

The Brothers' Test

- Genesis 42
- Welcome back to our sisters who were retreating last Sunday, and welcome to all of you with us here today in person or online. Today we are looking at a “test sandwich” because Joseph’s test of his brothers is the meat of the passage. Why does Joseph, and ultimately God, test the brothers? It is the same reason why God tested Joseph and why God tests you and me. Psalm 66:10 sums it up well: “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.” You have tried us, or refined us, as silver is refined. God’s tests reveal to *us* what is in our hearts and minds so that through our confession and submission to God and others, we may be refined and made faithful. Joseph was tested as a slave and then as a prisoner, and he was shown to be faithful. God gave him favor, but Joseph received that favor and walked in humility before the Lord. Now it is the brothers’ turn to be tested. Have they failed miserably already? Yes! But aren’t you glad that God does not destroy his people when they fail him? These men had to be tested and humbled if the nation they would form would be faithful. Once again, we see the grace of God in Genesis. God could have started over with Joseph. But he didn’t. “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” (Psalm 145:8)
- Let’s look at this chapter today under three main points: Canaan, Egypt, Canaan again.
- **Canaan (verses 1-5)**
- The years of plenty are done and we are now around two years into the famine, with five more to go, according to the best guess of biblical scholars. Jacob finds out that there is grain for sale in Egypt, and since they are out of grain and since his sons are sitting in his living room just looking at each other, he asks the classic dad question: “Why do you look at one another?” Or another way of saying it, “Why are you just sitting there doing nothing?” Hey, you who still live in your parents’ house, do you ever hear that question? I bet you do. I hope you do! The question is followed by three important things, without the obvious piece that went unspoken, that there was no food in the house. First, the truth. “There is grain for sale in Egypt.” Second, the command. “Go down and buy grain for us.” Third, the motivation. “That we may live and not die.” I remember many times like that growing up. Dad would speak to his three sons while we sat staring at Saturday morning cartoons. “It is time for Saturday chores.” Then, “Get up and get going.” And while we groaned that we didn’t feel like it, he would add, “I can change the way you feel.”
- The ten brothers got up and got going, and Moses is careful to tell us that the youngest, the only son left to Jacob from Rachel, as far as he knows, is left behind. Benjamin stays with dad. Though it has been around 20 years since Joseph was taken from him, Jacob is still grieving his loss and holding on for dear life to his new favorite son.
- The brothers make it to Egypt in about ten days and find that the rest of the world has come there as well. That leads us to...
- **Egypt (verses 6-28)**
- Joseph, the governor, is unrecognizable to his brothers. For all they know, he is the Egyptian leader in charge of grain. Everyone is lining up to see him and when it is his brothers’ turn, what do they do? They “bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground.” Dream number 1 fulfilled! Their sheaves bow down to his. Joseph remembered his dreams as he recognizes his brothers, and this is where the tests begin. He speaks through an interpreter, of course, so they will not know who he is or that he even understands Hebrew, and he accuses them of being spies. This is the first of three times in this chapter that I believe the brothers experienced sheer terror. To have the leader of the most powerful nation on earth accuse them of being spies could only mean one thing, that they are about to be executed. “You have come to see the nakedness of the land,” Joseph says to them. This would have been another way of saying, “You have come to see where we are most vulnerable to attack.”

- At this point, the brothers make two critical mistakes, which leads to Joseph increasing the heat under the test tube they are in. They say, “We are honest men,” and we know and Joseph knew that they were not. They were hiding a big lie. Then they say that there is another brother at home, and one is no more. He was born before Joseph was sold into slavery, and now he knows Benjamin is still alive. And the test heats up even more and Joseph uses the word twice in verses 15 and 16, “By this shall you be tested.” The word means “to search out, to examine, to try, to prove.” It is the same word in Psalm 66:10, which we saw earlier. “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.”
- This is where the brothers and Joseph will change roles. Allen Ross writes, “The oppressed became the oppressor, the spy accused the brothers of being spies, and the one who had been thrown into prison by his brothers put them into prison.” Why is Joseph doing this? To awaken their consciences. To help these self-proclaimed “honest” men to take a good look in the mirror. His goal is not to punish but to restore. He tells them that all of them will stay with him until one returns with the youngest brother back home. Then he puts them in custody, most likely prison, for three days. Why? So they could, as Dick likes to say, “Pause and reflect.” Wouldn’t you love to know what they talked about during those three days? I think we do know, in part.
- When they are released, Joseph must have shocked them by saying, again through an interpreter that he fears God. He doesn’t say “Ra” or any of the other Egyptian deity. He says, “I fear Elohim.” Almighty God. Then he tells them in effect that he has changed his mind, and just one of them must stay while the others return for the younger brother. “So your words will be verified, and you shall not die.” That’s when it happens, the crack in their hard hearts, and their consciences are awakened. They say to one another, “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother.” Conscience awakened, confession stated. They admit that their brother had begged them and they did not listen. Then Reuben says, “I told you not to sin against him. That is why this is happening to us.” Derek Kidner writes, “A taste of retribution was awakening feelings which a brother’s and a father’s tears had left totally untouched.” Meanwhile, Joseph understands every word they say and has to turn away to weep.
- When he turned back, he was ready to begin the second test. They seemed contrite over their sins against him, but would they now be faithful and obedient to do what he commanded? His end goal was to get the whole family to Egypt but not until they were ready. So he tested them again by having his servants replace the money they had given him for their bags of grain. It was a test of their character and at the same time a blessing for his family.
- The ten brothers left Egypt and at their first stop for the night, one of them found the money in his bag. Did Joseph intend for this to happen, or for all of them to find their money back home? We don’t know, but in God’s providence this is the way it happened, and it doubled the terror they would feel. Here, at their first stop, and even more when they get back home with the Father. On that first night when the money was found their hearts failed them and they trembled as they said, “What is this that God has done to us?” They are broken again because of their sin and **now** they recognize the hand of God in their trial. They recognize, as David did in Psalm 51, that all sin is ultimately against God. They could have recited the first verse of Psalm 60 if it had been written yet: “O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses; you have been angry; oh, restore us.” That is our cry. We feel rejected by God when we acknowledge our sin, but the truth is that he reveals in order to heal. He breaks through our defenses to show us that our only defense is his mercy, which he freely gives. “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Ps 51:17) That leads us to...
- **Canaan again (verses 29-38)**
- The first thing the brothers did when they returned was to tell their father everything. Well...except for the confession of their sin against Joseph. And except for the money they’d found in one of their bags. The heart work is still a work in progress with these guys. As with you and me!
- Then they all open their bags and find that ALL of their money had been put in with the grain. Terror again! You know, I just have to wonder if God intended for these brothers to feel a flash of the terror

that Joseph felt three times: once, thrown into the pit to die; twice, sold as a slave in Egypt; three times, thrown into prison where he was forgotten for at least two years. We don't know.

- But we do know what Jacob is thinking when he sees this and hears that Simeon is bound in Egypt, and they have been told to go back there with his favorite son, Benjamin. He says, "You have bereaved me of my children." He doesn't know how right he is, except he does not yet understand God's mercy in all of this. Kidner again writes that the brothers' reaction to finding the first bag of money was, "as far as it goes, a model of fruitful reaction to trouble (what is God doing in this?), while Jacob can see no farther than the trouble itself." Good word. We must be willing to see past the trouble and past the trial to see the plans and purposes of God. If we can. If God allows us to see it. If not, we can still say with Job, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."
- The chapter ends with Reuben offering, strangely, to let Jacob kill *his* two sons if Reuben does not bring Benjamin back to him. Let's give him the benefit of the doubt and believe that he and the other brothers were wanting to do what the leader of Egypt had told them to do, because they had changed. Jacob is also resolute in saying no way to Reuben.
- What can we take away from this passage today? 1- It is the mercy of God when our conscience is awakened and we acknowledge our sin. God will work with broken and contrite hearts. 2- God's people who know their sins are in a place to do what God requires of them to walk in faithfulness. 3- God's people who have been hurt by others, even family or close friends, can always by God's grace forgive and (sometimes) even enjoy restored fellowship.
- Prayer
- Communion
- Greet One Another