

Growing Pains 2-10-08

Genesis 42

Joseph had kept a blessable attitude through his 13 years of imprisonment. God used that time to shape his character. He became a humble man completely uncompromising, fearless, and utterly dependent upon God. (Proverbs 3:5) When he finally let go and gave everything to God, God exalted him to second in command of the most powerful nation in the world. He went from prison to the palace overnight. He went from bowing before others, to everyone bowing to him. The only way he could not be corrupted by this sudden change in position was the thorough preparation of his character during 13 years of difficulty. Let us pray that we might be as moldable as Joseph was in the hands of God so that He can use us for His glory. (Isaiah 64:8)

This chapter begins in the land of Canaan. ¹ When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you just keep looking at each other?" This reminded me of a cartoon version of Jungle Book. In one scene, three vultures are sitting on a limb overlooking a barren plain. One says to the other, "What we gonna do?" The other answers, "I don't know. What do you think we should do?" Back and forth it goes and finally one of them says, "We're going to starve if we just sit on this limb saying, 'What we gonna do?'" It's a perfect picture of Jacob's sons. The herds are dying for lack of pasture. No one has any grain to trade for a goat. Someone has to do something! (Ecclesiastes 4:5)

Do you think maybe they didn't want to head to Egypt because they might bump into a certain slave that they would recognize? And in their imagination, they could see him pleading again with them to buy him back and free him. And of course they could never do that, because then Dad would find out. It was a catch 22. Even if they wanted to rescue him, then they'd really be disinherited. But they are starving, and there is nowhere else to go. Sometimes God forces us to face the consequences of our past actions. (Psalm 90:8) He orchestrates us meeting the person we offended. He coordinates us facing our fears so we will deal with them.

³ Then ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. ⁴ But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him. This is a Shechem déjà vu. Remember when Jacob sent Joseph to the dangerous area of Shechem to check on the brothers and he never returned? Jacob wasn't about to let the last son of his favorite wife Rachel go into harms way. It isn't just that in Egypt who knows what could happen, but that the journey itself was perilous. You have to make it from water hole to water hole and avoid the bandits in the process. If you don't die of thirst, the thieves might kill you for your money on the way there, or for your food on the way back. So precious Benjamin stayed at home, and the ten brothers went to Egypt. The more men the better it would be to protect one another. Now they have to face their fears. There is no way out of it. Maybe they comforted themselves with the improbability of meeting Joseph in the huge crowds that had gone to Egypt to buy grain.

Commented [notes1]: Proverbs 3:5 (NIV)
5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

Commented [notes2]: Isaiah 64:8 (NIV)
8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Commented [notes3]: Ecclesiastes 4:5 (NIV)
5 The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.

Commented [notes4]: Psalms 90:8 (NIV)
8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.

⁶ Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the one who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. I wonder if they were avoiding eye contact with all the servants that were running around in the streets of Egypt, just in case one of them might be Joseph? Or did they try to look out of the corner of their eye to see if any servant with a Hebrew beard might be him? How could they imagine that the one they were bowing down to, the one in the royal Egyptian robe, clean-shaven and with a headpiece and scepter was little Joseph. Of course he was speaking to them through an interpreter and it had been 20 or more years. The boy of 17 they last saw was now in his late thirties. I doubt they ever saw Joseph with eye shadow.

⁸ Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹ Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected." God had orchestrated things to bring the dream He gave Joseph to finally come to pass. Had Joseph dreamed of this day and thought through what he might do? From everything we see of Joseph's character at this point in his life, I believe we must interpret his intentions as honorable. It appears that he has a plan to test his brothers. Joseph knows that he has matured and been changed by the paintbrush of time in the hand of God. Now he is going to find out if his brothers have been changed as well. Do they still hate him? Are they treating Benjamin like they treated him? Would they sacrifice one of their own to save themselves?

¹³ But they replied, "Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more." That reminds me of Mark Twain. After reading his own obituary, he said, "The report of my death is an exaggeration." The one who was "no more" was sitting in front of them accusing them of being spies. His interrogation, no doubt, was aimed at finding out if his father and brother were still alive without letting them know who he was. He got the information he was looking for. Now how would he see if the brothers had really changed?

¹⁵ And this is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶ Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!" ¹⁷ And he put them all in custody for three days. What will the brothers do? Will they be able to pick which one can go? Or will they all fight to be the one that can go. The three days gave them time to think about what was happening and why. Did they think about what Joseph might have experienced in that very same pit? (Genesis 39:20) I wonder if Joseph had his own spy in the pit to relay their conversations?

After letting them sweat it out for a few days in prison, Joseph came to them with his plan. ¹⁸ On the third day, Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households. ²⁰ But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die." Joseph said that he was doing this because of his fear of

Commented [notes5]: Genesis 39:20 (NIV)
20 Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison,

God. In other words, if they were innocent, he feared God's judgment, so he is letting them prove themselves, but keeping one of them for security. Did it surprise them that this supposed foreign ruler was the first to mention God?

Now would they abandon one of their brothers, like they had abandoned him? Would they hurry back with Benjamin to rescue their brother? Had their hearts changed? How would they pick who stayed?

²¹ *They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us."* ²² *Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood."* This was probably the repetition of what they had already concluded during those three days in prison. The justice of God had caught up with them. (Isaiah 3:11) They realized that they were reaping what they had sown. They knew God is just. At the time, selling Joseph seemed like a great idea. Now they knew it was selfish and sinful, and they were answering to God. If only we could see the results of our actions, instead of dreaming of a scenario disconnected from reality.

They didn't realize that Joseph could understand them. Hearing their conviction and realizing the pain he was inflicting on their souls, Joseph had to turn away to weep. God was at work in their lives after all. How he must have longed to hear them express regret for what they had done. They called him "our brother" instead of "that dreamer". Reuben even spoke of him as "the boy". It was the first he had heard that Reuben objected to their plan. He had to hide his tears from them. It wasn't yet the right time to make himself known.

There is a little spin going on in Reuben's memory. He didn't really say to not to sin against Joseph. He just suggested leaving him in the cistern to starve to death instead of outright murdering him on the spot. (Genesis 37:21-22) He was planning on rescuing Joseph, but he didn't tell his brothers that. Funny how our memory can make us bolder and braver than we actually were.

Apparently no one volunteered and nor could they agree on who should stay, so Joseph *had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes*. They must have flashed back to when Joseph was bound and led away. Simeon was the second oldest. Since Reuben had at least stood against killing Joseph, Joseph selected the second oldest, the one who should have done something in Reuben's absence some 20 years earlier.

They walked away, leaving Simeon to his fate just as they had left Joseph to his. No one spoke up. None offered a different solution or to take Simeon's place. They were convicted of their sin, but they really hadn't changed that much.

On the way back home, one of the brothers opened his bag of grain to feed his donkey and found the money he used to purchase the grain in the bag. *"Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, "What is this that God has done to us?"* Joseph had been the one who ordered their money be

Commented [notes6]: Isaiah 3:11 (NIV)
11 Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done.

Commented [notes7]: Genesis 37:21-22 (NIV)
21 When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said.
22 "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him."
Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

returned, but they saw it as the hand of God catching up with them. If they were caught and accused of stealing, they would never see home again. But more than that, they saw that what they had done was known by God and being dealt with. Although the silver was there at the order of Joseph, they thought that it was a miracle. In fact it was. Who could orchestrate all that happened? Only God! Guilt was having its gracious affect on their souls. (Deuteronomy 21:9)

Commented [notes8]: Deuteronomy 21:9 (NIV)
9 So you will purge from yourselves the guilt of shedding innocent blood, since you have done what is right in the eyes of the LORD.

Sometimes we find out that man had a hand in something so we don't give the credit to God. We don't tremble like they did because we see it all as natural events instead of the supernatural hand of God. Coincidence is one thing, but when we see near statistical impossibilities happen again and again, we need to tremble like they did. It isn't superstition; it is an honest look at life. When we start with the assumption that the spiritual world does not affect the physical world, we make the wildest claims for what we observe. If we would be honest, we'd realize it takes more faith to believe everything is an accident, than it does to believe in a God who is orchestrating history. Joseph put their money back in their bags, and God used it to get them to examine their hearts. (Jeremiah 17:10)

Commented [notes9]: Jeremiah 17:10 (NIV)
10 "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."

When they arrived home, they relayed the story to their father. ³³ *"Then the man who is lord over the land said to us, 'This is how I will know whether you are honest men: Leave one of your brothers here with me, and take food for your starving households and go. ³⁴ But bring your youngest brother to me so I will know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will give your brother back to you, and you can trade in the land.'"* Now Jacob has to decide if his love for Benjamin is really greater than that of Simeon. At the same time God is having the brothers face the seriousness of their sin against Joseph. Do you see how God is dealing with each of their weaknesses through the events as they unfold? He does the same with us.

They began to empty their sacks of grain and they all found their money in the sacks. Now they were really afraid. What was God doing? He was saving their lives, but first they needed to deal with their past by repenting of their sin. (Zechariah 1:3) They needed to realize that what they had done was evil in God's sight and that God holds us accountable. Then they needed to plead for God's mercy. (2Corinthians 7:10-11)

Commented [notes10]: Zechariah 1:3 (NIV)
3 Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Return to me,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the LORD Almighty.

³⁶ *Their father Jacob said to them, "You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!"* What? Simeon is no more? They just gave him up for dead. Jacob can't let go of Benjamin, even if it cost the life of one of his other sons.

Commented [notes11]: 2 Corinthians 7:10-11 (NIV)
10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.
11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

I want you to pay careful attention to his last sentence. "Everything is against me!" That is certainly how it seemed. His oldest son was disinherited, and the second oldest is in prison in a foreign land. He thought his favorite son was eaten by a wild animal. He thought they couldn't get anymore food unless he risked the life of his now favorite son Benjamin. Could anything else go wrong?

If there is ever an argument against suicide, this is it! Actually, everything is going right for Jacob. (Romans 8:28) There was simply no way he could see it. How can you know what is really happening in your life? How can you know when what

Commented [notes12]: Romans 8:28 (NIV)
28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

seems like a disaster is actually your salvation? You can't! Our perspective is too limited. (Romans 11:34) Only God knows and He has given us some very great and precious promises. (2Peter 1:4) Let's consider what is actually happening from God's perspective. The brothers are facing up to their sin and getting right with God. Dad is about to find out his long lost favorite son is not only alive, but is second in command of the most powerful nation on earth. He is going to meet grandsons he never knew he had. He is about to find he has no physical concerns for the rest of his life. But from his perspective, "Everything is against me!"

Commented [notes13]: Romans 11:34 (NIV)
34 "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

Commented [notes14]: 2 Peter 1:4 (NIV)
4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

The next time you are tempted to join Jacob's pity party with a similar expression, would you remember what was really happening to Jacob and have a little faith in God? I know, easier said than done. I know some pain can be so deep we can't imagine recovering. But can't we try to cling to this invaluable lesson of hope? (Psalm 31:24) God may be working in ways we could never imagine. (Isaiah 64:4)

Commented [notes15]: Psalms 31:24 (NIV)
24 Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD.

Commented [notes16]: Isaiah 64:4 (NIV)
4 Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

Reuben would do anything to be restored to his father. He made a most profound offer to save his extended family. He offered his own sons if he did not bring Benjamin back safely. ³⁸ But Jacob said, "My son will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left. If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in sorrow." He was saying, "I can't let go of him. I'm too attached! I'll die if I lose him." Now how do you think that made the rest of the brothers feel?

God is dealing with Jacob. The day will come when he will have to let go of him and trust God. If the Lord is dealing with us, we will have to let go of those things we cling to as well. People can be generous and offer us all kinds of assurances, but our only real security is the Lord. (Psalm 31:6) Jacob will only too soon discover that what he thought he lost is safe with God.

Commented [notes17]: Psalms 31:6 (NIV)
6 I hate those who cling to worthless idols; I trust in the LORD.

Is God dealing with you like He was with Joseph's brothers and father? Does it seem that everything is against you? It is actually for you. You may have to let go of a few things and trust God, but you can be sure, He has better plans for you, than you have for yourself. (Jeremiah 29:11) If God is for me, who can be against me? (Romans 8:31) Oh, it may look really bad, impossible even, but God is greater than any situation you can find yourself in. (Jeremiah 32:17) I'm reminded of Jesus' comment to His disciples after He stilled the raging lake. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40) Jesus was surprised they couldn't trust Him after all they had been through together. I imagine He feels the same about us at times. "Do you still have no faith?"

Commented [notes18]: Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)
11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Commented [notes19]: Romans 8:31 (NIV)
31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

Commented [notes20]: Jeremiah 32:17 (NIV)
17 "Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.

Commented [notes21]: Mark 4:40 (NIV)
40 He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

He will see you through to the other side; that will no doubt be better than you could have dreamed. It may not be in this life, though it could be. But one thing is certain, if you are in Him, eye has not seen, ear has not heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him. (1Corinthians 2:9)

Commented [notes22]: 1 Corinthians 2:9 (NIV)
9 However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"--