himself as surety for his brothers, taking responsibility on himself for what has been done and what must be done. Remember that Judah suggested they sell Joseph. Think of all he has been through in the intervening years: he left his family for Canaan and a marriage that resulted in the death of two wicked sons and the birth of a third son by his other sons' widow. There is a new maturity and humility in his self-offering. Judah emerges as the

spokesman for his brothers, even as the tribe of Judah will stand out later and give rise to King David and at last the Messiah (who will offer himself as surety for all.)

**In Gen. 42:36-38, Jacob was unable to see past his own grief and fear to send his sons back to Egypt. Re-read those verses along with Gen. 43:11-14 and compare the two incidents. What has changed?**

These two incidents offer dramatically different pictures of Jacob responding to the thought of sending Benjamin to Egypt. The first time, Jacob is drowning in grief. He looks only at the circumstances and how they affect himself. His faith is defeated. It is telling that throughout this account he is called “Jacob,” and in Genesis 43 the author calls him instead “Israel”—he who has struggled with God and overcome. In Genesis 43 Jacob lives up to that new name: He is once again his practical self, telling them to go at once to Egypt and planning a gift to please the ruler. He lifts his eyes from his own hurt and calls on “God Almighty” (El Shaddai)—the special covenant name by which God revealed Himself to the Patriarchs, and which doubtless carried with it thoughts of God’s omnipotence, His power, a reminder of the God who promises the impossible and keeps His promises. Jacob prays for God’s mercy and leaves the results in God’s hands—“If I am bereaved, I am bereaved.”

With these words, Jacob shows that he knows God is in control. He accepts God’s will, whatever that will be. There is a quiet strength in his words, especially when we compare them to what he says in the previous chapter: “you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.” Before, just the thought of losing his son made him think of death. Now he can contemplate the loss and rest in God. Self-pity, reproach, and fear are gone. He is looking past the circumstances and his fears and setting his eyes on God, and he is able to let Benjamin go in peace.

### **Chapter 43 (Skip to v15)**

**At table, Joseph sat the brothers in order of birthright and age, with Benjamin presumably at the end, but Benjamin was given five times as much food as anyone else. How might this be looked on as a test of his brothers? Do they pass?**

Joseph was showing a strong preference for the younger son, as his father once bypassed his older brothers for him. This allowed Joseph to see whether the others were as jealous of Benjamin (who was now evidently Jacob’s favorite) as they once were of him. They are amazed at being placed in the right order, but no reaction to Benjamin’s portion is recorded. There is no sign of the old jealousy or of any jockeying for position among them.

### **Chapter 44**

**Through his testing so far, Joseph has gotten his brothers to “prove their honesty” by bringing back Benjamin. He has seen that they show no hard feelings or jealousy toward their youngest brother, now their father’s favorite. He has heard them acknowledge their guilt. Isn’t this enough? Why do you think he continues to test them?**

Repentance entails not just sorrow over wrong done in the past but a determination to change in the future, and it is possible that he wanted to see evidence of a changed life and character. But there is something else needed as well. In Gen. 42:22 Reuben says, “Did I not tell you not to sin against the lad? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.” He sees what they did as a sin against Joseph. And yet it was Jacob’s love they were jealous of. Jacob is the one they deceived, that they hurt, that they offered hollow comfort to. And even before selling Joseph, they overstepped Jacob in the matter of Dinah and tried to hide their exploits from him. Joseph’s brothers are estranged not from Joseph but from their father. Their sin is primarily against Jacob—even as our sin is first an offence against God.

Joseph seems to realize that what his brothers did to him was evidence of a deeper rupture in their relationship to Jacob. He thus is looking for evidence they now love their father. The testing he does is directed toward reconciliation with their father; reconciliation with himself will follow on that. He is giving us a foretaste of the kind of mediation that will one day be done by Jesus Christ to reconcile us with our heavenly Father.

### **What is the nature of the test?**

To determine the extent of their love for their father, Joseph puts his brothers in a situation where they must act on that love. They don't seem to be jealous of Benjamin, so Joseph sets him up to give them a cause to mistreat their father's favorite. How will they react if they think Benjamin has jeopardized all of their lives by stealing Joseph's silver cup? Will they abandon him to his fate and increase their father's grief just to save their own skins? Or will they stand in for Benjamin out of brotherly love and respect for their bereaved father? If they do this, Joseph will have drawn out of them self-donating love, the kind of love that animates the Trinity and that God draws out of all those who are His.

### **Given that Benjamin appeared to be guilty, what is remarkable about his brothers' actions on discovering the cup (vs. 13)?**

Benjamin's brothers are filled with grief and despair, but not a word of reproach is said to Benjamin. They don't defend themselves, where previously on discovering money in their sacks they are very vocal both to Jacob and to the steward. Instead of allowing the supposedly guilty one to take his own rap, they go straight back to Egypt together in a remarkable display of unity.

### **Read what Judah says to Joseph in vs. 16. If he is only referring to Benjamin's sin (of supposedly stealing the cup), why does he refer to "the guilt of your servants (plural)? To what does he seem to be referring and why?**

What Judah does not say is as interesting as what he does. Notice that he doesn't defend Benjamin. He doesn't say "please excuse my little brother, he doesn't know any better;" nor even "please forgive him and take me instead, because I promised I'd take care of him." He doesn't bargain, he simply surrenders, and he surrenders for all of them together. It seems that in his mind, the stolen cup is all of a piece with their earlier sin, which he may think God revealed to Joseph through his divining. Ever since Joseph first started to question them, they have been waiting for the punishment they are sure God is bringing on them for their sin. It is this that he must be alluding to.

### **Read Judah's plea to Joseph carefully (vss. 18-34). What is Judah's chief concern? What do his words reveal about how things have changed?**

It is not for Benjamin's life for Benjamin's sake that Judah appeals to Joseph. Joseph's closing words (vs. 17), which sound so reassuring, stir up a storm of anguish. How can they "go up in peace to [their] father" without his beloved son? They had no trouble doing that 20 years earlier, but now Judah is consumed with love for his father. Look at how many times the word "father" appears in his plea! It is hard not to feel his anguish over the pain losing Joseph caused Jacob. Judah is no longer willing to let him suffer. He is so determined not to cause his father any more grief that he offers himself as a sort of atonement, standing in not just for Benjamin's supposed sin but for all of them.

### **Judah's name means "praise" but his early life hardly lived up to it. In an earlier lesson we were surprised that the Messiah's line would start from a man who left home for Canaan, produced sons so wicked God killed them, and slept with his daughter-in-law. How do you think he got from that point to this impassioned self offering?**

The Bible doesn't tell us, but it looks as though God has used Judah's mistakes, his pain, the years of seeing his father suffer, the exposure of his sin with Tamar, the famine and Joseph's testing to draw out of him a thorough repentance, to bring him to a complete about-face. It shouldn't be surprising to read later in Genesis 49 the prediction that Judah's brothers will praise him, or later to hear Jesus being called the Lion of Judah. Judah is finally living up to his name

### **What reaction does Judah's speech provoke in Joseph?**

Whether at the change in Judah or at the thought of Jacob's anguish, Joseph can no longer control his emotions. He sends the Egyptians out so he can make himself known to his brothers. And still the emphasis is on Jacob: "I am Joseph," he says. "Is my father still alive?" As we surmised earlier, Joseph's testing was

directed to establishing reconciliation with their father first as the necessary foundation for their own reunion.

**When Joseph makes himself known, his brothers are dismayed and can't answer him. What must be going through their minds? What would color their interpretation of his behavior?**

It must have been a shock to discover that the very boy they sold and believed dead (or serving in slavery, not as Pharaoh's right hand!) was the one who had brought them to this emotional turning point. They may have been dealing with disbelief or denial; certainly they are afraid. Their fear, as earlier, is colored by their assumption that he has been sent by God to punish them—a thought that may have intensified when they learned who he was.

**How does Joseph reassure them? (And if he wants to reassure them, why does Joseph reinforce his introduction by adding, "I am your brother...whom you sold into Egypt"—practically rubbing their noses in their sin?)**

Joseph brings up their sin not to incriminate his brothers but to help them believe that he is who he says he is. It also serves to reinforce what he tells them next: that God was working all the time to bring good out of what they'd done, and brought him to Egypt ahead of the others to save lives. God's hand in the whole thing is so obvious to Joseph, he disregards his brothers' culpability. Joseph reassures them by letting them know that he has forgiven them to the point of not holding them responsible.

**Does it seem strange to you that Joseph didn't seek or demand a personal apology from his brothers? Why do you think he did not? Is there a message here about how we should forgive others?**

It is difficult to understand why his brothers never come out and apologize for what they've done to Joseph, and it's hard to imagine "letting them off" the way Joseph does. It can be equally hard to imagine doing the same to someone who hurts us and never says "I'm sorry." Joseph models for us what Christ would later do. On the cross he said, "forgive them, father,"—not because they are sorry for what they have done, but because "they know not what they do." Joseph, like Jesus, is able to leave judgment to God. God knows how the others have acted and will deal with them in His way and in His time. By being willing to forgive them even before they were sorry, Joseph was able to accomplish a far greater thing than simply exacting a confession or getting some sense of retribution. He was able to see his brothers restored to his father and his family reunited.

## **Chapter 45**

**What reasons does Joseph give that his family should move to Egypt? How does God use even Pharaoh to advance His plan?**

Joseph tells his family to move to Egypt to be near him and to escape the famine, which had another five years to go. He tells them to move not just because food is plentiful in Egypt, but because God has made him lord of the country and what amounted to administrator of famine relief. Joseph was in charge of the food, and he would provide for them. Any fear that they would be unwelcome in Egypt was put to rest by Pharaoh's generous offer to give them the best of the land to live in. He also sends wagons to speed and ease their travel.

**Why do you think Joseph sends his brothers off with a warning not to quarrel along the way (vs. 24)?**

Imagine how hard it would be for his brothers to face their father. They could hardly give him the good news that Joseph was alive and in charge of Egypt without also confessing how he got there. In telling them not to quarrel, Joseph is encouraging them not to spend time hashing over the past and accusing each other; it was time to look ahead and rejoice in what God had done and was doing. He is anxious to see his father and to get the family settled in Goshen and doesn't want anything to delay the trip or impede their progress.