

## Tests of Transformation

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I thought about two things when reading these chapters in Genesis that close out the story of Joseph and his brothers. The first thing is an old proverb that says, “*The difficulties of life are intended to make us better, not bitter.*”<sup>1</sup> The second thing is an old Jim Croce song. The lyrics were straight out of the 1970’s—with its peace signs and its hippy-dippy flavor. The song starts out: “*Which way are you goin’? Which side will you be on? Will you stand and watch while all the seeds of hate are sown?*” Now those lyrics might come from the ‘70’s, but they may be even more applicable today than in the past.

And with that in mind, we will finish up our sermon series on this portion of the Book of Genesis. Much of what we have covered tells us about the many difficulties that Joseph encountered. But today, I’d like for you to think about Joseph’s brothers—the ones who, early on in this story, sowed so many seeds of hate. And as we look upon the brothers, think about that old proverb, and those Jim Croce lyrics, and begin to measure the decisions that the brothers made by them: Ask yourselves were their lives getting better by the decisions they were making, or were they getting bitter? Which way were they going? Which path would they be on?

Last week, we reviewed Joseph’s ascension to perhaps the highest administrative position in the Egyptian kingdom where he was responsible for the relief efforts that were being implemented in the face of the terrible seven-year famine that had descended upon the entire known world. And this famine had stretched all of the way back to Canaan where his father, Jacob, and Joseph’s brothers had continued to reside. And because of this famine, his brothers were forced to pack up their donkeys and head to Egypt in the hope of buying some grain there to avoid starvation. But once they arrived in Egypt, unbeknownst to them, they came into the presence of their long lost brother, Joseph, who was now in charge of doling out the grain that was being held in the royal storehouses.

Although 22 years had passed from the time that Joseph had been snatched up by those Ishmaelite traders from that pit his brothers had thrown him into, Joseph immediately recognized them because they looked pretty much the same—dressed in their traditional shepherd clothing. But, the brothers did not recognize Joseph because he was not only older, but was now arrayed in the fineness of Egyptian linen, wearing the Pharaoh’s signet ring and probably other expensive jewelry—his hair styled in royal Egyptian fashion. They had no clue that they were dealing with their younger brother that they had abused so badly in years past—when they even considered murdering him.

Now, Joseph’s reaction to them was very interesting. He didn’t lash out at them in rage—remembering bad things they had done to him. Joseph could have done that and ordered their

immediate execution. But, he didn't do that. Yet, he didn't welcome them with open arms either. Rather, he reacted in a way that I find very curious—he accused them of being spies. That isn't all that far-fetched. Foreign powers would sometimes send spies into Egypt just to see what was going on there. Of course, Joseph knew that they were not spies, but he leveled these charges against them anyway—apparently as some kind of test. As it turns out, in response to Joseph's charges, his brothers explain that they have come from Canaan where they have left their starving families—including their youngest brother, Benjamin, and their father behind. Joseph hears them out, but still insists that they are spies. So we still have to ask ourselves, why did Joseph sort of play them along this way?

Well, Joseph wasn't being mean—it wasn't his intent to cause them alarm. Yet, he wasn't acting in some random way either. Rather, Joseph had a plan. And that plan was intended to test his brothers. Of course, we have already concluded that it was not a test to determine if they were spies—it had nothing to do with espionage. So what was the test all about? As it turns out, Joseph wanted to test them to see if his brothers had changed. Had his brothers turned from their wicked ways?<sup>2</sup> And the nature of this test is stated in Genesis 42:15 where Joseph turns to his brothers and says: “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.” Genesis 42:15 (NIV) Eventually, Joseph relents a bit and agrees to let everyone go back home except Simeon. And under this test, Joseph is giving them the golden opportunity to escape from Egypt by abandoning Simeon to a dungeon, in much the same way they had abandoned him to the Ishmaelite slave traders. The test would be whether or not they would ever come back. Or would they just make up some wild story about Simeon being killed by a wild beast, like they had told their father about Joseph so many years ago? If they did that and never showed up in Egypt again, then Joseph would know that his brothers were hardened and hopeless—i.e., it would prove that they hadn't changed one little bit. On the other hand, if they returned, despite Joseph's threatening attitude toward them—well then, maybe there was hope for them yet. Perhaps, the passage of time had taught them some aspect of compassion and mercy that they had failed to display to Joseph in his younger years. Maybe under the pressures of this test, they might display some positive character traits that lay under the surface and just needed a little nudging to reveal themselves.

Well as it turns out, they didn't throw Simeon under the bus—so to speak. They ended up telling their father the truth about why Simeon was still in Egypt. And they wrestled with the decision as to how they'd convince Jacob to ever allow his now-favorite-son, Benjamin, to accompany them back to Egypt. And as they worked their way through all of this, we can begin to see that the pressure of the

testing process was paying off because these brothers were actually beginning to show some redeeming qualities.

For example, we can see this almost immediately after Joseph announced his test because in Genesis 42:21 we find that: “They [i.e. the brothers] said to one another, ‘Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he [i.e. Joseph] was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that’s why this distress has come upon us.’”(NIV) Now, why is that statement a positive sign? Think about what they are doing here—they are doing something that is important for redemption. They are engaging in a little *self-examination*. They could have simply bemoaned the fact that this Egyptian administrator—their unknown brother, Joseph—was being pretty tough on them. But they didn’t do that. Rather, they began to ask themselves if maybe they had been just as tough on somebody else in their past, and that someone, of course, was Joseph. This is a good process for all of us to engage in from time to time. It helps us to be humble. It helps us to be less condemning of others because it reminds us that, at some time or another in the past, we were just as guilty of similar misconduct as the unfair conduct that is being doled out to us. It helps us be resilient when troubles come along, and not whiners.

Now, the test continues as they told their father, Jacob, that somehow the money that they paid for the grain ended up back in their grains sacks. (Of course, they didn’t know that Joseph had ordered his servants to secretly give their money back.) They could have been dishonest and pocketed the money and not say a word about it to Jacob. So they passed this part of the test. Now, honesty appeared to be a part of their character—not the greed that was so evident when they were willing to sell Joseph into slavery.

Notice too that they didn’t sugar coat their report to Jacob—unless they came back to Egypt with Benjamin, Simeon would remain in custody of the Egyptians. The fact that Joseph demanded them to bring Benjamin back was a part of the test as well. Benjamin was Joseph’s only full brother—Rachel was mother to each of them. So, Joseph apparently wanted to see if his half-brothers would treat Benjamin as cruelly as they had once treated him.<sup>3</sup> But Jacob wasn’t too keen on the idea of letting Benjamin accompany them back to Egypt. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that Jacob told 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!” Genesis 42:36 (NIV) In hearing that, the brothers could have simply thrown up their hands and said, “Well, we did the best that we could? I guess poor ole Simeon will just have to do the best he can in that Egyptian jail.” But, we see a very different response. In fact, Reuben steps forward and said to his father: <sup>37</sup> “You may put both of my sons to death if I do not bring

him [Benjamin] back to you. Entrust him to my care, and I will bring him back.” Genesis 42:37 (NIV) This response passes the test in an important way. It is certainly not the kind of response that shows a passive character—the kind that allows injustice to go unaddressed. What is most important, however, is the fact that Reuben just didn’t voice his willingness to go back to Egypt and assure Benjamin’s safe return, but he also was willing to take the responsibility squarely upon his shoulders. Simeon was sitting there in that Egyptian jail without any just cause or reason, and Reuben simply was not willing to allow such a set of unjust circumstances to continue on.

Despite this assurance, Jacob would not let them go at that point in time. But, as food supplies ran out, the matter arises again, and we see Judah stepping forward voicing his commitment to guarantee Benjamin’s safe passage to and from Egypt, much in the way Reuben did earlier. In Genesis 43:8-9, it tells us: <sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy along with me and we will go at once, so that we and you and our children may live and not die. <sup>9</sup> I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life. (NIV) It’s remarkable just how much the brothers’ characters had changed over time. And we see it here with both Reuben and Judah being willing to step up and do the right thing—holding themselves completely responsible if things didn’t work out well.

Finally, Jacob gave his consent for them to head back to Egypt with Benjamin in tow. And when they arrived there, Joseph’s tests continued. He invited his brothers, including Benjamin, to dine with him. But, when the food was served to each one, it became apparent that Benjamin was given five times as much food as appeared on anyone else’s plate. And this was a test too—but what was it all about? It was a test to detect jealousy. Years before, they had been very jealous of Joseph, particularly when he wore that multi-colored coat. So now, how would they react to Benjamin getting such large portions of food compared to what was given each one of them. Would they be jealous? No, at this time in their lives, jealousy was the farthest thing from their minds—it tells us:<sup>4</sup> “They had a wonderful time bantering back and forth, and the wine flowed freely!” Genesis 43:34 (TLB)

So after that, they packed their donkeys with sacks of grain to head back home. Now Joseph applies the final test. He has one of his servants secretly put his royal silver cup in Benjamin’s sack. When his brothers were a short distance from the city, Joseph had his men stop the brothers and accuse them of smuggling out his silver cup in their grain sacks. But, the brothers are confident that there must be some mistake, and so they all declared with one voice: “If you find his cup with any one of us, let that one die. And all the rest of us will be slaves forever to your master.” Genesis 44:9 (TLB) The Egyptians, of course, find the silver cup in Benjamin’s sack and accuse all of them of being treacherous

thieves. So, the test is in place: Would the brothers abandon Benjamin—like they’d abandoned Joseph in that pit years before—and simply say: “Oh well, Benjamin, they caught you red-handed with the cup—so we guess you’ll just have to die.” But no, they didn’t say that. Rather, Judah steps forward, and instead of abandoning Benjamin, turns to Joseph and says: “Oh, my lord, what can we say to you? How can we explain this? How can we prove our innocence? God is punishing us for our sins. My lord, we have all returned to be your slaves—all of us, not just our brother who had your cup in his sack.” Genesis 44:16 (NLT)

Wow, this is a completely new Judah! Back in Genesis 37, he is the one who comes up with the idea of selling Joseph to the Ishmaelite slave traders just to make a little cash. But now, he humbles himself and his brothers before God, confessing that they are all sinners. Rather than leaving Benjamin hung out to dry, Judah surrenders himself and his brothers to serve as slaves, side by side with Benjamin. And so, Joseph’s test is complete and, amazingly, all the brothers appear to have passed with flying colors.<sup>5</sup>

So we have to ask ourselves: What was it that changed the brothers over all those years? What can it be that can account for such a transformation? A clue appears back in Genesis 42 when they first realized that their money had been returned to their sacks of grain. In verse 28, we find that they were completely perplexed by how this could have happened, and it tells us: “Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’” Genesis 42:28 (NIV) When they threw Joseph in the pit 22 years before, God never entered into their thinking. When Judah went to bed with his daughter-in-law, Tamar—thinking that she was a prostitute—God never entered into his mind. But apparently, over the years they began to think about their guilt—about the things just mentioned in this story, as well as many other things—I am sure. And because of that, God came to mind. And when that happened, there may well have been a temptation to pull God away—after all, it was very uncomfortable to think about God when also thinking about how many times that they had let Him down.

Despite this level of discomfort, God would not let them alone. So often we hear about someone *“finding God.”* Many times that is after a person has gone through some kind of trial, some kind of test. But, it’s *not that they found God*; rather, it is that *God found them*—He was always constantly pursuing them, as He pursues you as well.<sup>6</sup> Why?—because God loves you so very much.<sup>7</sup> And as He pursues us, there are times that we come to crossroads in our lives as God rushes toward us in His pursuit. These crossroads—they are like the tests that confronted Joseph’s brothers. Each test

required personal decisions on their part: Would they turn one way and keep on the path of jealousy, anger, lust, even murder? Or would they take the other path of generosity, compassion, purity and love.

You know, the greatest miracle in these passages from Genesis may not be Joseph's interpretation of the dreams or even his unprecedented rise to power. The greatest miracle may well be the transformation of his brothers from hate-filled, greedy, lustful, murderers to men who had begun to consider God when facing the tests of life—they started choosing God's path when reaching those crossroads that emerged before them, rather than taking their own paths.

At times, we too are tested by the Lord—not to make our lives more difficult, but to do what Joseph was trying to achieve with his brothers. He was trying to see if they would show the image of God, rather than the image of Man. And that's the way it is when God tests us—*He is trying make our lives better, not bitter*. And in the same way that God pursued Joseph's brothers, He pursues you and me, as well. His Hand is always reaching forward, trying to point us in the right direction to draw us closer to Him. Maybe you can feel His Hand today. Maybe God is confronting you with tests today—those crossroads that He brings you to.

Which way are you going? Which side will you be on?

Let us pray.

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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor ©2017

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, quoted in *Men of Integrity*, Vol. 2, no. 4, *Today's Best Illustrations – Volume 5*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "TESTS".

<sup>2</sup> John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary – Genesis: From biblical text...to contemporary life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 678.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, ed., "Genesis," in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2014), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 104.

<sup>5</sup> John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary – Genesis: From biblical text...to contemporary life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 681.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 15:3-6 (NIV) <sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders <sup>6</sup> and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'"

<sup>7</sup> Pamela Rose Williams, "God Pursues Us: 6 Bible Based Ways God is in Pursuant," <https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/god-pursues-us>.