

# Advent - Rescues: Famine

Genesis 42:1-43:34 (ESV)

Please open your bibles to Genesis chapter 37.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent a season of preparation and waiting - an opportunity reflect on the state of our souls, our life circumstances, and the world, and recognize our need for a savior and a king: namely Jesus. It's a time to cast our minds not only out into our present need for a rescuer, but also back through history - and see God's amazing promises to care for his people, and all the amazing ways that he has kept that promise.

And so this year, we've decided to spend these four weeks of advent looking at great rescues of the old testament. Today we're going to see one of the most emotion-laden narratives in the entire bible: the story of Jacob's sons. Joseph and his brothers. It's a rather long chunk of text, so I am going to summarize a few large swaths, and then touch down and read some of the meatier parts.

In the text today, we will see God's amazing rescue of Joseph, and then using him to rescue the fledgling nation of Israel, and the whole world from a global famine. In this story we will see that we can find hope and safety in God's promises, no matter our circumstances on earth.

Genesis 37: Jacob's favorite son, 17-year old Joseph, was treated with favoritism, making his brothers jealous. Worse than that, Joseph was also given prophetic dreams from God that one day his brothers would bow to him, *and he told them about it*. Joseph's jealous brothers want to kill him. Instead they decide to sell him into slavery.

Genesis 39: Joseph serves as a slave and then is falsely accused and imprisoned: 13 years.

In all this time, we see Joseph full of faith in the trial, living a godly life where he has been planted. In slavery, raised to manage his master's whole house. In prison, raised to essentially a warden. Faith and faithfulness to live according to God's commands while in slavery and in prison. What a unique man... certainly an example to us all.

Genesis 41: God exalts Joseph to the second highest place of authority on earth, in order to make him the savior of the whole world. God gives Pharaoh a very strange series of dreams, and God gives Joseph the correct interpretation of the strange message of the dream: that Egypt will experience 7 years of abundant crops and all kinds of prosperity, followed by 7 years of devastating famine. We will pick up the story in the text a year or two into the famine:

## Genesis 42-43 (With comment)

### Genesis 41:56-57 (ESV)

56 So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. 57 Moreover, **all the earth came to Egypt** to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over **all the earth**.

[Comment: Notice that the whole earth (the known world) is affected by this famine, and there's only one place in the world to go for rescue.]

**42** 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.**"

[Comment: These narratives were originally written to be read out loud, and so they use several devices to make sure the main points get through. One of those is repetition, and in this section we're going to hear that phrase: "That we may live and not die" - on repeat.]

**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.

**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."

**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."

[Comment: I wonder what Joseph was thinking here. "We are honest men..." who sold him to slaves and then lied about it...]

**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.**"

[Comment: "We are honest men..." "One is no more..." - That "one" is standing right in front of them. Joseph is having none of it. So he starts testing them.]

**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.”

<sup>17</sup> And he put them all together in custody for three days.

<sup>18</sup> On the third day Joseph said to them,

“**Do this and you will live**, for I fear God: <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, **and you shall not die.**”

[Comment: There’s that phrase again...]

And they did so. <sup>21</sup> 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.”

<sup>22</sup> 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.”

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

<sup>24</sup> 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.** <sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed.

**[Verse 27-38 summary:** They find the gold hidden in their sacks. “What is this God has done to us!” But they don’t go back because Jacob is afraid of losing Benjamin. But this was the condition of returning to Egypt to be rescued from the famine!]

**43** Now the famine was severe in the land. <sup>2</sup> 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.”

<sup>3</sup> But Judah said to him,

“The man solemnly warned us, saying, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’

<sup>4</sup> If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. <sup>5</sup> 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.’”

<sup>6</sup> Israel said,

“Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?”

<sup>7</sup> 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’?”

<sup>8</sup> 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.** <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice.”

<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks. Perhaps it was an oversight. <sup>13</sup> Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man. <sup>14</sup> **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.”

[Comment: Jacob does what Jacob does - puts together a bribe. Perhaps he can win favor with the rescuer with bribery... Just like he tried to do with his brother Esau, who was standing, ready to forgive Jacob and remember their past no more, Jacob still doesn't seem to understand the nature of mercy...]

<sup>15</sup> So the men took this present, and they took double the money with them, and Benjamin. They arose and went down to Egypt and stood before Joseph.

<sup>16</sup> 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.”

<sup>17</sup> The man did as Joseph told him and brought the men to Joseph's house. <sup>18</sup> 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.”

<sup>19</sup> So they went up to the steward of Joseph's house and spoke with him at the door of the house, <sup>20</sup> and said,

“Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food. <sup>21</sup> 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, <sup>22</sup> and we have brought other money down with us to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks.”

<sup>23</sup> He replied,

“Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money.”

43:24 - 45:1

- The brothers prepare a big long excuse. And are trying pay up, not recognizing that Joseph is being kind to them...
- They go in and eat with Joseph, who asks about his father, sees his younger brother Benjamin. Almost gives himself away at that point by placing the brothers at a table in correct age order.
- Then he decides to test them again, he harasses them a bit to see how they react. And finally Judah steps up and breaks in repentance. And Joseph reveals himself to them.

**45:1** Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 3 And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

4 So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

[Chapter 45-50 summary:

- And then he says "go tell dad"
- Everyone is shocked and in disbelief.
- The whole family, about 70 in total, come and settle in Goshen, the best part of Egypt, and thrive there.
- The famine continues, just as God told Joseph, and just as they had prepared for.
- Joseph rescues "the whole world" (the ancient near east...) - and establishes a very strong, centralized government, and all the people become slaves to the government. So apparently even that can be included in God's plan from time to time. uh oh!
- Then their father Jacob, finally dies, having been able to bless all his sons including two grandsons from Joseph, making up for going 22 years without one of his sons.
- And then we find that Joseph's brothers are still full of guilt and fear.

### **Genesis 50:15-20 (ESV)**

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." 16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 17 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." 'And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father."

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." 19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

One of the most amazing and confound statements in the whole bible. "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good..."

Paul echoes this in Romans:

### **Romans 8:28-32 (ESV)**

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

This word "predestined" is scary to some of us, and I'm not sure why. Paul puts the same thought into slightly different words in Ephesians 1: "In love, predestined for adoption to himself as sons..." - The statement is not scary, its the grounds of our comfort.

Joseph said: "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." Referring to the circumstances of his life. How did Joseph cope with 17 years of slavery and imprisonment, and 5 years of famine? Knowing God's promises to his father Jacob, Grandfather Isaac, and Great-grandfather Abraham.

Paul summarizes the effect of knowing that promise: if God is for us, who can be against us? And to amp this point up one more notch, I want to keep going out of Genesis into a third story of rescue. Essentially the epilogue to the Joseph story:

## **Epilogue of Genesis: Exodus**

A group of 70 come to settle in Goshen. And the family thrives and becomes numerous. But eventually, Joseph is forgotten, and the people are enslaved.

The 70 turn into millions... through that slavery - the nation explodes in population.

Here's the point from Romans - the point from Joseph's story, and the point for us today:

God is able to use our enslavement, imprisonment, and even global catastrophes leading to strong centralized governments seizing power and enslaving its citizenry to accomplish his plan of rescuing his people! In fact, it would seem that this is a primary mechanism in the biblical narrative! Not saying that this is a good thing that we should seek to bring about, but rather that it is an inevitable part of the human experience. The point is that there is always cause for hope and faith in the midst of those circumstances, because even more than the motif of human suffering is present in the bible, the motif of God's providing help and rescue in that suffering is present, in fact it is the main point.

# The Big Picture of the Bible

God is working out His plan to redeem a race of rebels. And nothing that sinful human beings can do can stop that plan. He works out His plan in spite of, and sometimes by direct means of our best efforts at thwarting it.

The fact that God is working out His plan, keeping His promise, unfailingly, and despite our sin, is meant to bring us hope and encouragement.

Romans 15:4 (ESV)

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

## On God's terms, not ours

That hope and encouragement comes from God's action and working. It is not meant to give us a pass for our sin.

If the brothers would have continued in their own way of doing things, they would have died and not lived. If Judah would not finally have stepped up to take some responsibility for the situation, rather than seeking an easy way out, momentary pleasure, or personal gain, they would never have gone back to Egypt, and the whole family would have starved to death. If the brothers would have gone back without Benjamin, Joseph was clear, they would have been killed and he would have given them no grain. The brothers had to come to Joseph on Joseph's terms, not their own.

## The Rescue

The message to us is clear. God had set up a rescuer in Egypt. There was only one place in the whole world where you could find food. You had to come on his terms, not your own. For the brothers, those terms meant repentance from a life of selfishness, passivity, jealousy, and anger.

For us the message is the same. There is only One to whom we can go to find the bread of life. We must come to Him on His terms. Repentance from sin, faith in His work, not ours, and baptism: identification and fellowship with His people, The Church.

This, the climax of the book of Genesis, the story about Joseph and how God used him to bring about the salvation of the world from starvation and initiated the beginning of a great nation of God's people, reminds us of the climax of the whole story of the Bible: Jesus Christ bringing about the salvation of the whole world from its slavery to sin and initiating a great nation of God's people, the church.

So this Advent season, as we look at the Old Testament narratives, we we can take encouragement and find hope. Marveling at God's relentless love toward His rebellious, sinful, people.

Let's pray.

