

Joseph Tests his Brothers

Genesis 44:1- 34

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Here in chapter 44, Joseph, already brilliantly successful in creating tensions during his brothers two visits to him, now unleashes his master stroke. Orchestrating an elaborate scheme, he tests their concern for their youngest brother Benjamin in order to get them to recognize their evil. An evil that they had perpetrated not only on himself, but also their father and youngest brother Benjamin many years ago.

The Plan is Set in Motion

"If you think I'll let you go you're mad...you've got another thing comin'...you've got another thing comin'."
From "You've Got Another Thing Comin'" by Judas Priest

Genesis 44: 1-5 (ESV) ¹ Then he commanded the steward of his house, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack, ² and put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph told him.

³ As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. ⁴ They had gone only a short distance from the city. Now Joseph said to his steward, "Up, follow after the men, and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid evil for good? ⁵ Is it not from this that my lord drinks, and by this that he practices divination? You have done evil in doing this.'"

Here again, Joseph demonstrates an amazingly skillful capacity to creatively manipulate the circumstances of his brothers unwitting reunion with himself and the associated emotions they must have felt. From terror and confusion, to unexpected hospitality and warmth. And then, full circle back again!

Intelligence manifests itself in men and women in many ways. Some are skilled in mathematics, sciences and analytical abilities. Others demonstrate a high degree of interpersonal skills and in the ability to read and interact with others around them. Typically, individuals possess strength in one area or the other. Rarely does an individual excel in both.

Here again, Joseph demonstrates his proficiency in both areas. Particularly, the ability to size up human nature and to leverage that knowledge skillfully in order to further a larger narrative. He not only demonstrates an ability to spontaneously generate plans according to the circumstances he encounters. But, also the patience needed to allow those plans to fully gestate over time to achieve maximum effect. It is truly impressive.

Here he sets in motion, the final pieces of a master plan that will bring his brothers to a final emotional reckoning of the sins of their past. You almost, but not quite, feel sorry for his outmatched brothers here. The psychological "gut punch" he sets them up for here, will be devastating.

In verse 2, the term used for cup is "**gabîa**", which would indicate an ornate chalice or goblet. It would never have been confused for a "**koš**", the word for a common drinking cup. The **gabîa** would have

been significantly larger than a common cup, approximately bowl shaped in size. And, would have most likely had a flower shaped interior with highly ornate external carvings exhibiting the finest craftsmanship.

We also learn from the steward in v. 5 that the cup had a dual purpose. Not only would it be used for drinking, but it was also a divining device. In ancient Egypt a goblet was frequently used as a means of communicating with the spirits. In some cases, small pieces of gold or silver, together with precious stones, would be placed into the goblet over which appropriate incantations would be uttered.

Hydromancy, the art of interpreting the liquids (water) in a cup or bowl, was widely practiced in the ancient Near East (other liquids included oil and wine). The common methods were interpreting the patterns of moving liquids or the patterns of floating objects in the liquid to foresee the future or discover hidden knowledge.

The goblet would then act as a type of Ouija board. Sometimes it would be filled with water and set in the sun so that the shadows cast in the cup could be read, like reading tea leaves in a cup. The magicians of Egypt exploited the masses by portraying the power of these goblets in their ability to divine the future and communicate with the spirit world. Consequently, the **gabía** of a ruler such as Joseph would have been a highly recognizable and valuable object.

So, the brothers were sent on their way back home early in the morning, which would be a normal and expected travel pattern. The fact that the brothers did not check their bags demonstrated that they were completely taken in by the goodwill Joseph had shown them. By secretly having the silver placed back into each brother's sack and particularly by planting his **gabía** in his brother Benjamin's sack, Joseph is preparing to test their loyalty and character again in the most extreme way.

Question for Discussion: Joseph goes to amazingly great lengths to set his brothers up for a reckoning of their actions from years ago. In the process, he intends to do more than simply reveal his identity, but also to skillfully strongarm his half-brothers, father and Benjamin through the full scale of the emotional spectrum along the way. Was it necessary to extract this emotional toll from his family this way? What purpose might it serve? Might it even be considered wrong to do so? Why or why not?

The Accusation of Theft

"Oh Mama, I'm in fear for my life from the long arm of the law...Lawman has put an end to my runnin' and I'm so far from my home!" From "**Renegade**" by **Styx**

Genesis 44: 6-13 (ESV) ⁶ When he overtook them, he spoke to them these words. ⁷ They said to him, "Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing! ⁸ Behold, the money that we found in the mouths of our sacks we brought back to you from the land of Canaan. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord's house? ⁹ Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die, and we also will be my lord's servants." ¹⁰ He said, "Let it be as you say: he who is found with it shall be my servant, and the rest of you shall be innocent." ¹¹ Then each man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. ¹² And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. ¹³ Then they tore their clothes, and every man loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city.

When confronted by Joseph's steward, the brothers immediately seek to assure him that stealing from the ruler was never even considered. Going so far as to explain in a rationale argument that it wouldn't even make sense.

They are so confident of their innocence, that they say if the stolen cup was to be found in their possession, whoever was found to have it, would die; and the rest would become slaves. This is how certain they were of their innocence.

Question for Discussion: When confronted by Joseph's servant, the brothers immediately proclaim their innocence. But they do so in dramatic fashion, charging that if the ruler's valuables are found in the possession of any one of the brothers, that man should die and all other brothers would become slaves. Does making this type of unsolicited offer demonstrate a lack of judgement? Why or why not? What does it reveal about the emotional state of the brothers?

It's interesting here that before the search was conducted, Joseph's servant agrees to the pledge, except he changes it slightly by saying, *"he who is found with it shall be my servant, and the rest of you shall be innocent."*

Question for Discussion: What does the way in which the servant carries out his master's instructions here say about the servant's motive and sense of judgement?

Question for Discussion: The scriptures say nothing here of the discovery of silver in each brother's sack, choosing only to focus on the final discovery of the cup in Benjamin's sack. Do you believe silver was found in each brother's sack as the search was conducted? If so, what impact do you think it had on the moment? Why was it not stated that the silver was found in each man's sack?

The search revealed the silver cup in Benjamin's sack. The silver that had been placed in each sack was not mentioned because the cup was the focus. Once discovered, the brother's actions deviate from the stated agreement. Rather than sending Benjamin back as was agreed upon in the servant's statement, all the brothers tore their clothes... and returned to the city.

Question for Discussion: Instead of returning to their father with the grain, the brothers choose instead to return to Egypt to face the consequences with their youngest brother Benjamin, even though the agreement made did not call for them to return to Egypt. Why do you believe the brothers chose to return to Egypt? What does it say about the brothers as a whole?

The brothers had come to one of their life's greatest crossroads. What would they do with Benjamin? Would they compound their wickedness and toss him to the wolves as once they had tossed off Joseph? Or would they take their stand for Benjamin? It did not take long for the interested steward to see the result of the game being played out there on the desert sands. Without a moment's hesitation the startled men cast their fortune with Benjamin and prepared to share whatever fate was in store for him. This time they would not leave a younger brother, a favorite of their father, to become a slave. This shows they had changed since selling their brother Joseph into slavery about twenty-two years before.

The Moment of Accountability

"Honesty is such a lonely word; everyone is so untrue. Honesty is hardly ever heard, and mostly what I need from you." From **"Honesty"** by **Billy Joel**

Genesis 44: 14-17 (ESV) ¹⁴ When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell before him to the ground. ¹⁵ Joseph said to them, "What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?" ¹⁶ And Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What

shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found.”¹⁷ But he said, “Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant. But as for you, go up in peace to your father.”

The text here indicates that Joseph was still in his house, showing that he most likely had expected a speedy return and was no doubt anxious for the return arrival of his brother or brothers. Upon the return of the brothers, Joseph immediately questions them in an accusatory tone, paralleling the language of the steward who confronted them moments ago.

Furthermore, Joseph actually belittles them here for thinking that they could fool a man of his stature who knew the art of divination.

Question for Discussion: Joseph chides his brothers here for believing they could conceal a theft of his property when he can perform divination. **Leviticus 19:26** and **Deuteronomy 18:10** clearly forbid the art of divination. How could one as spiritual as Joseph be guilty of engaging in behavior that was an abomination to God?

It's possible that Joseph did use the method of divination. The belief that divination was wrong had not been clearly revealed yet by divine revelation. However, it is probably most likely that this was just one more element of the carefully constructed disguise of Joseph, who was posing as a true Egyptian. A Godly man like himself would be unlikely to have employed methods which God would later condemn.

Additionally, when Joseph spoke to his steward about his cup, he did so in an unexpected manner if he did in fact use it for divination. Verse 2 states... *and put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain.*” If in fact, the cup had served such an importance purpose, it would make sense for it to be described as his cup of divination.

The scriptures here indicate a major change and growth in Judah the fourth oldest son of Jacob. Here he takes center stage as the spokesman for his brothers. His interaction with Joseph here demonstrates a dramatic change in character from what we read of him in chapter 38 where we read of his marriage to a Godless Canaanite woman and the sordid details of his actions with Tamar.

Here Judah admits that they cannot clear their name. After all, the cup was discovered directly in their possession. He admits guilt to Joseph, but not to the charge of the theft. Rather, he has in mind the crime against their long-lost brother Joseph. For Judah these inexplicable series of events are directly attributable to the crime they had committed against him years ago. He can think of no other way to explain it.

“What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord's servants,” Here, Judah accepts the guilt collectively for all of his brothers.

Joseph however, does not accept the guilt of all of the brothers. Instead, singling out the youngest brother Benjamin for the guilt. After all, the cup was found in his personal sack. Again, playing up the moment with his choice of words here... *“Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant. But as for you, go up in peace to your father.”*

Question for Discussion: Joseph refuses Judah's offer that all brothers should shoulder the blame of the theft of his cup. He even proclaims that all of the brothers except Benjamin are free to return to their father in Canaan. Why do you believe he would make such an offer?

Questions for Discussion: If his half-brothers had accepted the offer, do you believe that Joseph would have in fact let them go, with the possibility that he and Benjamin would remain in Egypt never to see their father and brothers again? How far do you think Joseph intended to take this charade?

Judah's Plea

"It's sad, so sad...It's a sad, sad situation. And it's getting more and more absurd. It's sad, so sad...why can't we talk it over? Oh, it seems to me, that sorry seems to be the hardest word." From "**Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word**" by Elton John

Genesis 44: 18-34 (ESV) *Then Judah went up to him and said, "Oh, my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father, or a brother?' And we said to my lord, 'We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.' Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.' We said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.' Then you said to your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.'*

"When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. And when our father said, 'Go again, buy us a little food,' we said, 'We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down. For we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One left me, and I said, "Surely he has been torn to pieces," and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol.'

"Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.' Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father."

Here, Judah takes center stage. It is his moment to shine, and shine he does.

He rises to the occasion here in one of the great intercessory prayers of the Bible, a prayer that demonstrated Judah's moral greatness and his supremacy over all his brethren. It was for this prayer, possibly, that the Messianic line was finally settled on Judah.

As a result of his petition, all the barriers to Joseph's complete revelation of identity were now removed. In his prayer Judah took his stand, on behalf of all his brothers, with Benjamin his father's most cherished remaining son. He appeals to the stranger-lord's patience. *"Oh, my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself."*

Question for Discussion: Judah chooses his words carefully here in addressing Joseph, appealing to Joseph's power and framing himself, his father and all of his brothers as Joseph's servants. Do you think he was being intentionally manipulative here in his appeal to Joseph? Why or why not?

Here he gives Joseph his proper respect and appeals to him on the ground of grace. He appealed to Joseph's purposes, telling him how the famine had affected the family. How Joseph's heart must have warmed as Judah rehearsed all Joseph's dealings with them.

He reminds Joseph of his inflexible demand that he be approached only through Benjamin. He appealed to the stranger-lord's pity, speaking to him of the father's great sorrow that Benjamin must go. " *You know that my wife bore me two sons. One left me, and I said, "Surely he has been torn to pieces," and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol.*"

Question for Discussion: How do you think Joseph must have felt as Judah shared the details of the conversations he had back in his homeland with his father regarding the loss of one of his sons and the fear of losing another?

Can you imagine how that must have wrenched Joseph's heart? Here was Judah talking to him about his father's sorrow, telling of the agony that had gone through his father's soul when he was told of Joseph's death. As Judah was speaking of the father's broken heart, Joseph's heart must have overflowed!

In concluding his plea, Judah appeals to Joseph's power. To return to his father without Benjamin would be out of the question; it would be the last straw, it would bring down the final curse. Judah felt it would be far better to be dead than to witness that.

Judah's transformation was remarkable, primarily because it culminated in sacrificial substitution as Judah stepped out of the brotherly circle and spoke for himself: "*Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father.*"

Judah's personal transformation here is extraordinary. Though his name means "praise," his early life had been anything but that. He fully participated in the near murder and sale of his brother into Egypt. His sexual behavior with Tamar in chapter 38 became was abominable.

Question for Discussion: The Judah we read about here in chapter 44 is radically different from the Judah we read about in earlier scripture. What do you think could be attributed to the change in his spirit?

God must have been at work in his life in ways both observable and hidden. Judah's humiliation before Tamar's revelation, served as the springboard for a deep work of God.

Here we see him as a man with great force of character. And ultimately his father Jacob saw Judah as the bearer of the family line when he prophesies in chapter 49 verse 10:

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Judah had been transformed by the love of God. Dr. Donald Barnhouse, an American Christian preacher, pastor theologian and writer, summarized the interaction between Judah and Joseph this way:



Dr. Barnhouse Th.D,
Born 3/28/1895
Died 1/15/1960

“Here was the eloquence of true love. . . . Love so burningly manifest, so willing to take full responsibility before God, love which thought only of Jacob and Benjamin, melted the heart of Joseph. Such love moved Moses to ask God to blot his name out of the book of life (Exodus 32:32); such love prompted Paul to wish himself accursed for his brethren if only they could be saved. Judah was transformed by divine love.” Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), p. 200.

Judah’s plea to Joseph was so sacrificial, so sincere and honest that it melted Joseph’s heart into hot, gushing tears. The mystery phase of Joseph’s identity is now over. The majesty phase of Joseph’s dealings with his family can now begin!