The Death of Jacob

Are you guilty of false consensus bias? If you are you wouldn’t know it. Wikipedia defines false consensus bias as *“a* ***pervasive cognitive bias that causes people to “see their own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common and appropriate to existing circumstances”*.**  That’s a mouthful but it simply means that people sometimes assume that most other people think the way they do. The truth is that we all have at least a mild case of this condition. In our study of Genesis chapter 50 we will see how false consensus bias had an impact on the relationship Joseph had with his brothers. Chapter 49 ended with the death of Jacob and chapter 50 begins with Joseph making funeral arrangements for his father. This involved observing customs of both the Egyptian and Jewish cultures. First Joseph had his father embalmed then Jacob was mourned for 70 days in Egypt. After that Joseph requested that he be allowed to take his father back to Canaan for burial. Pharaoh not only granted the request, he sent officials of his court to accompany the family paying honor and respect to Joseph for his service to Egypt. Joseph and his brothers went with the entire family except for children. When they crossed the Jordan River and reached Canaan, they stayed for 7 days at a threshing floor to mourn Jacob before proceeding to his burial site in the cave near Mamre. After burying Jacob, they all returned to Egypt.

With the death of Jacob, Joseph’s brothers began to fear that Joseph would take revenge for their sin of selling him into slavery. In verse 15 they wondered if Joseph would pay them back for the wrongs done to him. When we think of repayment, we associate that with repayment of debt which would require paying back the same amount borrowed. The lender, however requires interest in addition to the original sum borrowed. Joseph’s brothers may have thought that Joseph would want principal and interest. If the principal was slavery, what would the interest be? They concocted a story (they were experienced story tellers, see 37:31-32) that Jacob had left instructions that Joseph was to forgive his brothers. Joseph was sold into slavery at the age of 17 and he was 54 when Jacob died so his brothers had carried their burden of guilt for 37 years. They feared that Joseph withheld seeking revenge only because Jacob was still alive. Matthew Henry wrote *"A guilty conscience exposes men to continual frights , even where no fear is, and makes them suspicious of everybody, as Cain."*Joseph reassured them that he had forgiven them long ago and reminded them that his years of slavery and imprisonment were part of God’s plan to save his family from the famine. He also said “Am I in the place of God? (see Rom. 12:19).

Joseph and his brothers remained in Egypt and the chapter closes with Joseph dying at the age of 110. It is not clear if he was the first brother to die but he did tell his brothers to return his bones to Canaan. David Guzik wrote that this showed that Joseph’s heart was in the Promised Land. Upon his death his brothers had him embalmed but did not take him back to Canaan. Joseph spoke prophecy about the nation of Israel saying that God would come to their aid at which time they must carry his remains back to Canaan. This was a reference to God rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt some 400 years later.

Joseph’s brothers suffered from false consensus bias, they assumed that Joseph thought the way they would think if the roles were reversed. They did not have the perspective that Joseph had that led him to grant them forgiveness. As we have discussed, Joseph’s attitude toward his brothers is a picture of the grace of Jesus. His brothers apparently did not understand this concept, preferring to believe that eye for eye and tooth for tooth were the standard remedies. Having this bias can be as innocent as taking your wife to a concert thinking she likes the same music as you to something more serious like mistrusting people (although just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you). Joe South wrote a song called “Walk a Mile in my Shoes” which was an ode to trying to see things the way others do. As Jeff Foxworthy would say “You may have false consensus bias if you give your wife a bass boat for Christmas, after all everybody wants one.” Speaking of Christmas presents, the opposite of false consensus bias is trying to think what your spouse really wants. In “The Gift of the Magi” O. Henry writes about a man who pawns his pocket watch to buy a comb for his while his wife sold her hair to buy a chain for his watch. Each sacrificed something they treasured out of love for the other, sound familiar? (see Romans 8:32)

We have reached the end of Genesis and I hope you have seen Jesus throughout this remarkable first book of the Bible, I certainly have.