

### “Ye are spies”

Here is another instance of what we today might call ‘lies’. Clearly, Joseph is an holy and devout man, yet we see him deceiving his brothers. If you read carefully, you will find that he does not actually lie...but how many Christians think a lie includes not being explicit, or, retaining part of the truth, or, not giving the real story?

To my mind these are not ‘lies’ but craftiness. Joseph was simply manipulating a situation for a reason. He wanted to see how his brothers were thinking after such a long time. Were they sorry for what they did? Were they honest men?

Christians should sometimes wait a while before coming to conclusions, and they should never jump to them. There are times when we must wait and see; we must listen carefully before uttering a word. Where we are unsure we should remain silent and just wait. Do not be pushed into making statements, especially not by those with sinfully-Pharisaical hearts.

The same goes for doctrinal issues. If you do not know something, or are unsure about what to believe or say, then it is best to say nothing. Do not invent meanings, and do not follow the crowd. If you do not know, do not *pretend* to know, just to please everyone. And, vitally, if you are in doubt, say so, rather than assume a belief just because everyone else believes it.

On the other hand, whatever God says in His word is true, without question. We must always accept this to be the case. However, it does not mean that each of us will inwardly accept it! Sometimes we can accept with our heads but not with our hearts. That is, we experience doubt. We should not be afraid to express our doubts, because if we express them we can then talk about them and open up to further teaching or views. It is spiritual honesty... and God knows anyway, so why try to hide it?

We see in this whole episode (right to the end of Genesis) that what befell Joseph was God’s plan, in which Joseph, a believer, would be instrumental in saving the lives of many thousands of people. In this remarkable way we see God helping to sustain not just His people, but also many others of heathen nations.

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Thus, the sun shone upon the unrighteous as well as upon the righteous. It is an oblique way of showing us that those who are Believers can affect unbelievers to the good, when they are in their midst. Never underestimate what your presence will do for the good of unbelievers! (It does not mean we must become embroiled in the lives of the unsaved, but that we are to stand firm and holy when amongst unbelievers). One man, Joseph, blessed many nations. Will YOU bless many by being true to God? You never can tell. Remember – they watch you!

### Verses 1-5

1.

“Now when Jacob saw that there was corn in Egypt, Jacob said unto his sons, Why do ye look one upon another?

2.

And he said, Behold, I have heard that there is corn in Egypt: get you down thither, and buy for us from thence; that we may live, and not die.

3.

And Joseph's ten brethren went down to buy corn in Egypt.

4.

But Benjamin, Joseph's brother, Jacob sent not with his brethren; for he said, Lest peradventure mischief befall him.

5.

And the sons of Israel came to buy corn among those that came: for the famine was in the land of Canaan.”

Jacob was not aware his son Joseph was alive. Long ago he believed he had been torn apart by a wild beast. Yet, God's plans often take wondrous turns to be accomplished... and Jacob heard there was plenty of corn in Egypt. It is probable he had heard of the accrual of grain years before; it could not have been kept a secret.

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He spoke to his sons: 'Why are you shrugging your shoulders and wondering what to do? Go to Egypt and buy some grain, so that we don't starve!' The brothers all started out for Egypt, except for the youngest, Benjamin. Jacob did not want his youngest to suffer a similar fate to that of Joseph. So, the ten brothers began their journey across the desert, using the north to south trade route.

### Verses 6-13

1.

"And Joseph was the governor over the land, and he it was that sold to all the people of the land: and Joseph's brethren came, and bowed down themselves before him with their faces to the earth.

2.

And Joseph saw his brethren, and he knew them, but made himself strange unto them, and spake roughly unto them; and he said unto them, Whence come ye? And they said, From the land of Canaan to buy food.

3.

And Joseph knew his brethren, but they knew not him.

4.

And Joseph remembered the dreams which he dreamed of them, and said unto them, Ye are spies; to see the nakedness of the land ye are come.

5.

And they said unto him, Nay, my lord, but to buy food are thy servants come.

6.

We are all one man's sons; we are true men, thy servants are no spies.

7.

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And he said unto them, Nay, but to see the nakedness of the land ye are come.

8.

And they said, Thy servants are twelve brethren, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and, behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is not.”

Joseph was ‘governor’ of all Egypt: *shalliyt* – imperial master with dominion over all; literally, ruler over everything and everybody. Any foreigner who wanted to buy Egyptian grain had to come to him first with their request.

The brothers came before Joseph but did not recognise him, though he immediately recognised them. You might wonder how this was possible, but the text tells us he made himself ‘strange’ to them. That is, to them he was ‘in disguise’. He also spoke ‘roughly’ to them (in hard tones, as a great ruler). He spoke Egyptian through an interpreter, so the brothers would not detect his accent and recognise his voice.

Additionally, Joseph was dressed like a king, in fine garments and gold. His head was shaved and it is most likely he also wore the famed false goatee beard seen depicted on Egyptian ruins. It is also possible he was adorned in the face make-up used by high rulers. Overall, then, he was, to all intents and purposes, a different person. And, we all know that if we do not expect to see someone, we can literally ‘miss’ them even if we look them straight in the face! The brothers would have expected Joseph to be a slave, not the supreme ruler. Now, Joseph remembered his dreams, when his brethren bowed down before him... they were coming to pass.

Through his interpreter, Joseph asked, “Why have you come here?” The brothers said they had come to buy grain. “You are spies, come to see if Egypt is undefended!” No doubt gripped with sudden fear, the brothers tried to placate the great ruler, repeating that they only wanted to buy grain. ‘We speak the truth; we are not spies!’

Keeping up the pretence, Joseph again called them spies. In answer, the brothers told Joseph they were 12 brothers of the one father; the youngest was still with their father and another brother ‘was not’ (referring to Joseph). Why should they say this? In the next chapter we find out

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that Joseph asked them a direct question: did they have any other brothers?

### Verses 14-20

1.

“And Joseph said unto them, That is it that I spake unto you, saying, Ye are spies:

2.

Hereby ye shall be proved: By the life of Pharaoh ye shall not go forth hence, except your youngest brother come hither.

3.

Send one of you, and let him fetch your brother, and ye shall be kept in prison, that your words may be proved, whether there be any truth in you: or else by the life of Pharaoh surely ye are spies.

4.

And he put them all together into ward three days.

5.

And Joseph said unto them the third day, This do, and live; for I fear God:

6.

If ye be true men, let one of your brethren be bound in the house of your prison: go ye, carry corn for the famine of your houses:

7.

But bring your youngest brother unto me; so shall your words be verified, and ye shall not die. And they did so.”

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Joseph insisted on calling them spies. Then he said (through an interpreter): 'I have a test for you, so that you can prove you are not spies – send back home for your youngest brother. Until you do this, you will not return home...I give you my word in the name of Pharaoh! One of you can return to get the youngest, and the rest of you will remain in prison, and if he does not come, I will know you are spies. They were in prison three days, and Joseph visited them. He wanted them to consider their position and to come to agreement about the truth. This is why he let them be locked up for three days.

He had softened his approach: 'Because I fear God, I will let you take grain to your home, that your family may live. I will keep one of you in prison to see if you are telling me the truth. He will remain with me until your youngest brother is sent. His arrival will prove your story... but if he does not arrive, you shall die.' (Again, he spoke to them in Egyptian). The brothers agreed.

### Verses 21-24

1.

"And they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us.

2.

And Reuben answered them, saying, Spake I not unto you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and ye would not hear? therefore, behold, also his blood is required.

3.

And they knew not that Joseph understood them; for he spake unto them by an interpreter.

4.

And he turned himself about from them, and wept; and returned to them again, and communed with them, and took from them Simeon, and bound him before their eyes."

Unaware of Joseph's real identity, and thinking he only spoke Egyptian, the brothers spoke freely to each other in their own language. 'We are guilty of what we did to Joseph, and saw the

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fear and anguish in his eyes when we sold him, but we would not relent. That is why we are now in this predicament... we are being repaid for our wrongdoing.'

Reuben reminded them, 'Did I not try to stop you and tell you not to do what you did? But, you did not listen! Now, a penalty is required of us.' It is a truism that 'What goes around, comes around' and God does not sleep. We might do a wrong to someone and forget all about it, but it will one day be repaid many times over. A time will come when what we did (or, did not do), will come back as a punishment. Even if we think it has not come back, God will judge sins we have not repented of when we are judged.

As they stood discussing their sin and what they perceived to be a judgement upon them, "they knew not that Joseph understood them" because he always spoke to them through an interpreter. It was a clever way to get them to speak freely. As the brothers spoke amongst themselves, Joseph's heart melted and he had to turn away with tears in his eyes. But, he had to be resolute. He cleared his eyes and ordered the keeper to tie-up Simeon, who would be the scapegoat if they did not return.

### Verses 25-28

1.

"Then Joseph commanded to fill their sacks with corn, and to restore every man's money into his sack, and to give them provision for the way: and thus did he unto them.

2.

And they laded their asses with the corn, and departed thence.

3.

And as one of them opened his sack to give his ass provender in the inn, he espied his money; for, behold, it was in his sack's mouth.

4.

And he said unto his brethren, My money is restored; and, lo, it is even in my sack: and their heart failed them, and they were afraid, saying one to another, What is this that God hath done unto us?"

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Joseph ordered his servants to fill his brothers' sacks with grain and to put their money into the sacks, without their knowledge. This was to be his secret gift to them, and so he returned good for evil. And, before they left, he even gave them food for the journey.

Later that day, the brothers' stopped for the night at a khan, or inn. One of them opened his sack to take out some grain for the ass and, to his horror, he discovered his money-bag. When he told his brothers they were all afraid: 'What has God done to us?' They were probably expecting to be overtaken at any time by Joseph's guards! But, it was not Joseph's way, nor was it his intention. As he later told his family, though his brothers did a vile thing, it was all in God's plan. They did their deed not because they were sinners, which they were, but because God had prompted them to do so, for the greater cause of saving many lives.

### Verses 29-35

1.

"And they came unto Jacob their father unto the land of Canaan, and told him all that befell unto them; saying,

2.

The man, who is the lord of the land, spake roughly to us, and took us for spies of the country.

3.

And we said unto him, We are true men; we are no spies:

4.

We be twelve brethren, sons of our father; one is not, and the youngest is this day with our father in the land of Canaan.

5.

And the man, the lord of the country, said unto us, Hereby shall I know that ye are true men; leave one of your brethren here with me, and take food for the famine of your households, and

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be gone:

6.

And bring your youngest brother unto me: then shall I know that ye are no spies, but that ye are true men: so will I deliver you your brother, and ye shall traffick in the land.

7.

And it came to pass as they emptied their sacks, that, behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack: and when both they and their father saw the bundles of money, they were afraid.”

When the brothers reached their home, they told Jacob everything that had happened, and everything Joseph had said. They also told of Joseph's fierceness and his accusation that they were spies. Of course, to them, he was not Joseph, but the supreme ruler of Egypt, Zaphnathpaaneah.

They admitted they had left their brother as a bond, in prison, but that they had to return with Benjamin to prove they were telling the truth. If they honoured the demand, Joseph would accept they were not spies, and they were free to buy and sell in Egypt.

After relating their story each brother opened his sack of grain, and their fear was again kindled when they saw that each sack contained their original bag of money. It is evident they knew distance was not a guarantee of safety. Like any pontiff, Joseph was more than capable of sending an army to find the brothers, to slay them, and the brothers knew this.

### Verses 36-38

1.

“And Jacob their father said unto them, Me have ye bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me.

2.

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And Reuben spake unto his father, saying, Slay my two sons, if I bring him not to thee: deliver him into my hand, and I will bring him to thee again.

3.

And he said, My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he is left alone: if mischief befall him by the way in the which ye go, then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.”

On an earlier occasion, Jacob was compelled to flee the country when his sons had slaughtered the citizens of Jerusalem. Now, in his mind, his family was again in mortal danger because of what he thought was an act of stupidity. ‘Joseph is dead, and now you leave Simeon in Egypt; I am now two sons down! Now you expect me to release Benjamin, also? Everything is against me!’

Reuben then spoke up: ‘Father, you can put my own two sons to death if I do not bring Benjamin back to you.’ But, Jacob was old and could not be persuaded. No, Benjamin will not go to Egypt with you. Joseph is already dead and Benjamin is the youngest. If anything happened to him on the way to Egypt, it would kill me.

So, for now, Joseph would not see Benjamin or his brothers. Jacob thought the famine must end, so he thought he should just use up the grain and wait for the next harvest – at least Simeon was alive, even if he was in prison.

In this account we see how God does indeed ‘move in mysterious ways’. He had a plan that spans the whole of mankind and time. What happened to Joseph at the hands of his brothers was not an accident, but was a very small part of the overall divine purpose. It connected to the moving of the family to Egypt, and was followed by hundreds of years of captivity of Jacob’s descendants. But, this was just another part of the continuous plan of God, to bring Moses to free the people, and to cause them to move to Canaan to take over the land. And so the plan of God kept working out, and men were often none the wiser. Remember this when everything appears to ‘fall apart’ in your life. If you are true to God, whatever happens to you is part of His purpose, for His own reasons.

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