

GENESIS 43-50

THE BROTHERS RETURN TO EGYPT - 43-44

As was predicted, Israel (Jacob) and his family run out of food again as the famine rages on. They need to go back to Egypt. Israel's sons remind him that they cannot go back without Benjamin, and also, the money they were given back for the food they bought the first time. How do they convince Israel to release Benjamin to their care? Judah takes the responsibility upon his life. Israel relents and lets Benjamin go. But he also sends so many gifts, hoping this will appease the Egyptians in case they think harm toward Benjamin and the others.

Joseph receives them warmly but formally. He is still intent on hiding his feelings. When he sees his little brother, he becomes so emotional he has to step out so that they do not see him break down. How will he hold on to Benjamin? He comes up with a scheme. He is also not prepared to reveal himself or let his brothers off the hook. It is still not clear what he intends to do to them. A special silver chalice is planted in Benjamin's bag. This is a chalice used for religious purposes. It would be seen as a serious theft. As the brothers never anticipate the object to be in their possession, they commit to being slaves should it be found among them. It is found in Benjamin's bag to their total shock. The brothers are fully resigned to being slaves of Egypt. Yet Joseph wants Benjamin only. But the brothers cannot accept these terms. To return to their father without Benjamin will mean certain death to Israel.

Judah, in particular, distinguishes himself from his brothers for taking the lead in sacrificing himself in place of Benjamin. Moreover, he tells Joseph honestly and openly about his father and how important Benjamin is to Israel.

JOSEPH REVEALS HIMSELF - 45

When Joseph hears about his father's grief, he can no longer contain his emotions. All the grief and loss of these many years is released in intense weeping and wailing. He reveals himself to his brothers. He also assures them that he is not angry with them, that all that has taken place has worked out for the best. Indeed, he goes so far as to state that God sent him to Egypt so that the life of many could be preserved. Finally, he persuades them that they and all their families must come and settle in Egypt for good, as the famine will continue for many more years to come.

ISRAEL/JACOB COMES TO EGYPT WITH THE WHOLE FAMILY - 46-50

Israel comes to Egypt with the whole clan (they are 70 people in total). They are given the choicest land in which to settle (Goshen). Israel re-unites with Joseph and meets Joseph's sons which he blesses as equals with his own sons (thus, Ephraim and Manasseh are listed among the 12 tribes, not Joseph alone). Also, following early patterns, the younger (Ephraim) is given a larger portion than the elder (Manasseh). This explains the fact that in later parts of the Old Testament, the northern kingdom of

Israel is sometimes referred to in shorthand as Ephraim, indicating the most dominant tribe. The southern kingdom's dominant tribe is Judah and we will see below why Judah takes on this prominence.

Israel also pronounces his final blessings on his sons. Reuben, the eldest, is diminished, for he had slept with his father's concubine. Simeon and Levi are diminished, because they violently and wickedly killed all the inhabitants of Shechem (34). Thus, all the blessing of the firstborn is passed on to Judah, and even though Judah's character is not that of Joseph, he has distinguished himself among his brothers in showing leadership and self-sacrifice.

Before he dies Israel asks that he be buried in the land of his forefathers and mothers. He also predicts the eventual return of the clan to Canaan, as this is the location of the promised land. Joseph, too, before he dies, asks that when the clan eventually return to Canaan, his bones be taken for burial there. Where one lies is as important as where one lives. Land has a sacred quality to it. Also, Even as Joseph has become fully Egyptianized, he remains to the last a Hebrew.

Finally, After Israel dies, the brothers fear that Joseph's memory of betrayal will flare up toward them. But again, Joseph tells them that God worked things out for good. And now, he also speaks words of forgiveness. They share tears and they are reconciled all over again.

What do we learn from all this? Many things. But here are a few points to ponder.

1) Any family and any community is bound together in greater and greater intimacy, only as they openly confront each other about hurts and wrongs, and openly forgive each other. We cannot escape wrong since we are imperfect human beings. But forgiveness is the powerful remedy of love which reconciles and renews relationships like nothing else can.

2) God's ways are not our ways. Blessings don't come because we deserve them. Misfortunes don't happen because we have earned them. But God has plans for us which God is seeking to work out regardless of what happens. Whether good or ill befalls us, God is there waiting to grow us from the inside out. Will grace, compassion, gentleness, courage, patience, humility, and openness grow in us? Or will we grow cold, bitter, closed, arrogant, selfish, or cynical? Life doesn't do us any favours. We need God's Spirit to inspire and provoke us to choose the right way each and every moment we are alive and every season of our lives.