

The Story of Joseph

Spy vs. Spy

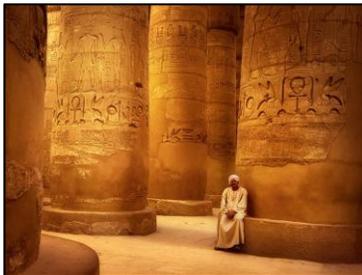
Part 37 – January 20, 2013



Scripture is a window through which we watch Joseph's family. And their dysfunction and drama draws us closer to the glass, until we suddenly see our *own* reflection in the pane.



Joseph's ten half-brothers passed the wheat stores of On, to purchase grain in Itjtawy, the royal city where Joseph had been sold. The implication being that at least some of the brothers wanted to look for Joseph, which made all of the brothers look suspicious. To prevent military action, Egypt's enemies were allowed into the land to buy grain. (41:57) But this made Egypt vulnerable to spies. And this made the Egyptians spy-paranoid. So when Joseph realizes his abusive brothers are obviously bowing before him, he grabs a golden opportunity to kill 'em with impunity.



... [Joseph] spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he asked. "From the land of Canaan," they replied, "to buy food." [Ah, but Canaanites wouldn't come this far just for food] – Genesis 42:7b NIV

Hypostyle Hall, Karnak, c. 1260 BC

And the scriptural shocker last week was that he didn't even *care* about his dreams anymore because, he didn't even *recall* his dreams anymore! And there was a darker surprise. When he *does remember*, in the middle of his lethal interjection, he *still* doesn't care; in fact, it doesn't even slow him down!

Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected." – Genesis 42:9 NIV

And with that the battle has begun: it's a grudge match with God between our lust for revenge and our need for reconciliation. God isn't asking him to dismiss, excuse, or rationalize what his brothers have done, just to surrender his own self-destructive, God-dishonoring, created-purpose-derailing desire to get even. The shell-shocked brothers, suddenly realize how bad this looks.



"No, my lord," they answered. "Your servants have come to buy food. [Their argument?] We are all the sons of one man." – Genesis 42:10-11a NIV

That's actually a good defense. Big cities had several gates, and when brothers entered a new and hostile land, cultural common sense dictated entering through separate gates. In the event of deadly violence, you wanted to ensure some of your brothers' safety, so your family dynasty wouldn't be devastated.

Gate of Ptolemy III, Karnak, Egypt c. 230 BC

Ancient rabbis taught that they tried to answer the charge: “The way we entered and met up looked suspicious, but we’re the sons of *one man*.” And then, of all the things they *shouldn’t say* to Joseph, they add on ...

“Your servants are *honest men*, [i.e. upright, reputable] not spies.” “No!” he said to them. “You have come to see where our land is unprotected.” [Lit. *the nakedness of our land*. An expression only used in 42:9 and 42:12. Joseph invents it to say, “You want to see my land with *its robe removed*.”] – Genesis 42:11b-12 NIV

“Explain why upright Canaanites would come this far for food!” They can’t. They wouldn’t. To *see* the land’s *nakedness* means they’ve been looking around and prying into private affairs, which they probably *had*! And they are *sunk* if they’ve been asking where to find the most Canaanite slaves, which would’ve been ... *government* projects! But, who would they ask?



Back Alley, Cairo, Egypt, c. 1890

The rabbis taught that they went where foreigners had to go to ask such things: back alleys and brothels. And in spy-paranoid Egypt, Canaanites visiting brothels just to talk, would’ve been quickly reported as highly suspicious behavior (and may have made its way to Joseph’s guard). “You’ve been prying in places upright, reputable men avoid.” Hmm, how do you explain that you’re *honest men* who’ve waited *21 years* to try to reunite with the brother you beat, betrayed, and sold into slavery?

That’s a long time to hold onto a grudge. But, one of the big reasons we struggle to forgive others, is that we don’t feel the fullness of the forgiveness that *we’ve* received from God. Either, because of pride, I don’t feel like I *require* much; or because of shame, I don’t feel like I *deserve* much. But either way, you can only offer it to the extent you’ve embraced it.

But they replied, [apparently beginning to explain their odd behavior] “Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more.” [Cutting them off] Joseph said to them, “It is just as I told you: You are spies! “And this is how you will be tested: [Now, there was a common Hebrew expression, “As surely as the Lord lives”, but look what Joseph says] As surely as Pharaoh lives [He’s ignoring his dreams and God’s will, seeking revenge instead, and now pushing the Lord away. When we’re determined to do what we know God doesn’t want us to do, *that’s* what we do; we push God out of our mind and as far from our thoughts as possible. When Joseph visits his brothers in jail, *after* God softens his heart, the first thing he does is to speak God’s name] you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here.” [Now listen close as he tells *them* to choose *one* brother] “Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. [He’d rather kill nine if one fails to return, than just one if nine fail. Plus, it’ll be easier to hunt down the one than nine] If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, [Again he pushes God away] you are spies!” [You will die!] And he put them all in custody ... – Genesis 42:13-17a NIV

Why’d he put them *all* in custody, after telling them to send *one* home? Revenge! He assumes they’re ruthless, cruel, and selfish. So, he wants them to suffer by the same hands *he* did: *theirs*!

It's a cage match! "Nine *die*. One goes free. It's every man for himself! Enjoy your stay!" When we've been neglected, betrayed, bullied, or abused, we're tempted to push God away and withhold our forgiveness, until we feel like they've felt some of the pain they made us feel. But forgiveness isn't a feeling; it's a choice, a *decision* to release our resentment to God. Imagine how Joseph will feel when he returns to find them confessing their sin against *him*!



Grain Silo, Megiddo, c. 800 BC

And *where* do you think he put them? I think we're supposed to picture the *only* prison described in the story. The one Joseph lived in and managed. The one shaped like a huge, dry cistern. The royal, round-house dungeon¹ under Captain Potiphar's would've resembled this 2,800 year old, underground, grain silo at Megiddo. Picture it with cells at the bottom, sealed over, and lit with torches. A heavy door opens and Joseph in chains, *now* of gold, (41:42) watches his *brothers* descend into despair.

Our resentments create a much crueler prison. Look how Jesus concludes his parable of the unforgiving servant, who was forgiven an *enormous* debt, but then refused to forgive a tiny debt.

"... his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." – Matthew 18:34-35 NIV

Wait! *Our* Heavenly Father turns *us* over to be *tortured* until we *forgive from our heart*?! Yep. He doesn't have much choice. Unforgiveness is a curse that *we* freely call down on ourselves. And we can only cancel it by 'paying' the forgiveness we owe. But, how do we pay if we're emotionally and spiritually broke?! You got'a *know* Who you *owe*. Though the servant refuses to forgive a fellow servant, *who* does he have to repay? The *king*! Joseph doesn't owe forgiveness to his *brothers*; he owes it to the Lord! In the same way, we don't *owe* forgiveness to those who've hurt us; we *owe* the forgiveness to the God who's forgiven *us*. And we repay our eternal debt to *Him* by offering forgiveness to *them*.

I want to jump ahead just a little. Because, when Joseph returns to the prison, and finds his brothers confessing, he's able to eavesdrop, because they don't think he understands them.

They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. [Why are they *so sure*? Because Joseph's distress *when he pleaded*, and theirs, is *so similar* it's alarming] We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us." [The parallel is *so striking* they can only see it as God's judgment] – Genesis 42:21 NIV

So, what were their pleas? "We're all sons of one man; honest men; not spies." I'm sure Joseph pleaded that they're brothers, the sons of one man, but *why* would his pleas include being *honest* and *not a spy*? When someone is introduced in a Hebrew story, the opening scene is crucial. It's like an establishing scene in a movie, where a character is shoplifting, selling drugs, or saving a kitten. But, have you ever noticed *Joseph's* establishing, opening scene?

¹ The literal term 'round house' (Gen 39:20) is *only* used to describe the dungeon (Gen 40:15) at Potiphar's house. (Gen 40:3)

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. – Genesis 37:2b NIV

Meet Joseph, a 17-year-old snitch, who keeps tabs on his half-brothers and reports every misdeed he happens to spy.



[But when his father sends him into the middle of nowhere, saying] “Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me.” [The brothers decide it's time to be rid of their father's favorite informant] – Genesis 37:14b NIV

Joseph, no doubt, would've appealed to them as brothers, the sons of one man. And perhaps he tried to convince them that he was only, *honestly*, checking on their wellbeing, and *not* spying.

And now, after 21 years, they've finally come to check on *their* brother's wellbeing, and find themselves accused of spying, and pleading for their lives, and imprisoned in a pit! And as they suddenly see themselves in the other's shoes, God's sovereignty is so startlingly clear, that Joseph's dreams pop into his head, and the brothers' sin pops out of their mouth.

And as Joseph eavesdrops on their confession, the brothers he's accused of spying have *no idea* that their brother, now the second most powerful man in the world, is once again spying. There's nothing we'll ever be asked to forgive of someone *else* that *we* haven't done, at some point, at least in our heart.

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. – 1 Peter 3:8-9 NIV

There's little impulse to forgive when it's just an effort of generosity toward someone who doesn't deserve it. But there's power to forgive when it's an expression of gratitude toward God! It's not two separate things: me and God, and then me and others. His grace melds it all into one big God-me-others. The question is: Am I *grateful* enough to forgive?



To remain merciless is to dismiss the enormous price Christ paid to forgive *us*. Even as He suffered at the hands of *His* enemies ...

Jesus said, “Father, forgive them ...” - Luke 23:34a NIV

I forgive *because* I'm forgiven.

But Joseph's going to need a *bit* more convincing.

And the secret weapon that God planted in the second dream? It's set to go off next Sunday, as Joseph enters the 'black space'. And this is where we have to close God's story for today.