

## Prayer

Praise You, Almighty Lord, for You take situations which seem impossible, unimportant or unsustainable, and You make great things out of them. Praise You for the work of Your Holy Spirit, who sees more than we can see, understands more than we understand, and is stronger than any strength we can muster. Almighty Lord, may we never fail to rely upon You: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Books

*Pray for Christian publishers who are working hard to try and present good books for Christian readers; novels, Biblical and teaching material, children's books, and much more*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray about the greed and godlessness within our world today*
- *Give thanks for good food, blessed and shared with others*
- *Pray for people you know who are on holiday and need a rest*

## Meditation

When you are hard pressed by the hardships of life,  
Look to the hills, and see Your Lord  
Coming from the spiritual horizons of God's eternity!

When you are stuck in the quagmires of everyday existence,  
Look to the Word, and discover  
The liberating power of praise, and the glory of God!

When you are troubled by the mysteries of human relationships,  
Look to the Cross, and be humbled  
By the love which passes understanding and changes lives.

When you are disturbed by the mess of God's people, the Church,  
Look to the Spirit of Christ within you  
For only His presence will guide you in His truth.

Then, when Satan's wiles have played their merry dance,  
Look to the path of faith you have trod  
And know that in eternity, in Christ, you are secure.

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## Bible Study - Genesis 42:1-17

<sup>1</sup> When Jacob learned that grain was available in Egypt, he said to his sons, 'Why are you looking at each other?' <sup>2</sup> He said 'I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go there and buy us some grain so that we may live, and not die.' <sup>3</sup> So ten of Joseph's brothers travelled down to Egypt to buy grain. <sup>4</sup> However, Jacob did not send Benjamin (Joseph's brother) with the others, because he feared that harm might come to him. <sup>5</sup> So, because the famine had reached the land of Canaan, the sons of Israel (Jacob) were among those who travelled to buy grain.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph was in charge of the land, and it was he who sold grain to everyone in the land. When Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down before him with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup> Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he concealed himself and spoke strictly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he said. They replied, 'From the land of Canaan, to buy food.' <sup>8</sup> Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. <sup>9</sup> Then Joseph recalled the dreams that he had once about them, and he said to them, 'You are spies; you have come to spot the weaknesses of the land!' <sup>10</sup> They replied to him, 'No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food.' <sup>11</sup> We are all sons of the same man; we are honest men, and your servants have never been spies.' <sup>12</sup> But he said to them, 'That is not true, you have come to identify the weaknesses of the land!' <sup>13</sup> They pleaded, 'We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of

one man in the land of Canaan; but the youngest is now with our father, and one is no more.’<sup>14</sup> But Joseph repeated, ‘It is just as I have said; you are spies!’<sup>15</sup> This is how you will be tested: as Pharaoh lives, unless your youngest brother comes here you will not leave this place!’<sup>16</sup> Send one of your number to bring your brother while the rest of you remain in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if there is any truth in you. If not, then as Pharaoh lives, you are most certainly spies.’<sup>17</sup> Then he put them all together in prison, for three days.

## Review

The story of the famine in Egypt and throughout the entire world continues, and the spotlight falls on God’s chosen people, the small family of Jacob, descended from Abraham and bearers of the Covenant promises of God for the salvation of the world. The ‘chosen’ nature of Jacob’s family is indicated in several places, principally where Jacob is called ‘Israel’, the special name given when Jacob submitted to the will of God (Genesis 32:28 – see 42:5). In this story, however, they were a family in need of salvation themselves! They were not immune to the problems of life just because they were God’s people, and the famine hit them hard. The ten brothers who travelled down to Egypt to buy grain believed they were doing what was plainly right, but in our passage today, they walked into nothing less than a personal nightmare, engineered without their knowledge by their younger brother Joseph.

This, of course, is just the beginning of a protracted tale of intrigue that occupies the next three chapters of Genesis. As we read about the family of Jacob and the brothers, struggling with existence in the dry southern region of Canaan, it is as if time has stood still; things had hardly changed since Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and Jacob was left in mourning for his lost favoured son (37:32f.). However, Joseph’s life had grown beyond recognition, and the vast gap between the shepherd brothers from Canaan, and Joseph the royal Vizier, was so great that Joseph had no difficulty in concealing his identity from the brothers when they came to him in search of food, along with others. But Joseph had grown in more ways than mere prestige. After fourteen years of hard labour, another seven years of plenty in which he gained supreme authority in Egypt, and a few years of biting drought in which he exercised power and discernment, Joseph was a man of extensive experience and judgement. God would use him to bring His family together, but not in an inconsequential way. It was vital that the brothers demonstrate to Joseph that they had grown and developed, and were prepared for the full and godly reconciliation that was necessary if the family were to be united again, under Jacob and under God.

Early in our passage (42:4), Jacob’s caution at the motives of his sons is clearly evident. Benjamin and Joseph were brothers, the two sons of his favoured wife Rachel, who had died giving birth to Benjamin (35:16f.). Jacob had lost the elder son Joseph and was under the impression that he was dead, killed by a wild animal. But is it possible that he suspected some foul play in this matter on the part of his other sons? Family history gave him reason to be suspicious (37:12f.) and it would certainly explain why he was reluctant from the beginning to send Benjamin to Egypt with the other brothers. Benjamin would have been a man in his twenties or thirties by the time of this story, but Jacob would not let him go, despite the risks of famine.

When Joseph saw his ten older brothers coming to buy grain, he ‘hid’ himself (42:7) from them (presumably by clothing and disguise) and challenged them. The reasons for this are not yet clear to us, for the story that follows is extensive, but his accusation, repeated three times, is that the brothers were not to be trusted; he believed them to be ‘spies’ seeking out the ‘weaknesses of the land’. In other words, Joseph believed they may have been acting in self interest, and not in honesty. He challenged them to produce the younger son they had talked about as proof of their story, and he then put the brothers in jail to consider their position. Joseph then set his brothers a series of test to see if they had changed. A long time ago, Joseph had come in all innocence to meet them, and they had plotted, tricked him, abused his brotherly trust and sold him into slavery. They had effectively wiped him out of their lives; but he returned and was capable of wreaking vengeance on them all; but by God’s grace, the story turns out to be the greatest worldly tale of reconciliation ever told!

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Coming to Egypt to buy food
- The beginning of the fulfilment of dreams
- Joseph’s treatment of his brothers

## Going Deeper

The story is readable and many people know it well, but the version known from the stage musical does not do justice to the real text in Scripture! When Joseph saw his brother’s fall down in homage before him, the first of his youthful dreams was fulfilled; but not the second (37:9-11). The latter dream included his father

Jacob, and Benjamin as well, so it was important for Joseph to try and find a way of persuading the brothers to get his father to come to Egypt.

### ***Coming to Egypt to buy food***

It was not obvious to anyone except Joseph that his youthful dreams had been given him by God and it was therefore his duty not just to sit back and watch them come true, but to do all in his power to make sure that they did. This is an important feature of the whole story of Joseph, and because it does not feature in the stage show, many people forget that this is very important to Scripture. The story of Joseph's manipulation of his brothers is extensive, but behind it all was Joseph's desire to get Benjamin and then his father to Egypt. Only then could his dreams be fulfilled.

God had a purpose for these dreams, of course, which was to move His people to Egypt, so that they could grow as 'aliens in a foreign land' and therefore obtain a distinct identity. Previous stories in Genesis (see the story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38) showed the dangers of remaining in Canaan. Also, there is a hint earlier in Genesis that God did not feel that Canaan was yet ready for the full scale occupation of the land; 'for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete' (15:16).

Prior to this story in Genesis, Abraham had avoided famine by travelling down to Egypt (12:10f.), Isaac had survived famine by staying in Canaan and putting great effort into the digging of wells (Genesis 26:1f.). Now Jacob had to decide what was right for his family. He was the man who still bore the Covenant promises of God and he knew that God's plans for the future could only be fulfilled through him. Interestingly, he is called Israel more times within this story than at any other place in Genesis (43:6,8,11, 45:28, 46:1,2,29,30 etc.) and this reminds the reader that what happens is part of God's Covenant plan, because Israel is Jacob's Covenant name.

There are interesting glimpses of Jacob's family in the early verses of this passage; hints of guilt and indecision in Jacob's cutting 'why are you looking at each other?' (42:1) and the retention of Benjamin by Jacob which we have already commented upon. Why was it important to send ten sons to buy grain? Presumably because the larger the mission to buy food, the more could be bought, protected and driven back to Canaan; we should be in no doubt that this was a dangerous and difficult journey at a time of drought when many people were starving.

### ***The beginning of the fulfilment of dreams***

It is no surprise that when the brothers reached Egypt and came to the man responsible for selling grain, they bowed down to him as if he were a god. The Hebrew words in verse 6 make it plain that the brothers grovelled before Joseph. It was an accurate fulfilment of Joseph's first dream (37:7), but certainly not the second, which specifically mentioned homage from eleven stars (brothers) as well as the sun and moon (his parents – see 37:9). The connections with Joseph's earlier life come thick and fast, but are not always obvious in the English translation; for example, the word for 'recognise' in verse 8 is the same one used by the brothers when asking Jacob to 'recognise' the blood soaked tunic of Joseph (37:32), and when Joseph concealed himself (42:7), the Hebrew is a play on the word for 'plotting' used when the brothers schemed to throw Joseph into the pit. The narrator of the story appears to be calling our attention to how Joseph must have felt seeing his brothers again; the past came flooding back!

### ***Joseph's treatment of his brothers***

The way that Joseph treated his brothers has been endlessly examined over the years, with little agreement on any good explanation. The truth is that when faced with dramatic situations of which we have had no warning, few of us could foresee our reactions with accuracy; and what happens in such circumstances is generally quite unpredictable. The story captures this unpredictability very well, even though we know the story well. On the one hand, Joseph treated his brothers 'harshly' (42:7,9f.), repeating his allegation of spying no less than three times. However, Joseph's persistence in questioning the brothers indicates that he was trying to find out as much as he could from them about the state of their family without revealing himself. Remember, Joseph, the grand Vizier, was at liberty to have the brothers summarily executed even on suspicion of spying. However, Joseph manages to extract from his brothers some commendable truth in which they reveal the existence of Benjamin and allude to his own past as a brother (42:13).

The brothers were in fear of their lives, expecting to be dispatched at any moment under the weight of accusation levelled against them. They professed honesty, arguing in effect that spies would not travel to buy food in a large family group; it would be illogical (42:11,13). When under pressure for your life, how easy it would be to say something 'not quite true' if you believed that this would save your skin; but the words the brothers spoke were all truthful, and Joseph knew it. It is a remarkable interrogation.

Joseph places the whole group of brothers under guard, declaring that the younger brother must come to Egypt, leaving them in prison for three days to think about what had happened. Joseph insisted that one of

the brothers should travel and come back with the younger brother (Benjamin) but Joseph knew full well that his father would be hard pressed to let Benjamin out of his sight. His aim was to bring everyone together.

We know that even in the next phase of the story, Joseph changes his mind and allows the brothers to go as a group, leaving only one, Simeon, behind. This only reinforces the sense of unpredictability and fluidity in the story at this early and critical stage. The reality was that both Joseph and the brothers were caught off guard by what happened. As we read, we look on in amazement and wonder at the work God is doing.

## Application

Unexpected circumstances can be one of the most exacting tests of our faith and trust in God. We all know what it is like to be completely 'thrown' by events, but are we able to both be true to ourselves and also allow God to work through what happens so that good can come from the strangest of situations or circumstances? Joseph, the great organiser and Pharaoh's 'fixer' for the whole land of Egypt was also God's servant, needing to let God work through his words and actions for an unfolding drama with unforeseen consequences.

One possible lesson from this text is that we must allow for the fact that circumstances sometimes unfold in a haphazard way. We need to be ready for God to work in the midst of what appears to be chaos; and our best response to is to hold firm to the truth of our faith, as we have received it from God. Joseph appears to have acted not so much out of vindictiveness, but out of a desire to extract the truth from his brothers and to test their honesty, just as he had been tested. The brothers' truly good response to their terrible predicament was to be utterly honest and correct. Just like Joseph, their lives had changed over time, and they were now in the right place to do what was right. Would that we could all be like this!

The story of Joseph has many twists and turns to come, as is true of the story of our own lives! The best thing we can do is to maintain our faith in God's greater plan for us, for we will only make sense of what happens to us in the light of eternity, not the daily twists and turns with which we are sometimes faced.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. What is the evidence that the brothers have become good honest men? Are words enough?
2. Can you imagine a scenario in which Joseph could have revealed himself to his brothers immediately and achieved his goal of getting Benjamin and Jacob to Egypt?
3. In a time of drought, of what use would be information obtained by a spy?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*Sometimes, our lives read like a great fictitious story, and we can hardly believe what is happening to us! I have certainly known what this is like, and I have been surprised by the manner in which God has guided us through all that has happened. I know what it is like to want to see instant results, but have to wait for many things to happen and much time to pass before God's purposes can be achieved, especially with family members! As here, the wisest course of action is to accept that all these things are God's test, and wait patiently for His will to unfold, without panicking!*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Does your life trundle along without any surprises, or have you experienced too many surprising events for your comfort? Think and pray about this, for we sometimes long inappropriately for either 'stability', or 'a big shake up' in our own personal life or the life of the church. The true disciple of Christ is one who maintains close contact with the Lord and is prepared to follow whatever happens, exciting or not, surprising or not, etc. Our role is 'unflappable faithfulness'!*
- *Pray for any you know for whom the Christian life is one of crisis after crisis. Pray that they will be blessed with peace through the support of friends and church people who can help them receive God's peace.*

## Final Prayer

Lord God, and Master of all; make us worthy of our call, and willing to stand firm in the midst of chaos as well as persist through times when nothing seems to happen. May we be happy when Your Spirit moves in

power, and content to maintain our spiritual nerve through difficult times. Glory be to You, Lord God and Master of all! AMEN.

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