

GENESIS
Week 37, chapters 42 and 43

At the end of our last lesson, the 7 years of abundant crops and livestock had passed, and the great 7-year famine of Pharaoh's dream had begun. Joseph was now in charge of Egypt...and this food program..... and was 2nd in Command of the nation with only Pharaoh above him. Joseph was one of the most powerful men on earth at this time in history.

This famine of Genesis 41 was caused by low rainfall; a drought. This drought that apparently affected Northern Africa, where Egypt lay, also affected much of the Middle East.

Let's talk a little about the geography because it helps to understand the overall situation of this section of the Torah, and explains why many things happened in the way they did.

First: the regional designations of Egypt are virtually backwards of what we would normally think. Egypt was spoken of as Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt; interestingly UPPER Egypt is to the south, and LOWER Egypt is to the north. Further, this is because the Nile River flows from south to north.....it flows from Upper Egypt to Lower Egypt. And, this helps to explain just why southern Egypt is called Upper. Obviously, water flows downhill. As it turns out, the southern end of Egypt is a slightly higher elevation than the northern end; therefore, as anyone knows that a River flows from UP to DOWN, the southern end of River is called upper, and the northern end is called Lower.

The southern end of the Nile.....Upper Egypt.....is where the Nile begins and there are two enormous geographical basins where the rainfall occurs, and where the water from that rainfall naturally funnels towards the Nile to fill it. From one basin flows what is called the White Nile, and from the other the Blue Nile. Around the city of Khartoum the White Nile and Blue Nile come together to form the Great Nile River.....which we typically just call the Nile River.

The Great Nile then flows UP (in our way of thinking), north, towards the Mediterranean Sea. As it approaches the Land of Goshen in Lower Egypt, it encounters what is called the Delta Region, and the River dissipates into a number of natural fingers that all eventually find their way to the Sea. Even though the Delta Region (as is most of Lower Egypt) is a virtually rainless desert, due to the abundant waters of the Nile, and the marsh lands that are created by all those fingers spreading out in the Land of Goshen area allowing the water to flow across the lands much like the Florida Everglades, the area is fertile and great for growing crops and grazing animals.

The bottom line here is that the ONLY thing that makes Egypt inhabitable is the Nile. And, the only thing that creates the Nile is rainfall from these two great basins far to the south, in Upper Egypt.

Even though the Egyptians very early on began digging canals to channel water from the Nile to water crops, it was the annual rising and falling of the water levels of the Nile that determined feast or famine. It is crucial that the Nile overflow its banks during the 3 summer months; an overflow caused by monsoon type rains that occurred far to the south, in the two southern river basins that formed the headwaters of the Nile. The overflow not only watered the land, but it brought silt, rich in nutrients necessary to grow crops all along the Nile. But, it takes only a few inches of rainfall deficit in but one of the two great southern river basins to destroy the delicate balance and prevent sufficient water flow to cause the necessary downriver flooding.

So, it's not that the Nile dried up in Joseph's time, nor that people didn't have sufficient water to drink; it's simply that for a several year period, the Nile did NOT overflow, and the marshlands of the Delta receded, and therefore sufficient crops were not produced to feed the citizens of the Egypt. To be clear: all food production did NOT cease. But, it was dramatically reduced and there was not enough to sustain the people.

Now, just so we understand the supernatural nature of this widespread famine: the weather systems that govern rainfall in southern Egypt, and those that govern rainfall in the Middle East are totally separate. That very low rainfall occurred for several years in southern Egypt during the same time there was a drought for several years in Canaan was a God thing; that does not normally occur.

One of the reasons that Egypt and the people of Canaan knew each other so well, and had since time immemorial established trade, was because usually when there was crop failure in Egypt due to low levels of the Nile, Egypt could count on going up to Canaan to buy extra food.and vice-versa. But, this time it was different. Had God not given Pharaoh the prophetic dream, and then given him Joseph to interpret it, there would have been widespread death in both Egypt and Canaan because of low food supplies in both lands. But, God warned Egypt, and Egypt prepared because it was ABLE to prepare. God FIRST gave them Supernatural abundance that they would have hefty surpluses for 7 straight years; Joseph planned and used this so they could build up enormous stores of grain for the coming 7 bad years.

Later, upon the onset of the drought, Egypt, partly from a sense of compassion but primarily from a sense of self-interest, made food available from its warehouses to people of other nations. This was not welfare. The price for those stored grains was VERY high. We see from the upcoming story of Genesis 42 and 43 that several BAGS of silver was required to buy food from Egypt for the clan of Jacob; food would normally not have required a sum of money that would be spoken of in terms of "bagfuls" of silver. Rather, Egypt was going to make a huge profit on its adept handling of this extended and extensive food crisis. But, make no mistake, these high prices were not only for foreigners; Egyptian citizens also were required to purchase their food from Pharaoh. . . .or better, Joseph.a supplement to be sure, usually not their sole source of food. But, for those who were poorer, and did not have access to other more commercially available food sources, this famine wound up costing hundreds of thousands of Egyptians. . . . possibly a million or more. . . .their liberty. For, as these lower-class Egyptians ran out of

money to buy food, they had no choice but to sell themselves and their families into bond service to the Pharaoh in exchange for grain. But, from their standpoint, it was this Semite foreigner.....Joseph.....who was to blame for this travesty and humiliation; because Joseph was the front man, the visible symbol, for the entire food program; getting both credit and blame.

This was not something Egypt would soon forget; after Joseph's death, and a long period of social upheaval, the Egyptians would blame Joseph's kin.....the tribes of Israel... for their condition. This would eventually lead to the Egyptians turning the tables on Israel; the peasant Egyptians would enslave the more well-to-do, and free, Israelites, beginning a cycle of persecution of the Hebrew people in foreign lands that we read of throughout the Bible, have witnessed ourselves in the last century, and will continue to witness until Messiah comes.

READ GEN. 42 all

If we can but grasp that **Israel** was the tool that God would use to bring about His divine purposes from this point forward in history, until time comes to an end sometime in the near future, then perhaps we can begin to comprehend the significance of what is about to happen in this Biblical narrative.

We have now moved from Egypt and Joseph, back to Canaan and Jacob. The great famine having now affected an enormous area, Jacob's clan is in a bad way. And, the first verse of this chapter we see Jacob, Israel, in a rather sarcastic mood, as he says to his sons: "Why are you STARING at each other?" In other words, you KNOW we're in dire straits, you KNOW that there is grain available in Egypt, so why are you all sitting here waiting for SOMEBODY else to do something. Let's remember, he was not speaking to children. These men were all middle aged and beyond, most with their own families children by now.

While I wish I could find some good and lovely things to say about Jacob's sons, the tribes of Israel, the Bible doesn't offer much about their character that is admirable at this point. God didn't choose Israel because they were great men.....He chose them because He is a great God and uses ordinary people to carry out His will. And, by the way, we're not told to stand with Israel because they're a specially good or extraordinary or sympathetic race (which they're not), we're to stand with them because that's what God has instructed all the people of this planet to do.....with dire consequences for those who do not heed Him. So, brace yourselves America: our president has now put his desire for a legacy of peace in the Middle East, regardless of the cost, ahead of his God-commanded concern for Israel. We are going to pay an awful price.....every one of us.

So, Jacob, unable to wait any longer for these sons to do (on their own volition) what is right and necessary, orders all of them, except for Benjamin, to go to Egypt, to buy grain. Was Benjamin not old enough to go? Certainly he was. But, Benjamin had taken the place of Joseph in Jacob's heart, because Benjamin and Joseph were his two sons through

the wife Jacob loved the most.Rachel, now deceased. He simply wasn't going to risk Benjamin, after having lost Joseph. As the sons of Israel arrive in Egypt, they join in with many more tribes and peoples from other nations, all in need of being saved from starvation. And, who is it they must go to for their salvation? Joseph.

Verse 6 makes it clear that it was common knowledge that it was this great Vizier of Egypt.who was now going not by the name Joseph, but by the EGYPTIAN name the Pharaoh had given him, Zaphenath-Paneah. that everyone must go to in order to buy grain. Joseph must have had an immense organization to deal with the millions who needed food, and certainly it would have been rare for Joseph himself to deal directly with those who sought to buy grain.

But, of course, Joseph's brothers didn't recognize him. It's not just that 20 years had passed since they had last seen their little brother, and his boyish features had become manly; it was that he now looked Egyptian. He was clean shaven (Hebrews, by tradition, always wore beards); he wore his hair in Egyptian fashion and would have used certain cosmetics that Egyptian royalty typically applied to their faces.he also spoke Egyptian. And, the mannerisms of that former tent-dwelling boy with all of his teenage gawkiness had been exchanged for the refined and confident regal bearing that was now Joseph. But...*he* recognized *them* right away.

And, we can only imagine what must have flashed through his mind upon seeing his brothers: deep pain, from being so long ago torn from his family at the hands of these same men. But, in a nano-second, it says in V9 that he remembered those dreams of his youth.of the 11 sheaves of grain bowing down to his; and of the 11 stars, the moon, and the sun paying homage to him. And, it must also have been at that moment, with all the preparation so carefully guided by the invisible God, that those dreams that his brothers AND his own father, Jacob, had chastised him for.were TRUE! Joseph realized for the first time that Divine Providence had been at work all along. He now knew with certainty why God had allowed to happen all that had happened to him. Yet, some testing was needed to see if his brothers had also been prepared by El Shaddai.

Joseph, knowing otherwise, accuses them of being spies. The brothers are utterly taken aback by this, for the accusation doesn't even make sense.it borders the irrational. But, they are afraid, for they are totally at this ruler's arbitrary mercy. Truth and justice matter not at all at this point, and they know it. For a ruler of Joseph's stature can decide matters summarily, and order whatever punishment he deems appropriate. They are helpless and powerless to control their fate.just as Joseph found himself helpless, so long ago, lying at the bottom of a dry well; begging and crying for mercy that would not come from these same pitiless brothers, now standing before him hat-in-hand.

He questions them, and finds out his father is still alive, as is his little brother Benjamin, and so orders that one brother was to go and bring back the youngest brother, Benjamin, to prove their assertion that they were not spies.that they were truthful. But, this would not happen until all 10 were to be put into prison for 3 days. Of course, the reason behind Joseph's decision to jail them was to separate his brothers from the myriads of Egyptian

citizens and foreigners who daily came hoping to buy from Egypt's reserve grain supplies. He wanted, and needed, to deal with his family separately and not under the gaze of everyone else.

At the end of the 3 days, he now gave a different order. Nine brothers were to return with the grain they needed to feed their clan. One, Simeon, was to remain in custody, as surety for the rest. And, if they did not bring back Benjamin, Simeon would forfeit his life (or so was the implication).

The brothers discussed their plight among themselves in front of Joseph.....assuming he was an Egyptian and would not be understanding what they were speaking in Hebrew. And, Joseph kept up the ruse by using an interpreter as a go-between during his dealings with his brothers. What he heard made him weep; the guilt of over 2 decades overcame them, and they knew that this was the day of reckoning for what they had wrongly done to their little brother, Joseph. But, he also heard Rueben try to absolve himself, with apparently no disagreement as to his position of innocence. And, Joseph must have believed him. For, rather than keeping the all-important first-born, Rueben, as a prisoner, Joseph ordered Simeon, the 2nd son of Jacob, to be held hostage.

Now, Joseph REALLY messes with their heads. He orders that the money the brothers paid for the grain be hidden in the necks of the grain sacks. The very first night on their way back home, one of them went to get some grain for his donkey, and there was the money! Oh my gosh. What in the world was going on here?! They quickly decided that God was giving them their just desserts.

One wonders what must have gone through their minds on that many day journey back to face their father. Who would be the spokesman among them to tell their fragile father that not only had they come back one short in their number, but that now they were to take Benjamin, Jacob's most beloved child, back to Egypt with them, or Simeon would die, along with the rest of them when Pharaoh's men caught up with them.

Jacob's reply is obvious: you've taken 2 of my children away from me, and now you want to take a 3rd? Rueben then gives Jacob the guarantee that he will bring Benjamin back. But, if he fails, Jacob can kill Rueben's two sons as punishment. Though we're not given Jacob's reply to this offer, one can only imagine the unbelieving look on Jacob's face. I think his stunned reply would have been something like, "Brilliant!" Only you would figure that after I had lost 3 sons, I should now kill my own grandchildren as retribution?! Are you insane?!"

More and more we see the wisdom in Rueben being denied his firstborn birthright. Rueben is a politician...a wind bag. He is always making these grandiose, unwise statements and promises that are worthless and designed to do little but elicit an emotional response. In fact, we won't hear from Rueben any more. He is set aside, and we'll hear Judah's voice more than any other brother from here forward.

For the time being, though, Jacob simply is paralyzed and cannot fathom what to do. All he knows is that should Benjamin be taken from him, he could not survive it. He doesn't really trust those sons of his anymore, so he's not about to entrust Benjamin to them. Yet.....how are they going to survive without more grain?

READ GEN 43 all

A little time passes, and the famine does not let up. The grain supply purchased and brought back from Egypt is exhausted. Apparently, the 9 sons of Jacob (Simeon is still back in Egypt held hostage) who had earlier sat in a depressed state and did nothing to try and save their clan from starvation are once again completely passive. So, Jacob tells them to go back to Egypt and get more grain. Of course, Jacob is reminded by his sons that they cannot go without Benjamin. Jacob is still unconvinced to hand over Benjamin to his treacherous sons.

Then, Judah speaks. Judah, humbled by life, humbled by his daughter-in-law Tamar's bold act when Judah failed to respond to her plight appropriately, now offers HIMSELF as the surety bond for Benjamin. Now, one might ask, just exactly what penalty could Jacob extract from Judah should he fail on his mission to take Benjamin to Egypt and return him safely home? Well, as we discussed a while back, Judah almost certainly saw himself as the likely inheritor of the wealth and authority of the clan of Israel. He apparently knew that Reuben was no longer going to receive the first-born blessing for he had defiled his father's bed. And, of course, Jacob's 2nd and 3rd sons were the ones who led the raid of revenge upon Shechem, killing every male and then leading the plundering of the remaining inhabitants.....this would have disqualified them. So, with Joseph, formerly Jacob's favorite, now thought to be dead, Judah, 4th in line, must have seen himself as that person who would soon be the leader of the tribes of Israel. Judah, by agreeing to accept all blame if something were to happen to Benjamin, had much to lose. He, too, could have been disinherited. Jacob knew that, too, and must have felt that if it were at all possible for Benjamin to be spared, Judah would do all that could humanly be done to see to it. Here, finally, was a son who could be trusted.....Jacob could trust Judah in this matter. But, even more, Jacob would trust God. If he was to lose all of his sons, then so be it. It is in God's hands.

So, taking the money that had mysteriously found its way into their grain bags upon return from the first trip, and an equal amount to buy new grain, the brothers, including Benjamin, journeyed back down to Egypt.

Joseph sees that his brothers have returned, and with them is Benjamin. So he orders a banquet to be prepared and served at noon. He orders his servants to bring his brothers inside his house for this banquet; but the brothers think this is a trap. That they are going to be taken as slaves (as they had arranged to happen to Joseph), in retribution for the incident with the money found in their packs. Joseph's house manager assures them that that is not the case.

Joseph arrives at his home, and the brothers present him with the gifts they had brought with them from Canaan. Joseph inquires about their, his, father's well being, and they tell him he's fine; then Joseph spots Benjamin. He is overwhelmed with emotion, and must leave them for a few moments to weep bittersweet tears in private.

Now composed, Joseph returns and the meal is served. What we see in these verses is a completely accurate account of the way a meal of this sort would have been served in Egypt: Joseph eats alone. The brothers eat together as a group, and the Egyptian house servants eat separately from both the brothers and from Joseph. It is well-documented Egyptian custom that the head of the house never eats with the servants. But, why didn't the servants eat with the Israelite brothers? Well, we're told in V32 that it was "abhorrent to Egyptians to eat with Hebrews".

This is interesting stuff. You see Hebrews, as were many Semite tribes and people groups in this era, shepherds. The Egyptians saw shepherds as the lowest class of people, and their mere presence was offensive. An Egyptian would NEVER eat with a shepherd. Egyptians valued cattle, not sheep. That's one of the reasons that the Egyptian's highest deity, Isis, was represented by a Bull. But, soon, another aspect of this Egyptian tradition would come into play: the Israelites were going to be given the land of Goshen to live in. A land where they would be away from the bulk of Egyptian society, to grow their sheep and not offend Egyptian sensibility.

As the brothers sat down to eat, each carefully seated by a servant in a place reserved specifically for each brother, they were stunned to see that they had been arranged from oldest to youngest, in perfect order of their birth. What could this mean? Even more, Benjamin was given a portion of food 5 times everyone else's. Scholars have debated the meaning of this 5 fold blessing of food upon Benjamin, and the general consensus is that in Egypt, a prince or a ruler was given 5 times as much as everyone else as a sign of royalty. Of course, that also raises the question, what was Joseph signifying with this? My personal opinion is that Joseph was honoring the brother he would have had the most affinity to, the one with which he shared a common mother. And, the one who, of the 11 brothers, was completely innocent of any wrong doing in connection with Joseph being sold into slavery. But, we should also not overlook that the very first King of Israel would be a descendant of Benjamin.