

GENESIS

In the beginning God...

Joseph and His Brothers – Part 3

Joseph's brothers must have felt like a great weight had been removed from their shoulders. The man who they feared turned out to be a reasonable leader and for them a congenial host. Instead of being harassed, imprisoned or even killed they were honored guests at the table of a great Egyptian ruler. Now they would be able to return to their father with Benjamin and Simeon as well as a good supply of grain. However there was one more trial Joseph wanted to "test" them with. He still was not sure what their attitude might be if forced to make a choice between their own personal welfare and that of Benjamin and their father.

Chapter 44

V1 *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, (ESV)*

V2 *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. (ESV)*

V3 *As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. (ESV)*

While the brothers were sleeping the night before their journey home, Joseph had his steward load their sacks with food, as much as the sacks would hold. He knew that, when they saw this, they would be elated. However in addition he instructed the steward to return their money once again, in the mouth of each sack. This would have the twofold effect of renewing their sense of guilt and also of reinforcing the steward's earlier statement that God was somehow working on their behalf. Then, as the most important part of the test, Joseph told the steward to place his own personal drinking cup, made of silver, in Benjamin's sack. This to make it appear that Benjamin had actually stolen the cup. The next morning at dawn, the brothers found their donkeys loaded and ready to go.

V4 *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? (ESV)*

V5 *Is it not from this that my lord drinks, and by this that he practices divination? You have done evil in doing this.'" (ESV)*

V6 *When he overtook them, he spoke to them these words. (ESV)*

Almost immediately after they had left and were just beyond the city limits, Joseph sent the steward after them, instructing him carefully what to say and do. He first reminded them how well they had been treated and then he accused them of returning evil for good. He was to point out that it was ‘this’ in which his master drank, and with which he was able to practice divination. The use of the pronoun would indicate that he believed they all knew full well what it was they had stolen.

It may be strange that a man like Joseph, knowing the true God as he did, would have used such a cup of divination. That it was a very unusual cup is indicated by the fact that the word (Hebrew *gabia*) has only three usages in Scripture: in the sense used here, for the ‘cups’ (‘bowls’ in KJV) on the golden lampstand in the tabernacle (See Exodus 25:33), and for the ‘pitchers’ (‘pots’ in KJV) full of wine used to tempt the Rechabites (See Jeremiah 35:5). It is known that the Egyptians used such cups, as did other ancient peoples, for the purpose of predicting, professing to see tokens of future events in the reflections of water in the cup or in the arrangements assumed by small particles of gold and silver in it. They believed that the spirits that knew future events would act on the cup’s contents in such a way as to form these messages.

It is more probable that Joseph, in his preliminary dealings with his brothers, was still simply adapting his image to that expected of an Egyptian leader who had priestly functions, as was a political. In charging the children of Israel with stealing his divining cup, Joseph was implicitly suggesting that they, as professed worshipers of the true God, had actually descended to stealing the implements of worship of a heathen god. Such a charge and its implications caused great dismay to the brothers when they heard it. They were being accused of the sins of ingratitude, theft, and apostasy!

V7 *They said to him, “Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing!” (ESV)*

V8 *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? (ESV)*

V9 *Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die, and we also will be my lord’s servants.” (ESV)*

V10 *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.” (ESV)*

They of course deny the charges, saying they already showed their honesty by returning the silver that had been placed in their bags on the first trip, why would they steal something now? So confident of their innocence were they that they offered to become Joseph’s slaves if his cup were found among them, with the one actually guilty of the theft to be put to death. Joseph’s servant immediately took them at their word, knowing of course what the outcome would be. He did say that he would not hold them all guilty, but only the one who actually stole the cup. The guilty one would be made a slave, as they said, but the rest could go home blameless.

V11 *Then each man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack.* (ESV)

V12 *And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack.* (ESV)

V13 *Then they tore their clothes, and every man loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city.* (ESV)

Quickly each man's sack was opened, starting with Rueben and going down to the youngest. As the sacks were opened, they must have seen their returned money, but there is no mention of it. As sack after sack was emptied without disclosing the cup, they must have felt more and more vindicated and resentful. But then, in the very last sack, that of Benjamin, there was the missing cup! The older brothers had no reason to think Benjamin would have stolen the cup; he was neither a covetous man nor an idolater, and he could hardly have been foolish, despite his youth, as to take a risk as this. Nevertheless, there was the evidence. His brothers might have reasoned that there was no cause for them and their families to suffer for Benjamin's crime. They could have reasoned in such a way, this was the test that Joseph arranged. If they felt any resentment against Jacob and/or Benjamin in any way, it would show up under circumstances like these. The results of the test would indicate if their nature had really changed. Would they be willing to stand by Benjamin no matter what? Apparently so, they tore their clothes in grief and immediately turned around and went back.

V14 *When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell before him to the ground.* (ESV)

V15 *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?"* (ESV)

Joseph remained at his house until the steward could bring back word on their reaction. He was not doubt moved with joy and thanksgiving when he saw all of them coming, instead of just Benjamin. However, he still needed to hear from their own lips their thoughts and feelings. As they came before him, once again they all prostrated themselves. Joseph opened the interview with a formal charge and inquiry as to why they had done such a thing. Surely they knew by now that he had the ability of divination. This statement calls attention to the fact that he did not really depend on this cup for his prophetic powers. He could 'divine' who had stolen the cup even without having it.

V16 *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."* (ESV)

Judah was clearly the spokesman for the brothers from this time on. He felt quite helpless; he saw the evidence of Benjamin's guilt was overwhelming, and there was really no way he could prove his innocence. It is significant that, even though Benjamin was the only one charged, Judah acknowledged that all were equally involved.

If Benjamin was guilty, so were they all. He also confessed that they all deserved punishment. Even though they were innocent in this particular situation, they were guilty of selling Joseph into slavery 20 years ago and that guilt had deeply burdened them and now “*God has found out the guilt*” of them all.

V17 *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.”* (ESV)

V18 *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.* (ESV)

V19 *My lord asked his servants, saying, ‘Have you a father, or a brother?’* (ESV)

V20 *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.’* (ESV)

V21 *Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.’* (ESV)

V22 *We said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.’* (ESV)

V23 *Then you said to your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.’* (ESV)

V24 *“When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord.* (ESV)

Joseph tested them one more time by repeating the offer of his steward. Since only one man was guilty of the theft, only he need stay in bondage. The rest were free to return safely and in peace to their father. Judah recounted to Joseph all the events that had led up to this confrontation. He spoke very respectfully, but very earnestly and intensely. In this remarkable plea, Judah clearly demonstrated that he now was a strong man of godly character and compassion. He reminded Joseph that he had shown an interest in their personal affairs, asking about their father and younger brother, and how Joseph had then insisted that they bring Benjamin down to Egypt with them, even though their father would be in danger of death if they did so.

V25 *And when our father said, ‘Go again, buy us a little food,’* (ESV)

V26 *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.’* (ESV)

V27 *Then your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons.* (ESV)

- V28** *One left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces, and I have never seen him since.* (ESV)
- V29** *If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol.*' (ESV)
- V30** *“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,* (ESV)
- V31** *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.* (ESV)

Judah next told how his father had finally given consent for Benjamin to go, knowing that there was no other alternative. Then he told of his father’s final plea, reminding his other sons how his beloved wife Rachel had given him only two sons. The first one had gone away on an errand years ago and he had never seen him since. He assumed he had met a terrible fate, being “*torn to pieces.*” If Benjamin now were likewise not to return home, he had said it would “*bring down the gray hairs of your servant with sorrow to Sheol.*” Judah assured Joseph that the very life of his father was so connected with Benjamin’s life that he simply could not bear to go back home without him. He knew that when his father saw them returning without Benjamin, that he would die of shock.

- V32** *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.’* (ESV)
- V33** *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.* (ESV)
- V34** *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.”* (ESV)

Finally, Judah came to the climax of his plea. Even though he was confident Benjamin could not be guilty of the theft, he could not argue Benjamin’s innocence, for there was clear evidence against him, and there was no contrary evidence at hand. But, assuming that Benjamin was guilty and therefore deserving punishment, would it not be possible that Judah himself might bear his punishment in substitution? He would claim the bag in which the cup had been found as his own, and Benjamin could take Judah’s. Though Judah was innocent, he desired so keenly to see Benjamin spared, for his father’s sake, that he was willing to be pronounced guilty in his stead and to suffer the punishment which otherwise would be given to Benjamin.

Judah had promised Israel he would guarantee Benjamin’s return, perhaps not fully realizing at the time how near his promise would come to fulfillment. He was willing to follow through bearing the blame forever if Benjamin could only return to his father. Judah’s intense love for his father is exhibited most of all in his final plea.