

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

I want you to think about a situation where what you wanted, or needed, depended upon the favor of someone else.

Maybe you had put in your job application and were hoping to get hired.

Maybe you were just pulled over for speeding by a police officer, and you really could not afford to get a ticket.

Maybe you had just put in an offer on a house, and you were hoping that the owners would accept your offer.

Maybe you met someone you really liked, and you were hoping that they would also like you.

The situations may change, but the feelings remain the same.

For Jacob and his sons, everything depends upon the favor of one man, the governor of Egypt.

Jacob's family needs food. Egypt is the only place to get food.

And getting food from Egypt depends upon being able to stand "before the face" of one man.

The problem is that the last time the brothers stood before this man, he told them not to return unless they brought their youngest brother with them. Without Benjamin, they would NOT have his favor!

To take Benjamin down to Egypt might mean his being taken as a slave or worse.

To not take Benjamin will evoke anger in the man whose favor they desperately need.

Jacob and his family are in a crucible of life.

They are between a rock and a hard place.

It is a place that we, as God's people, often find ourselves.

It is not a comfortable place.

But it is the sort of place that God uses to produce change in us.

Over the past several weeks we have seen how Joseph's brothers have acted in very evil ways.

They were motivated by greed, selfishness, jealousy, and hatred.

But now we are in the process of witnessing these same men demonstrate honesty, humility, love and self-sacrifice in their words and actions.

If we are going to rightly apply the Scripture to our own lives, we must ask the question, "What is driving this change?"

How is it being produced in these men?

We pick up the story back in the land of Canaan.

Read Genesis 43:1-2.

2 Now the famine was severe in the land.
 And
 when they had eaten the grain
 that they had brought from Egypt,
 their father said to them,
 "Go again,
 buy us a little food."

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

More often than not, God uses scarcity and felt need to transform His people.
Famine is the tool that God often uses in the book of Genesis.
God has used famine to place Joseph in a position of power.
Now, God continues to drive the story using famine.

God is not absent in times of famine in your life.
He is very present in the trial.
And we must accept by faith that He is using the season of famine to produce change in us.

Jacob's immediate concern is to feed his family.
His sons had told him very plainly that they were NOT to return to Egypt without Benjamin.
But Jacob does not want to send his beloved son down to Egypt.

So, what is his initial response to the trial in front of him?

Denial...

"Boys, don't you think it is time to go back to Egypt and get some more food? What are you waiting for?"
I can see the look on the faces of the brothers. "Dad, don't you remember what we told you?"

So, Judah rises to speak truth to his father.

Read Genesis 43:3-5.

3 But
 Judah said to him,
 "The man solemnly warned us, saying,
 'You shall not see my face
 unless your brother is with you.'
4 If you will send our brother with us,
 we will go down and buy you food.
5 But
 if you will not send him,
 we will not go down,
 for the man said to us,
 'You shall not see my face,
 unless your brother is with you.'"

Jacob did not want to hear what Judah had to say, but Jacob needed to hear the truth.

It was not too long before this that Judah needed to hear the truth from Tamar.
Tamar spoke the truth and it broke Judah's pride.
Now Judah will speak the truth to his dad, and God will use it to force Judah to deal with his fears.

Jacob wants to believe what is not true. He wants to live in denial.
Judah's strong words bring him back to the reality of the situation.

Judah's words make clear that everything depends upon the brothers seeing Joseph's face. If they see his face, then all will be well. If they do not see his face, then they are doomed.

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

And the one condition given to them is that they bring Benjamin with them.

Seeing Joseph's face then implies having Joseph's favor, being in his good graces. The very survival of God's covenant family appears to hinge upon "seeing the face" of the governor of Egypt...

But as a reader, you are to remember another important encounter in which Jacob was brought "face to face" with someone far more important than the ruler of Egypt.

^{ESV} **Genesis 32:30** So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

Jacob does not seem to remember this encounter. At least, it does not seem to give him any assurance at this time. The harshness of his life over the past 20 years has driven it from his mind.

We must not forget Jacob's previous encounter in which he obtained the favor of God. Jacob obtained the favor of God through faith in God's gracious promise. And the favor of God is far more important to Jacob's destiny than the favor of the governor of Egypt.

Do you believe this is true in your life situations?
Do you believe that because of your faith in Jesus Christ, that God's wrath over you has been removed and that you have the privilege of standing before the face of God Almighty?
Do you believe that it is His favor alone that controls your destiny?
Do you believe that your destiny does not rest in the hands of any other person in this life, no matter how powerful they may be?

In Genesis 43, it is not standing before the face of Joseph that determines the destiny of Jacob and his family. It is having seen God face to face and lived.

Having Joseph's favor is only important because God has chosen Joseph to be the one through whom God would show His favor to His people.

Yet like Jacob, we know this on paper, but it is far more difficult to apply it in the crucible of our own lives.

Read Genesis 43:6.

⁶ Israel said,
"Why did you treat me so badly
as to tell the man that you had another brother?"

Jacob does not see God's favor.
All he can see are the impossible problems before him.
He tried denial. Now he tries the "blame game."
"How could you be so "stupid" as to tell this man about Benjamin?"
Jacob is struggling to submit his heart to God.
Can you relate?

Read Genesis 43:7.

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

7 They replied,
"The man questioned us carefully
about ourselves
and
our kindred,
saying,
'Is your father still alive?
Do you have another brother?'
What we told him was in answer to these questions.
Could we in any way know that he would say,
'Bring your brother down?'"

The brothers defend themselves. But all that their defense proves is that human wisdom is not really sufficient to the problems of life. How often do we make choices based upon our limited information? How often do we say or think, "If I had only known..."

We second guess ourselves. We mentally beat ourselves up for not being smarter.

But God does not shine His face on the smart.

God shines His face on those who acknowledge their sin and cast themselves upon the mercy of God in Christ.

Read Genesis 43:8-10.

8 And
Judah said to Israel his father,
"Send the boy with me,
and
we will arise and go,
that we may live and not die,
both
we and you and also our little ones.
9 I will be a pledge of his safety.
From my hand you shall require him.
If I do not bring him back to you
and
set him before you,
then let me bear the blame forever.
10 If we had not delayed,
we would now have returned twice."

Judah understands that his dad is acting out of fear.

I find it refreshing that Judah does not scold his dad. Instead he offers to him what assurances he can give.

Judah offers to personally guarantee Benjamin's safety. He will bear the blame forever if he does not bring Benjamin back. Of course, Judah does not possess the power to guarantee Benjamin's safety. But his pledge is a good one.

Judah is taking personal responsibility and acting in love towards his dad.

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

What is more, Judah continues to respect the authority of his dad. He might have stolen Benjamin away when his dad was not looking and taken him down to Egypt. Did they not do something similar with Joseph?

Instead, Judah pleads with his father. And this enables Jacob to act in faith.

Read Genesis 43:11-14.

11 Then
 their father Israel said to them,
 "If it must be so,
 then do this:
 take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags,
 and
 carry a present down to the man,
 a little balm
 and
 a little honey,
 gum,
 myrrh,
 pistachio nuts,
 and
 almonds.

12 Take double the money with you.
 Carry back with you the money
 that was returned in the mouth of your sacks.

13 Perhaps it was an oversight.
 Take also your brother,
 and
 arise,
 go again to the man.

14 May God Almighty grant you mercy
 before the man,
 and
 may he send back
 your other brother
 and
 Benjamin.

 And
 as for me,
 if I am bereaved of my children,
 I am bereaved."

Only now do we see Jacob's heart brought into submission to God.

Only now do we see him once again act in faith.

Jacob finally comes to accept the situation for what it is. He says, "If it must be so..."

He has moved past denial and blame into acceptance.

But it is not a fatalistic acceptance.

It is an acceptance driven by his submission to God's will and filled with a refreshed faith.

Jacob instructs his sons to take a very generous gift.

This reminds us of when Jacob offered another gift to his brother Esau.

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

Jacob also instructs his brothers to “Take your brother and go at once!”
Jacob is no longer dragging his feet. He is acting decisively.

And Jacob is able to do this because he is both trusting in God and surrendering himself to God.

We see his trust in his pronouncing a blessing upon his sons in their mission.

“May God almighty grant you mercy before the man.”

Jacob recognizes that the favor of the man is entirely dependent upon the mercy of Almighty God.
The governor of Egypt is just a man. What matters that Jacob’s God would extend sovereign mercy.

But Jacob’s faith is not some means to manipulate God. Jacob has surrendered himself to God’s sovereign will.

“If I am bereaved, I am bereaved.”

He has accepted that the entire matter is in the hands of His God.
He does not know the outcome, but he does not leave it to fate to determine.

God has sustained Jacob’s faith.
He has prevented it from being extinguished.
And He has brought Jacob to bow before His sovereign will.

Jacob’s attitude is pleasing to God.
This is the place where God is driving each one of us.
Can you see how God is using the crucible of life to bring you to surrender all your hopes and dreams into His sovereign and loving hands?

Jacob’s circumstances look very different than those of Abraham when God called him to sacrifice Isaac on the altar. But both men are called to surrender what they love to God’s will.

Can you say with Jacob, “If I am bereaved, I am bereaved.”?
Not on your own!
But you are not on your own. The grace of God is working in you through the crucible of life.

Now the story leaves Jacob.
This new scene picks up back in Egypt as Joseph sees his brothers return.

Read Genesis 43:15-18.

15 So
 the men took this present,
 and
 they took double the money with them,
 and
 Benjamin.
 They arose and went down to Egypt
 and

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

stood before Joseph.
16 When Joseph saw Benjamin with them,
he said to the steward of his house,
"Bring the men into the house,
and
slaughter an animal
and
make ready,
for the men are to dine with me at noon."
17 The man did as Joseph told him
and
brought the men to Joseph's house.
18 And
the men were afraid
because they were brought to Joseph's house,
and
they said,
"It is because of the money,
which was replaced in our sacks the first time,
that we are brought in,
so that he may assault us
and
fall upon us
to make us servants
and
seize our donkeys."

Try to put yourself in Joseph's mind. What would be your thoughts and feelings when you see Benjamin? It has been more than 20 years! This is your little brother. The only son of your mother. Surely, feelings of warm affection would be welling up within you.

At the same time, you would still have lingering doubts about your older brothers.

It is good that they have returned. They did not leave Simeon to rot in prison. But maybe the famine has driven them to this. Maybe it is not a clear sign that they love Simeon. They have taken a long time to return. And they have brought Benjamin! That is good. Did dad allow them to bring him? Or did they steal him away from him? How can I be sure?

As readers, we are hoping that there will be a resolution. We want Joseph to reveal himself and all to be well. But that is not yet to be. God is stringing out the tension of the drama. The unresolved tensions drive us on as readers. We want closure. We want reconciliation. But it is not yet to be.

This too is purposeful. It is not only to keep the readers attention. Joseph and his brothers are being called to be patient. They are being called to wait. So much of our lives, we just want answers. We want resolution. But God calls us to wait. We are to wait upon the Lord.

Waiting is not easy. We are impatient people. It is through waiting that the Lord continues to work. Even Jacob is called upon to wait. He sent Benjamin with the brothers and what is he now doing? Waiting. He has resigned his heart to God's will. But every day that he looks for the return of his sons, he must surrender his will afresh.

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

The brothers are waiting in the courtyard.

While they are waiting, their worst fears grip them.

They are not entirely unfounded fears. The situation could turn very badly for the brothers.

But like most fears, that which is feared has not yet occurred.

It might occur. But it also might not occur.

Very often, there is nothing to be done with our fears. We can only place ourselves in the hands of our merciful and sovereign God.

But in this case, the brothers think of something they can do.

They approach the steward of Joseph's house to better explain themselves.

Read Genesis 43:19-22.

19 So
 they went up to the steward of Joseph's house
 and
 spoke with him
 at the door of the house,
20 and
 said,
 "Oh, my lord,
 we came down the first time to buy food.
21 And
 when we came to the lodging place
 we opened our sacks,
 and
 there was each man's money
 in the mouth of his sack,
 our money in full weight.
 So
 we have brought it again with us,
22 and
 we have brought other money down with us
 to buy food.
 We do not know who put our money in our sacks."

The brothers explain themselves by telling the steward the truth.

And they show the steward that they have returned the lost silver.

This is good evidence that they are not attempting to steal from Egypt. But in the end, their story is just a story. There is no hard proof that they are telling the truth.

From their perspective, their very lives depend upon whether the governor of Egypt will believe them.

They must get their story out!

But through all of this God will eventually teach the brothers that it is about His favor, not the favor of men.

The brothers receive a strange response from the steward.

Read Genesis 43:23-25.

23 He replied,
 "Peace to you,

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

do not be afraid.
Your God
and
the God of your father
has put treasure in your sacks for you.
I received your money."
Then
he brought Simeon out to them.

Now it is the time for the brothers to be confused. Surely the words of the steward would have greatly perplexed them. The steward encourages them that all is well. But he does not tell them that he believes their story, or that he will relay the story to the governor to see if he believes it.

He only gives them the declaration that they can have peace. They can quiet their fears because all is well.

But if you are the brothers, this would appear too good to be true. And the steward does not speak of the favor of the governor. He refers to the sovereign mercy of their God.

It makes sense that Joseph would have instructed his servant to respond in this way. Joseph wants his brothers to be pointed to the steadfast love and faithfulness of their God.

But from the brothers' perspective, they must think this to be some sort of trick. Why would this steward acknowledge their God?

While these multiple thoughts are swirling around in the hearts of the brothers, the steward brings out Simeon!

Seeing Simeon must greatly encourage them!
Or, the governor simply wants them all together when he sentences them to their death.

24 And
 when the man had brought the men
 into Joseph's house

 and
 given them water,
 and
 they had washed their feet,
 and
 when he had given their donkeys fodder,
25 they prepared the present
 for Joseph's coming at noon,
 for they heard that they should eat bread there.

If the governor is determined to kill them, he is doing it in a very strange way. The steward takes care of their animals. And he gives them water to wash their feet. This is an act of preparation for a meal. They are being treated like honored guests.

The brothers make use of this time to prepare the present for the governor.

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

Read Genesis 43:26.

26 When Joseph came home,
 they brought into the house to him the present
 that they had with them
 and
 bowed down to him to the ground.

As soon as Joseph arrives, the brothers present to him their gift and bow themselves before Joseph. This is the second time that they have bowed themselves to Joseph.

Again, the dreams come to mind.

God had revealed His will in the dreams long ago. Now He is demonstrating that He is able to accomplish His will in the lives of His people.

But the story is not simply about recognizing God's sovereign will. The story is about bringing reconciliation and unity to a broken family.

Read Genesis 43:27-30.

27 And
 he inquired about their welfare and said,
 "Is your father well,
 the old man of whom you spoke?
 Is he still alive?"
28 They said,
 "Your servant
 our father
 is well;
 he is still alive."
 And
 they bowed their heads
 and
 prostrated themselves.
29 And
 he lifted up his eyes
 and
 saw his brother Benjamin,
 his mother's son,
 and
 said,
 "Is this your youngest brother,
 of whom you spoke to me?
 God be gracious to you, my son!"

The gift is relatively unimportant to Joseph. He wants to know about his father and about Benjamin. As readers, we are reminded of the importance of relationships over things. Joseph has all the wealth of the world at his fingertips. But what matters to him are people. And now, the first dream is fulfilled. All eleven brothers bow themselves before Joseph!

The first time you read this story, you think that this is the moment of resolution. Surely, Joseph will reveal himself to his brothers!

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

In this way, he ensures that the brothers do not recognize him. He treats them as would a good host, but maintains his distance from them.

This distance would have been required by Egyptian tradition.

Hebrews were herders by trade. And Egyptians had a strong prejudice against herders. We are not told how this prejudice developed, only that it existed.

In a subtle way, Moses is introducing another element to the grand plan of God. While Jacob's family lived in Canaan, intermarrying with the Canaanites was a problem. God's people often did not possess the strength of faith and character to remain separate from their pagan neighbors. Had they remained in Canaan, they would have not remained a distinct people with a distinct faith.

God knows this. I suppose He might have infused them with a stronger faith. But in His sovereign wisdom, He does not do this at this time. Instead, He will take His people down to Egypt, where there is no possibility for their mixing with the Egyptians. Why not? Because the Egyptians have no interest in mixing with them.

In this way, the people of God will multiply as a distinct people with a distinct faith. God is not only taking His people down to Egypt because they need food. He also has deeply spiritual reasons for doing so.

33 And
 they sat before him,
 the firstborn
 according to his birthright
 and
 the youngest
 according to his youth.
 And
 the men looked at one another in amazement.

In verse 33, Joseph gives the impression that he has divine knowledge. He seats the brothers around the table according to their age. The brothers are baffled that Joseph could do such a thing. This adds to the tension. The brothers have been shown tremendous hospitality by a man that seems to know everything about them! It would be incredibly foolish to try to trick this man!

34 Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table,
 but
 Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs.
 And
 they drank and were merry with him.

Joseph increases again the level of hospitality towards the brothers. He takes food from his table and gives it to the brothers. We are inching ever closer to Joseph revealing himself. But Joseph has one more test that he must give. He must ensure that the brothers love their brother Benjamin.

The Saga of Joseph: Before His Face

Genesis 43:1-34

And so, he gives to Benjamin five times as much food.
In this way, Joseph singles Benjamin out as the favored one.
He knows that this will push the buttons of the old jealousy in their hearts.

This raises an important point for us.
Is it right for God to honor one person above another in the body of Christ?

All the brothers have a seat at the table.
All are enjoying the favor of Joseph.
Does Joseph have the right to give one brother more honor than the others?
The answer of the Bible is “yes”?

I do not know how this will work in eternity.
Every spiritual blessing belongs to every member of Christ’s body.
But somehow, within the body, we will all have different places and functions.
And we will not mind that one person may have a higher place than another.

God is working to bring the brothers to submit themselves to Benjamin being given more honor.
A true sign of grace in the heart is when we are filled with gladness and joy when God blesses another person.

Can you recognize the hand of God as He takes you through the crucible of life?
Do you believe that your destiny depends upon the favor of God rather than the favor of men?
Do you believe that through repentance and faith alone that you have the favor of God?
How is God calling you to surrender what you love to Him?
How is God calling you to wait upon Him?
In what way is God removing jealousy from your heart and replacing it with true love?
Always remember, it is God’s steadfast love and faithfulness that are driving the show!
It is His grace that is preparing you to live eternally “before His face.”

Amen!