

The Saga of Joseph: The Testing of Truth Genesis 42:1-38

What do you do when you question whether someone you love is telling you the truth?

What they are saying to your face sounds good, but you are not sure if they are being truthful?

This is especially difficult when the person in question has a bad history of lying.

Accusing them of lying, without any solid proof, is usually not a good idea. One thing that destroys a relationship more quickly than lying is to accuse someone of lying when they are being truthful.

If you did not love them, it would not be so difficult. You would be careful to not make yourself vulnerable to being hurt. You would protect your heart by building walls around it.

But if you desire to build a strong relationship with them, you know that good relationships are based upon mutual trust. And trusting another person opens yourself up to being hurt.

In our passage today, Joseph does not trust that his brothers will tell him the truth.

The last time Joseph saw his brothers they were full of jealousy and hatred towards him.

They threw him into a pit and sold him into slavery.

Because they did not fear Joseph, they had no reason to hide their true feelings towards him.

But everything has changed.

Now Joseph holds all the cards. Next to Pharaoh, he is the most powerful man in the world.

If Joseph were to make himself known to his brothers, they would surely beg for his mercy.

They would tell Joseph exactly what he wanted to hear.

They would proclaim to Joseph their sorrow for what they had done to him.

They would profess to him that they had changed.

But would they be telling the truth?

Or would they only be saying what was necessary to avoid being crushed by Joseph?

Joseph wants to know the truth. He wants to know if his brothers have changed. He wants to know if they have become men of truth.

So, Joseph creates scenarios where he can observe the actions of the brothers. He will watch, not so much how they treat him, but how they treat one another.

Genesis 42 begins with Jacob talking with his sons during the years of famine. Joseph had been sold into slavery when he was 17.

13 years later, he became Pharaoh's 2nd in command.

Seven years of plenty have gone by and now we are beginning the 7 years of famine.

It has been twenty years since Joseph has seen his family.

Read Genesis 42:1-5.

When Jacob learned
that there was grain for sale in Egypt,
he said to his sons,
"Why do you look at one another?"
2 And
he said,
"Behold,
I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt.
Go down and buy grain for us there,
that we may live and not die."
3 So
ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt.
4 But
Jacob did not send Benjamin,
Joseph's brother,
with his brothers,

for he feared
that harm might happen to him.

5 Thus
the sons of Israel came to buy
among the others who came,
for the famine was in the land of Canaan.

God is the one driving the events of the story. God is the one working to bring the brothers together.

And He is using a famine to do it.

What can you learn about Jacob here?

Jacob is unaware of what God is doing.

As far as he is concerned, he is only trying to survive.

We might wish to see Jacob's perfect faith in God's promises of blessing. But that is not what we find.

It is not the perfection of Jacob's faith that accomplishes God's purposes. It is the perfection of God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

We also see that Jacob is still grieving the loss of Joseph.

There seems to be a hardness about him. Maybe even some depression.

Jacob's experience of past sorrow drives his current fears.

Jacob's primary concern is that his new favorite son, Benjamin, does not die.

Remember how easily Jacob sent Joseph to look for the brothers before they threw him into the pit.

Life has made Jacob more cautious.

How do the pains of your past drive your present fears?

God understands the feelings swirling within you.

God does not want you to live in fear. He wants you to live in faith in His steadfast love and faithfulness.

But God is understanding and compassionate as we struggle with fear.

Read Genesis 42:6-9.

6 Now
Joseph was governor over the land.
He was the one who sold to all the people of the land.
 And
Joseph's brothers
 came
 and
 bowed themselves before him
 with their faces to the ground.

7 Joseph saw his brothers
 and recognized them,
 but
he treated them like strangers
 and
spoke roughly to them.
 "Where do you come from?"
he said.
They said,
 "From the land of Canaan,
 to buy food."

8 And
Joseph recognized his brothers,
 but
they did not recognize him.

9 And
Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them.
 And
he said to them,
 "You are spies;
 you have come to see the nakedness of the land."

When the brothers arrive in Egypt, they immediately bow before Joseph. Joseph immediately recognizes them. They have no clue that they are bowing before their brother. At this point, Joseph could have easily had them killed. He might have done this quickly. Or he might have drawn out their suffering. If revenge was Joseph's intent, he certainly had the means to carry it out.

If you are looking for a good story of revenge, you should try “The Count of Monte Cristo” by Alexandre Dumas.

Genesis 42 is not a story of revenge.

It is not a story of revenge because God is working in Joseph and in his brothers to conform them to the image of Jesus Christ. God is working to bring reconciliation and unity in His covenant people.

Even though it is not a story of revenge, it has plenty of suspense and intrigue.

Ironically, the brothers who were so unwilling to bow down to Joseph as their younger brother, now bow down to him unknowingly.

This first meeting is not the complete fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams. Benjamin is not present. Nor is Jacob.

But you can see the sovereign hand of God bringing the dreams to fruition.

Joseph is not content that he is lord over his brothers.

He wants to be reconciled with his brothers.

If Joseph were to reveal his true identity to his brothers now, they would be tempted to tell him what he wants to hear. They would have a good reason to lie.

They would surely tell him that they were sorry for what they had done. They may have even groveled at his feet. But this is not what Joseph wants. He wants to know that their character has changed.

And so, Joseph pretends to be a stranger. He speaks harshly to them.

And he accuses them of being spies!

At first, we do not really know Joseph’s motivations. Only as the story unfolds do we see them clearly.

Joseph is testing his brothers.

He wants to see if they have genuinely repented of their selling him into slavery.

And he wants to see if they are still filled with the same jealousy and hatred.

Read Genesis 42:10-13.

10 They said to him,
 "No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food.
11 We are all sons of one man.
 We are honest men.
 Your servants have never been spies."
12 He said to them,
 "No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see."
13 And
 they said,
 "We, your servants, are twelve brothers,
 the sons of one man in the land of Canaan,
 and behold,
 the youngest is this day with our father,
 and
 one is no more."

How do the brothers respond to Joseph's accusations?

They deny that they are spies.

They declare themselves to be "honest" men.

The brothers are being honest with Joseph, but Joseph knows that they have not been "honest" men.

In order to defend themselves, they tell Joseph more and more about themselves.

They even go so far as to talk about Joseph and Benjamin.

They probably did not intend to say as much as they did.

Joseph knows that they have told him the truth.

I am sure he was encouraged by this. But it is going to take more than this to convince him that they have had a genuine change of heart.

Read Genesis 42:14-17.

14 But
 Joseph said to them,

"It is as I said to you.
 You are spies.
 15 By this you shall be tested:
 by the life of Pharaoh,
 you shall not go from this place
 unless your youngest brother comes here.
 16 Send one of you,
 and
 let him bring your brother,
 while you remain confined,
 that your words may be tested,
whether there is truth in you.
 Or else,
 by the life of Pharaoh,
 surely you are spies."
 17 And
 he put them all together in custody
 for three days.

Joseph tells the brothers that he is testing them as to whether they are spies.
 But what is the true test?
 He wants to know if they will discard Benjamin the way that they discarded him.
 Has their heart attitude towards their younger brother changed?
 He wants to see if they have become "faithful" brothers.

The brothers had said they were "honest men".
 But Joseph says that he is going to test them to see "whether there is truth in you."
 The word Joseph uses is emet.

tm,a/ (°§met) firmness, truth.

Emet is an important theological term.
 It has two related but distinct meanings.
 It can describe what is accurate to the facts.
 It is true that the Denver Nuggets beat the Miami Heat for the championship.
 It is true that I grew up on a farm in Paris, OH and that I met Robin in Jackson Hole, WY.

It is also true that I am a sinner.

Emet can also be used in the sense of faithfulness.

That man was true to his word.

When a person says he will do something, he is true when he follows through and does what he says he will do.

It is because emet can be used in both ways that it serves Joseph well.

The brothers think he is only wanting to know if they are telling the truth.

But Joseph wants to know if they have become “faithful” men.

Faithfulness is one quality that God must have in His people. It is upon this quality that our relationship with Him is founded. And it is this quality that must be displayed between brothers.

In fact, this quality is first found in God Himself.

He is faithful.

Along with “hesed” (steadfast love), emet is often used to describe the character of God.

^{ESV} **Genesis 24:27** and said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the LORD has led me in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen."

Steadfast love and faithfulness are both what theologians call “Communicable attributes”.

There are some attributes of God that only God can possess. God is self-existent. That means that He needs no one or nothing besides himself to exist. God is Omniscient, possessing all knowledge. He not only knows what is. He knows what might have been. God is Omnipotent. That means that there is nothing that God wants to do that He is not able to do. There is no limit on God’s power.

These attributes are called “incommunicable attributes” meaning that God does not transfer these attributes to humans. They are the attributes that distinguish God as God.

But steadfast love and faithfulness are communicable. That means that God can, and does, transfer these qualities to His people. They are communicable because humans do not possess them independently of God. They flow from God to us.

When a person displays “steadfast love” and “faithfulness” to another person, they are mirroring the character of God.

^{ESV} **Genesis 24:49** Now then, if you are going to show steadfast love and faithfulness to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or to the left."

It is not by accident that these two words are found in the same chapter in Genesis. Through this account, God is teaching His people the truth of who He is and the importance of their becoming like Him.

These two qualities, steadfast love and faithfulness, are the driving causes of our redemption.

In salvation, God is motivated by His eternal covenant keeping love towards His chosen people.

And in salvation, God is being faithful to keep His promises to His people.

There are many other things going on in salvation. But the Bible condenses our salvation into these two attributes.

These two words fill the OT.

The NT does not use them.

The NT does not use any OT word. The NT is not written in the same language.

The OT is written in Hebrew. And the NT is written in Greek.

But the NT does carry these same concepts over into the Greek language. The NT writers intend the same meaning only using Greek words rather than Hebrew.

This is what is happening in the book of John.

John 1:16-17 ¹⁶ And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John uses Greek words: charis and aletheia

h` ca,rij kai. h` avlh,qeia

They are translated into the English as “Grace and truth”.

And as Danny explained last week, these are not new ideas that were absent from the OT.

John is taking the Hebrew ideas of hesed and emet and translating them into the Greek for the people of his day.

Jesus is the fullest expression of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness.

That is what Grace and truth means.

Jesus is not only true in the sense that what he says is accurate to the facts.

He is true in that in His person and work, God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises is accomplished.

And, it is steadfast love and faithfulness that are being produced in us by God. He is transforming us into His image. He is conforming us to the image of Christ.

The fact that we too often display a lack of steadfast love and a lack of faithfulness does not nullify what God is doing. We continue to repent of our failures. And we repeatedly commit ourselves to pursue steadfast love and faithfulness. And we continue to look to Jesus to produce these in us by His grace.

Joseph does not have to have all these Gospel connections in his mind to know that if he is going to have any chance at a meaningful relationship with his brothers, they will need a new attitude. They will have to be “true”.

And he is not going to reveal himself as their brother until he has assurance that they are no longer the men they once were.

Read Genesis 42:18-20.

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 remain confined
 where you are in custody,
 and
 let the rest go and carry grain
 for the famine of your households,
20 and
 bring your youngest brother to me.
 So your words will be verified,
 and
 you shall not die."
 And
 they did so.

As the brothers are in custody, Joseph has more time to refine his plan. He realizes that forcing them to choose one brother to leave behind will reveal their hearts.

And as they consider leaving another brother behind, Joseph knows that it will remind them of what they did to him. They will have to go back and tell dad that they lost another brother.

Joseph wants them to deal honestly with their past sin.

In the same way, God also wants us to deal honestly with our past sin. Not so that he can crush us. But because it is through an honest dealing with our sin that we learn of His wonderful grace to forgive and cleanse us from our sin.

Read Genesis 42:21.

21 Then
 they said to one another,
 "In truth

we are guilty concerning our brother,
in that we saw the distress of his soul,
when he begged us
and
we did not listen.
That is why this distress has come upon
us."

Joseph's plan is working as he had hoped.
The brothers are now dealing honestly with their sin.
They have ignored and suppressed their sin for many years.
Now it bubbles up in their conscience.

They are making the connection between their current trial and their previous sin.
They are making the connection that their guilt demands punishment.

The truth is that our guilt deserves much more than the temporal pains of this life.
Our guilt deserves an eternal punishment in hell. But the connections that the
brothers make are still good. They are "feeling" in their heart that what they did
deserves punishment.

Have you felt the guilt of your sins?
This is a work of God's grace.
Joseph does not want to leave the brothers in their guilt forever.
He wants to experience reconciliation with them.
But in order for that to happen, the brothers must deal honestly with their sin.

Honesty is foundational to our being in relationship with God.
Without honesty, we cannot live before our holy God.

Read Genesis 42:22-24.

22 And
 Reuben answered them,
 "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy?
 But
 you did not listen.

So now
there comes a reckoning for his blood."

23 They did not know that Joseph understood them,
for there was an interpreter between them.

24 Then
he turned away from them
and
wept.
And
he returned to them
and
spoke to them.
And
he took Simeon from them
and
bound him before their eyes.

Why do you think Joseph responds to their discussion with weeping?

Even though Joseph is putting on a show of being harsh and indifferent, in his heart, he really cares for his brothers. He is not harboring bitterness towards them.

True forgiveness and reconciliation have not yet occurred.

But Joseph truly hopes for these things. He is not holding on to his bitterness.

And so, when he sees them struggling with true guilt, he begins to hope that there might be heart change among them. And it moves him to tears.

In this way Joseph is like Christ; he loves those who before hated him.

What do you think of Reuben's words in v. 22?

Reuben is complex.

Is he only shifting blame?

Or is he only being honest about his previous failed attempt to save Joseph?

I think Joseph believes him.

It would have been likely that he would have chosen Reuben because he was the firstborn.

Instead, Joseph chooses Simeon to keep in Egypt.

Read Genesis 42:25-28.

25 And
 Joseph gave orders
 to fill their bags with grain,
 and
 to replace every man's money in his sack,
 and
 to give them provisions for the journey.
 This was done for them.

26 Then
 they loaded their donkeys with their grain
 and
 departed.

27 And
 as one of them opened his sack
 to give his donkey fodder
 at the lodging place,
 he saw his money in the mouth of his sack.

28 He said to his brothers,
 "My money has been put back;
 here it is in the mouth of my sack!"

 At this
 their hearts failed them,
 and
 they turned trembling to one another,
 saying,
 "What is this that God has done to us?"

Joseph has his servants plant the brothers' silver in their sacks.

Joseph knows that once they find this money, they will be open to the accusation of stealing from the treasury.

This would make it all the more difficult for the brothers to return to Egypt, knowing they would be accused of stealing the grain.

The test is whether these brothers would put their own lives in jeopardy to redeem Simeon out of prison.

How loyal (true/faithful) would they be to Simeon?

Upon finding the silver in their sacks, the brothers react as Joseph expects.

Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling.

And they ask, "What has God done to us?"

I believe the brothers are trying to do what is right. They are not in purposeful rebellion to God. And they are trying to be honest men.

Just as they are trying to live as God would want, they begin to feel as if God is working against them.

This is a typical experience of Christians. They think that now that they are trying to please God, that God will make everything fall into place for them. Instead, the circumstances of their lives get worse. Or, at least, they feel like they are getting worse.

We know that God is working for the good of these men, and He is doing so through the hand of Joseph.

This is one reason why we need other Christians to speak into our lives.

Sometimes another trusted Christian can see our lives more clearly than we can see our own.

God is not against these brothers.

Even if we did not have our birds-eye perspective, we know that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

We have Jesus' death and resurrection to assure us.

Joseph's brothers had God's covenant promises given to Abraham.

They had their circumcision as the sign of those covenant promises.

But like us, they take these things for granted.

And continue on their journey home, dreading to tell dad the news.

Read Genesis 42:29-36.

29 When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan,
they told him all that had happened to them,

saying,
30 "The man,
the lord of the land,
spoke roughly to us
and
took us to be spies of the land.

31 But
we said to him,
'We are honest men;
we have never been spies.

32 We are twelve brothers,
sons of our father.
One is no more,
and
the youngest is this day with our father
in the land of Canaan.'

33 Then
the man,
the lord of the land,
said to us,
'By this I shall know that you are honest men:
leave one of your brothers with me,
and
take grain for the famine of your households,
and
go your way.

34 Bring your youngest brother to me.
Then I shall know
that you are not spies
but
honest men,
and
I will deliver your brother to you,
and
you shall trade in the land.'"

35 As they emptied their sacks,

behold,
 every man's bundle of money was in his sack.
 And
 when they and their father saw their bundles of money,
 they were afraid.
 And
 Jacob their father said to them,
 "You have bereaved me of my children:
 Joseph is no more,
 and
 Simeon is no more,
 and now
 you would take Benjamin.
 All this has come against me."

What do the brothers do when they get home to Jacob?

They tell him the whole story, including their need to take Benjamin back.

Their telling the facts, as they are, is important. That is why the writer takes the time to repeat them to us.

The brothers are being truthful to their father, unlike when they lied concerning Joseph.

Jacob responds to their report with despair.

We might fault Jacob. We might counsel him to remember God's words of promise to him.

But it is refreshing to know that one of the patriarchs came to a point of despair and yet, God was not finished with him.

As readers, we should grieve with Jacob. He has lost Joseph. And now he has essentially lost Simeon, because there is no way that the brothers can show their faces before the governor of Egypt.

On the one hand, Jacob has the promises of the Covenant. On the other hand, he has his life experience.

He chooses to believe his life experience. "Everything is against me!"

Jacob is caught up in self-pity. How many of us would also feel what he is feeling?

We should be empathetic to Jacob. But we should not strive to emulate Jacob's despair.

Feelings of despair will come easily enough to us. This story of Joseph is designed by God to fuel our faith in moments of despair.

Jacob seems to almost lose his faith; it certainly is the lowest point in his life so far. But it is through this low point that Jacob is learning more of God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

The brothers see the despair in their father.

Read Genesis 42:37-38.

37 Then
 Reuben said to his father,
 "Kill my two sons
 if I do not bring him back to you.
 Put him in my hands,
 and I will bring him back to you."
38 But
 he said,
 "My son shall not go down with you,
 for his brother is dead,
 and
 he is the only one left.
 If harm should happen to him on the journey
 that you are to make,
 you would bring down my gray hairs with
 sorrow
 to Sheol."

Reuben sees his dad's despair, and he formulates a plan to bring back Simeon. He swears an oath to Jacob. "If I do not return with Simeon and Benjamin, then you can kill two of my sons.

Reuben surely cares for his sons in the same way that Jacob cares for his sons. Therefore, his oath is a good one. It is not so much that Jacob would want to kill his grandchildren. But it is the motivation of Reuben to act sacrificially towards his dad.

He is not only looking out for his own interests, but also the interests of his dad, and for those of Simeon.

Jacob probably believes that Reuben is swearing his oath truthfully. But he questions whether Reuben will have the strength to pull it off. He cannot fathom life without Benjamin. And so, he declines the offer.

In his words, Jacob devalues the lives of his other ten sons. He acts like the welfare of Benjamin is the only one that matters. "he is the only one left."
Jacob is wrong to treat his other sons this way.
But it is important to the testing of the brother's hearts.

We can see from this that Jacob's favoritism continues to exist. This was the cause of their jealousy in the first place. Since Jacob's attitude has not changed, it creates the perfect environment to see whether the attitude of the brothers has changed.

Will the brothers hate Benjamin as they hated Joseph?
The resounding answer is, "NO, they will not."

The brothers are demonstrating in their actions that there is truth/faithfulness in them.

The tests are not over. But so far, they are giving us great hope.

Application to your life:

1. Has God brought you to the place of being honest about your past sins?

Most of us carry the guilt of our sins throughout our lives.

1 John 1:8-10 ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

2. Are you striving to become a man or woman of truth?

You will do it imperfectly in this life.

But are you hungering and thirsting to be a person of steadfast love and faithfulness?

This is the purpose of life.

My greatest regrets since I have become a Christian are those moments and seasons where I have not acted in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Philippians 3:12-14 ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

3. Do you believe that God is working to make you a man or woman of steadfast love and faithfulness?

The world tells you to pick yourself up by your own bootstraps.

The world tells you to rely only upon yourself.

The world tells you that God cannot be trusted.

If He exists at all, He will only fail you.

When God is bringing famine into your life, remember Jacob.

Remember that God's ways are not our ways.

Jacob could not see in the moment God's steadfast love and faithfulness towards him.

How precious is the Word of God!

We can see the bigger picture. We can see God's good hand towards Jacob.

And because we have the Word, we can trust that just as God was faithful to Jacob, He will most certainly be faithful to us.

Finish all your thoughts with Jesus.

Doubts and fears and feelings of guilt and despair may swirl around in your head every day.

Fix your eyes on Jesus.

He died to remove all your guilt.

He died and rose again, to crucify all that is evil in you and to raise you to new life.

In Jesus Christ, God is faithful to give you grace upon grace!

For Communion

WSC 1:97 WSC 97 What is required to the worthy receiving of the Lord's supper? A. It is required of them that would worthily partake of the Lord's supper, that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body,(1) of their faith to feed upon him,(2) of their repentance,(3) love,(4) and new obedience;(5) lest, coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves.(6)