

Genesis 44:1-34

The Test

The men had certainly enjoyed themselves. They had not expected to do so. Recall that they had been abruptly removed from the line where they had hoped to meet the “lord of the land” of Egypt and to persuade him to allow them to buy more food. They had brought their youngest brother Benjamin, as he had insisted they must, and they had hoped to explain away the embarrassing situation brought about by finding that the money they had used to purchase the grain had been found in their own baggage. They knew this did not look good, and their anxiety only increased when they were asked to follow an Egyptian official to an undisclosed location.

They soon discovered that they were being taken to the home of the “lord of the land.” They were certain they knew why. Surely, they assumed, he had discovered that they had not paid for their original purchase. They expected that he would use that as an excuse to attack them and take them into slavery. They knew that this man could have done so in the great hall where they were appealing to buy food, but understood that he would not want to alarm other merchants and beggars. In a private location, he could do with them what he wanted. The irony of this was that they believed God was punishing them for their having sold their own brother into Egyptian slavery themselves. The consummate irony, of course, was that these brothers did not know that the “lord of the land” with whom they dealt was, in fact, that same brother.

But the steward who brought them to the house assured them that he, and the “lord of the land” were both well aware of the money having been replaced. The “God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks” (Genesis 43:23) claimed the steward. And soon the brothers were reunited with Simeon, who had been compelled to remain a prisoner as surety for Benjamin being brought into Egypt. They washed themselves and had their animals cared for. They rested. They began to unwind. And they were given a great feast in which the “lord of the land” fed them from his own table until they were satisfied. They had relaxed, celebrated, and anticipated good things ahead. They were welcome in Egypt, after all, it seemed. They could buy more food and journey back to Canaan where their old and anxious father awaited the return of his youngest, and favorite son.

Joseph Deceives His Brothers

But Joseph’s brothers had let their guard down. Influenced by their surroundings, they forgot to be vigilant, and Joseph took full advantage. At some point during the meal, probably after his brothers were so satiated with food and wine that they could be easily distracted, Joseph, “¹commanded his house steward, saying, ‘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. ²And put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his money for the grain’” (v. 1-2).

The money was again returned, though it would play no further part in the narrative. It was the ‘stolen’ cup that would command the attention of all. Perhaps the money had been returned by Joseph to further influence his brothers to be complacent and lower their guard. After all, Joseph had given them their

money back before. Maybe Joseph hoped they would believe that this was just another act of selfless generosity on the part of this great ruler. Joseph wanted his brothers to be as vulnerable as possible. The steward “did as Joseph had told him” (v. 2). He returned the money and took the cup, likely the same one which Joseph had used during the meal, and hid it in Benjamin’s bag. This cup would have been impressively carved and would have drawn the attention of the brothers. And it was small enough to hide under an outer garment and later slipped into a bag. The theft of such an object was plausible, and that was precisely as Joseph intended. He had determined to discover exactly what were the feelings of his brothers toward this last son of Rachel.

Joseph’s plan had worked perfectly. By holding Simeon as hostage, he had compelled his brothers to bring Benjamin to Egypt. Joseph knew the famine would continue and that his family in Canaan would eventually run out of food and need to purchase more. Now, with all of his brothers in his power, Joseph could reenact that scene of nearly thirty years before and see if his brothers would again turn against one of their own.

Joseph took great pains to appear to be generous. He instructed his steward to give the brothers “as much as they can carry” (v. 1). Their bags were full and bulging. They were difficult to load onto the donkeys. This was, of course, an act that might have seemed in keeping with Joseph’s concern for the family in Canaan, but in fact, the grain-filled sacks also ensured that the cup would not be noticed among the weighty bags. Arrangements made, well fed, and well equipped, “as soon as it was light, the men were sent away, they with their donkeys” (v. 3).

Suspecting nothing, to the brothers all seemed well. They had Simeon with them and Benjamin was unharmed. They had supplies to bring to the family in Canaan. They had stories to tell about the magnificent place where Joseph had entertained them. That they left at first light was not an indication of subterfuge. In fact, that was often the time to begin a long journey, as it allowed as much ground to be covered as possible before the heat of the day. That the brothers never checked their possessions only reinforces the idea that they had been completely taken in by Joseph’s hospitality and presumed goodwill.

But Joseph had yet another task for his obedient and faithful steward. “⁴They had just gone out of the city, and were not far off, when Joseph said to his house steward, ‘up, follow the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, “why have you repaid evil for good? ⁵Is this not the one from which my lord drinks, and which he indeed uses for divination? You have done wrong in doing this!’”” (v. 4-5). Joseph did not want his plan to go wrong, so he did not give his brothers much of a head start. As soon as they left the shadows of the city walls, it seems, he instructed his steward to hunt them down and confront them over the staged robbery.

The Steward Confronts the Brothers

Again the steward was obedient, even though he may have been very confused. We do not know how much of the narrative the steward actually knew. It is likely that Joseph did not tell him the entirety of his plan. All the steward knew was that he had been instructed to return the money to the men after their first encounter. Then he was instructed to do so again after the feast, as well as to place the divination cup into the sack of the youngest. Now he was told to go after the men and accuse them of stealing that same cup.

If Joseph had not given the steward his reasons for all of this, the man must certainly have been confused. After all, why go to such trouble over a band of starving Hebrews from a distant land?

Nevertheless, the steward “overtook them and spoke these words to them” (v. 6). He accused the men of repaying “evil for good,” a standard expression not only describing ingratitude, but also the malicious exploitation of another’s kindness. The specific act was the theft of Joseph’s cup, which he apparently used for the art of interpreting the liquids as they swirled about in a cup or bowl. It could refer to either hydromancy (pouring water into oil) or oleomancy (pouring oil into water). Often these ingredients were used instead of studying the entrails of an animal simply for economic reasons. Despite the importance of knowing whether or not to go to war, or whether or not the famine would end in this case, there was no need to waste precious protein. This art was widely practiced in Near East cultures at this time. In fact the largest number of Akkadian texts we have involves this act. We should also note, however, that there is no Scriptural evidence that Joseph ever did use his cup for that practice, but that is not the point. This was not just any drinking cup that could easily be replaced. This was a sacred object. It was the personal and prized possession of the second in command of all Egypt.

We can only imagine the shock of this speech to the brothers. They had probably been casually talking and thinking about how glad their father would be to have all of his sons (except Joseph, of course) back at the family settlement in Canaan. He would be thankful for the food. He would be relieved that now his sons could freely return to Egypt for additional supplies if the famine endured. But this mood was abruptly broken by the arrival of Joseph’s steward and the accusations he made.

Overcome, the brothers again spoke as a chorus, pleading over one another.

“⁷And they said to him, ‘why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing! ⁸Behold, the money which we found in the mouth of our sacks we have brought back to you from the land of Canaan. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord’s house? ⁹With whomever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord’s slaves.’” (v. 7-9).

They instantly and vehemently denied the charge, and we must remember that they are being honest in this case. They took offense at being so accused, “why does my lord speak such words as these?” (v. 7). They assured the steward that they still fully appreciated their humble position, and still remembered the appropriate court protocols by referring to themselves as servants. They even reminded the steward that they had tried to right the previous confusion over the money by returning it, “the money which we found in the mouth of our sacks we have brought back to you from the land of Canaan” (v. 8). So such an act would have been out of character for them. Thieves do not return stolen items only to steal again. Since their previous behavior had been above reproach, how could the steward possibly accuse them now?

There are two other points to consider from the hasty defense offered by the brothers. First, they stipulated that the mere possession of the cup would establish guilt. It is curious that they would do so, having only recently had a misunderstanding over the money. Did they not think that the cup could have been accidentally placed into their baggage as they packed after the feast? They provided themselves with no possible excuse or explanation if the cup was found. We can recall that during the dramatic confrontation with Laban, Jacob made such a rash claim himself.

“²⁶Then Laban said to Jacob, ‘what have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? ²⁷Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with tambourine and with lyre; ²⁸and did not allow me to kiss my grandchildren and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly. ²⁹It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, ‘be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob.’ ³⁰Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father’s house; but why did you steal my gods?’ ³¹Then Jacob replied to Laban, ‘because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. ³²The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our relatives point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself.’ Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them” (Genesis 31:26-32).

Second, it was the brothers, themselves, who insisted that the harshest possible sentence be carried out on whoever had perpetrated the crime. In effect, they took an oath. And so passionately did they deny any wrongdoing, that they stated they all would be guilty even if only one was in fact the thief, “with whomever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord’s slaves” (v. 9). Such a statement must be seen as an example of how confident the brothers were of their innocence.

The steward quickly agreed to their stipulations in general, but with two amendments. Of course he did, since he was the one who had placed the cup in Benjamin’s sack, and he knew that the brothers had not possibly had time to discover it and hide it elsewhere. “So he said, ‘now let it indeed be according to your words; he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and the rest of you shall be innocent” (v. 10). The first amendment was that the steward only insisted on punishing the thief. There would be no communal sentence imposed. The second change involved the punishment itself. The steward would enslave the man who had stolen the cup; he would not execute him.

The brothers quickly began to demonstrate their innocence. “Then they hurried, each man lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack” (v. 11). They unpacked the donkeys and willingly exposed the contents of their possessions to the steward. He “¹²searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest; and the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. ¹³Then they tore their clothes, and when each man loaded his donkey, they returned to the city” (v. 12-13). Even though he knew the cup was in the possession of Benjamin, he began his search with Reuben’s baggage. He may have wanted to make certain that the brothers never assumed they were victims of fraud, or he may have wanted to let the tension build and let the brothers grow in confidence as each one of them was found innocent.

When the cup appeared in Benjamin’s bag, the brothers were shocked. They “tore their clothes” as their father had done when he believed Joseph had been killed. Curiously, nothing is recorded about what they might have said to Benjamin, or if Benjamin offered an explanation. Probably they were all too overwhelmed. They had resolutely believed themselves to be innocent. The brothers did not try to resist. And it is to the brothers’ credit that they also did not immediately abandon Benjamin and flee to Egypt. After all, the steward had said that only the guilty would be punished. But the brothers acted in unison. Ironically, when the brothers had been guilty of selling Joseph into slavery, they had shown no remorse. Now, though innocent, they were crushed in spirit. They passively rearranged their baggage and followed the steward back into the city.

Judah's Plea

They probably traveled in silence. Their spirits were broken. They feared the worst. As they arrived, the "lord of the land" was there to receive them. ¹⁴"When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there, and they fell to the ground before him. ¹⁵Joseph said to them, 'what is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that such a man as I can indeed practice divination?'" (v. 14-15). The fact that Joseph was still home was not a surprise to either the steward or to the reader. He had orchestrated these circumstances, and he waited for his steward to bring the men before him.

The brothers only had time to prostrate themselves before Joseph challenged them. Unlike the last time they approached Joseph's house, the brothers had no chance to plead their case before Joseph made his accusations. Joseph's accusation was not specific, though his reference to practicing divination informed the brothers that he knew exactly what had happened. That is, Joseph is not saying "why did you steal my cup, I use it for divination" but rather "why did you steal my cup, don't you know I practice divination and know all."

Unlike other times where all the brothers speak over each other, it seems that in this case they were speechless. All, that is, except for Judah. "So Judah said, 'what can we say to my lord? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; behold, we are my lord's slaves, both we and the one in whose possession the cup has been found'" (v. 16). Judah made a less punitive proposal than originally (that the culprit be killed) but more stringent than the steward had proposed (that only the guilty be punished). But when Judah spoke of "the iniquity of your servant" he could not have been referring to the cup. He knew they had not taken it. Scripture makes no mention of the brothers actually suspecting that Benjamin took the cup. Instead, Judah is admitting the brothers' guilt in their actions toward Joseph. Judah understood that God's justice will out.

But that was not Joseph's plan. He had no need for more slaves. Instead he wanted to discern the hearts of his brothers. So Joseph "said, 'far be it from me to do this. The man in whose possession the cup has been found, he shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father'" (v. 17). This was the moment of truth. To be sure, the brothers had left Simeon behind previously (they had no choice) but then they were offered the return of their brother if they produced Benjamin. Now no such offer is made. This will be a permanent separation. Joseph wanted to know if, once again, the brothers would abandon one of their own to secure an advantage.

Judah would not accept. The Judah who engineered Joseph's abduction into slavery (Genesis 37:26-28) had been transformed. We can wonder if it was the humiliating encounter with Tamar (Genesis 37) that God had used to soften him. In any case, it was Judah who stepped forward to plead for his brother's life. He began with deference, as he must, and tried to flatter Joseph. "Then Judah approached him and said, 'oh my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are equal to Pharaoh'" (v. 18). Judah risked the wrath of this "lord of the land" by making his request. But like Esther, he was compelled by his conscience to be bold.

Judah gave an account of their first interview with Joseph. ¹⁹"My lord asked his servants, saying, 'have you a father or a brother?' ²⁰And we said to my lord, 'we have an old father and a little child of his old age. Now his brother is dead, so he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him'" (v. 19-20).

Judah delicately omitted the accusation of being spies that Joseph had made, and he also turned the conversation around to make it appear that Joseph had asked them about their family in Canaan, when in fact the brothers had volunteered that information (Genesis 42:10-13). This was the same tactic the brothers had used when explaining the situation to Jacob (Genesis 43:7).

Judah tried to evoke sympathy for his “old father” and the “little child of his old age,” now the grown Benjamin. He played on the feeble age of his father and the comparative youth of Benjamin to draw attention to their vulnerability. He reminded Joseph that Benjamin’s older brother was dead (again imagine Joseph’s expression and feelings) and that Benjamin was all that was “left of his mother, and his father loves him” (v. 20). This honest admission on Judah’s part, and his willingness to use it for Benjamin’s benefit, point to the dramatic change that had occurred in him.

Judah delicately tried to remind Joseph that it was his demand to see Benjamin that had set the chain of events in motion. “Then you said to your servants, ‘bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him’” (v. 21). He insisted that the brothers had been reluctant to do such a thing because of the deep emotional connection between Jacob and Benjamin. “But we said to my lord, ‘the lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die’” (v. 22). But Joseph had insisted. “You said to your servants, however, ‘unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again’” (v. 23). So the brothers had no choice.

Having recounted their first interview with Joseph, Judah then described the events as they transpired at the family settlement in Canaan.

“²⁴Thus it came about when we went up to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. ²⁵And our father said, ‘go back, and buy us a little food.’ ²⁶But we said, ‘we cannot go down. If our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down; for we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’ ²⁷Then your servant my father said to us, ‘you know that my wife bore me two sons; ²⁸and the one went out from me, and I said, “surely he is torn in pieces,” and I have not seen him since. ²⁹And if you also take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow’” (v. 24-29).

Jacob is referred to as “your servant my father” throughout the passage. Thus he continued his deference and respect for the person to whom he was speaking. Judah also wisely omitted any discussion of the returned silver. He emphasized instead the fact that the famine was severe in Canaan and the food acquired in Egypt had run out. The family was desperate. Just as the brothers had no choice but to return to Canaan and get Benjamin, ultimately Jacob had no choice but to let him go. This even though, as Judah poignantly described, if “harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow” (v. 29).

Judah makes his plea using personal language. He evokes the pathos of an old man having to part with his dearest son. He alludes to the death of the first son born to Jacob’s wife. As an aside, this is the first time Joseph hears of how his father took the news of his presumed death. But we must notice that even here, Judah seems to have Jacob speak as if Rachel was his only wife and he was the father of only two sons, though clearly that was not the case. All of the other children of Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah are of no

account in this case. As painful as that reality had been for Judah and the others for decades, Judah pressed his case passionately to gain Benjamin's release.

As Judah reached the climax of his speech, he admitted his own responsibility. ³⁰“Now, therefore, when I come to your servant, my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad's life, ³¹it will come about when he sees that the lad is not with us, he will die. Thus your servants will bring the gray hair of your servant, our father down to Sheol in sorrow. ³²For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, ‘if I do not bring him back to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever’” (v. 30-32). Again the plea is personal and the language polite and deferential. Judah tried to make Joseph understand that Jacob and Benjamin shared one heartbeat. If one was lost, so too would the other be.

Then he concluded with his proposal. ³³“Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. ³⁴For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me, lest I see the evil that would overtake my father?” (v. 33-34). This is the biblical high point of Judah's life. He offered to be a substitute. He would rather remain enslaved than watch his father suffer the loss of another son.

Takeaways

The change in Judah is unmistakable. The man who wanted to murder his brother and only relented when he could sell him into slavery, the man with the calloused lack of regard for his daughter-in-law, the man with the uncontrolled lusts, this was the man who stepped forward to place himself into slavery himself for a brother he did not like. His offer was unconditional. His offer was sacrificial. His offer was as Godly a moment as any we have encountered thus far in our history of the patriarchs. And one cannot study it while thinking about the substitutionary death of Christ two millennia later.

It is a lesson for us all. Just as God had not finished with Judah when he tried to kill Joseph, or when he took advantage of Tamar, so God has not yet finished with us. We can take hope from that when we fail. We can be encouraged that we are forgiven and, as children of God, in the process of being sanctified and made ready to enter into His presence.

But we must also remember that if God is not yet finished with us, He is not yet finished with the other people we encounter. We can also be reminded to be patient when we see sin or when someone sins against us. We can be reminded to be tolerant of others as they, too, struggle to live in the image of Christ. As long as we remain in the flesh, like Judah we all have elements of the divine and the flesh, and we all will continue to struggle.

¹⁵“For I do not understand what I am doing; for I am not practicing what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶However, if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, that the Law is good. ¹⁷But now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. ¹⁹For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. ²⁰But if I do the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin that dwells in me” (Romans 7:15-20).