

Joseph Saw His Brothers Come for Food

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to explain the fact that the plan the Lord had given to Joseph was going to save the lives of people from many lands. In our topic today, we are going to see this also included the family of Joseph.

Genesis 42:1-5 says, “When Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob said to his sons, ‘Why do you look at one another?’ And he said, ‘Indeed I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down to that place and buy for us there, that we may live and not die.’ So Joseph’s ten brothers went down to buy *grain* in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, ‘Lest some calamity befall him.’ And the sons of Israel went to buy grain among those who journeyed, for the famine was in the land of Canaan.” Here, we see the famine that was happening in the land of Egypt was also happening in the land of Canaan. However, the word quickly spread to other countries that there was food in the land of Egypt. Jacob heard that there was grain in the land of Egypt.

Jacob told his sons that it was time for them to do more than just look at each other as their grain supply decreased. Jacob realized that the day would soon come when they had no grain. So, he told the brothers of Joseph that he had heard there was grain in the land of Egypt. He told the brothers that it was important for them to go down to Egypt and buy some grain so they and their families would live and not die. Jacob realized that if they did not get grain, it would be possible that they and their families could starve to death in a short time. The brothers agreed and prepared to go to Egypt so they could buy food for their families.

However, we see that only ten of the brothers actually went to Egypt. Joseph had probably been in Egypt for more than twenty years. Joseph was seventeen years old when he brought the bad report about his brothers, in Genesis 37:2. Soon after this event, his brothers took the sheep to Shechem to feed them. They went from there to Dothan and that is where Joseph had found them when his father sent him to check and see if things were going well with his brothers. They were so angry their father favored Joseph over them that they sold him as a slave to the Midianites who then took him to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar. Genesis 41:46 says, “Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt.” Here, we see that Joseph was thirty years old when he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh. Then came the seven years of plenty, so Joseph was thirty-seven years old by the time the famine started. All of the people stored enough grain to last until the next harvest. As a result, it would have been a year later before the famine meant no food had grown. That was why Joseph had

probably been in Egypt more than twenty years.

Even though Benjamin was an adult, his father did not allow him to go to Egypt with his brothers. Jacob was afraid that some calamity might happen to him, and he would not return safely from Egypt. We go on to read what happened when the ten brothers arrived in Egypt. Genesis 42:6-12 says, “Now Joseph *was* governor over the land; and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed down before him with *their* faces to the earth. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them. Then he said to them, ‘Where do you come from?’ And they said, ‘From the land of Canaan to buy food.’ So Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. Then Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them, and said to them, ‘You *are* spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land!’ And they said to him, ‘No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. We *are* all one man’s sons; we *are* honest *men*; your servants are not spies.’ But he said to them, ‘No, but you have come to see the nakedness of the land.’” Joseph recognized his brothers and realized that he needed to test their attitudes before he revealed to them that he was their brother.

Earlier, we saw that Joseph had been given an Egyptian name by Pharaoh. Genesis 41:45 says, “And Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphnath-Paaneah. And he gave him as a wife Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On. So Joseph went out over *all* the land of Egypt.” We also mentioned that the Egyptians were clean shaven. As a result, in addition to his Egyptian name, we will see that Joseph was dressed like an Egyptian, talked to his brothers through an interpreter, and was the Egyptian governor. The brothers came and bowed down to Joseph with their faces to the ground. Joseph recognized his brothers but acted like a stranger and spoke roughly to them. These things were all in addition to the fact that it was probably more than twenty years since the brothers had seen him. The brothers did not even imagine that the Egyptian governor might be their own brother because of all of these things.

Then, Joseph demanded of them, “‘Where do you come from?’ And they said, ‘From the land of Canaan to buy food.’” As Joseph saw his brothers bowed down before him, we read that he remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about his brothers. It is very possible that he had not thought about those dreams since the time his brothers had sold him into slavery. Suddenly, he saw those dreams being fulfilled right in front of his eyes. However, to test his brothers and make sure that they did not recognize him, he again spoke roughly and said, “You are spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land!” This probably filled the brothers with great fear. As a result, we see that they almost pleaded with him as they said, “No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. We are all one man’s sons; we are honest men; your servants are not spies.” Here, the brothers used several words to describe themselves as honest men who had only come to buy food for their families.

They called Joseph “lord” to show that they recognized his authority. They called

themselves “servants” to try to show an attitude of humility. They said that their only purpose for coming to Egypt was to buy food. Then, they started describing their family. They said they were all the sons of one man. They said they were honest men. They again said they were servants of the governor, not spies. Instead of changing his tone and speaking kindly to them, Joseph continued to test their attitudes and said, “No, but you have come to see the nakedness of the land.”

This forced the brothers to tell more about their family. Genesis 42:13-17 says, “And they said, ‘Your servants *are* twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and in fact, the youngest *is* with our father today, and one *is* no more.’ But Joseph said to them, ‘It *is* as I spoke to you, saying, “You *are* spies!” In this *manner* you shall be tested: By the life of Pharaoh, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of you, and let him bring your brother; and you shall be kept in prison, that your words may be tested to see *whether there* is any truth in you; or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you *are* spies!’ So he put them all together in prison three days.” We see that their answer helped Joseph learn more about the rest of his family. This was the first time in all of those years that Joseph had heard anything about his family and so, the news the brothers shared with him probably filled his heart with joy.

That was especially true when they said, “...and in fact, the youngest is with our father today...” By that statement, Joseph immediately learned two things. First, Benjamin was still alive. Second, his father was still alive. However, he then said to them, “It is as I spoke to you, saying, ‘You are spies!’ In this manner you shall be tested...” This test was not to find out if they were spies. Instead, this test was to see if they had changed their attitudes. They did not know that was the purpose or that it was even a test. Then, Joseph told the brothers how they could prove they were not spies. He told them that they could prove they were not spies by sending one of them back to their home country and getting their youngest brother and bringing him to Egypt. Joseph said that only if their youngest brother came to Egypt would he know they were not spies.

Then, Joseph told them they could decide who they would send to get their brother. Joseph said that the rest of them would be kept in prison while the one went back to get their youngest brother. Joseph said that was the way their words could be tested to see if they were speaking the truth or not. If the one brother did not bring back their youngest brother, then Joseph said that by the life of Pharaoh that would prove they were spies. To give them time to think and choose a brother to send back to their home to get their youngest brother, Joseph put them all together in prison for three days. Since Joseph was directly under Pharaoh, that meant they were prisoners of Pharaoh and those who served him. That meant they may have been placed in the same prison where Joseph had earlier spent several years before he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh.

This also gave Joseph time to more fully develop the plan to test his brothers. This was necessary to reveal the condition of their hearts to see if the Lord had been working in their hearts during the many years that Joseph had been in Egypt. Jeremiah 17:9 says,

“The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” The time in the prison gave them time to think because they had no idea what this governor of Egypt might do to them. Joseph truly understood the importance of helping his brothers learn that he loved them, even though they may not have understood that at this time. In fact, they did not fully understand until after the death of their father. We want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to understand and explain the importance of Joseph testing his brothers before he revealed to them that he was their brother. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to explain why Joseph did what he did.