

Genesis 44 – Joseph and His Brothers-Part 3

Review

Last time, we saw that when the initial consignment of Egyptian grain was depleted, Joseph's ten elder half-brothers returned to Egypt seeking to buy more food. This time, they brought Joseph's younger brother Benjamin with them just as Joseph had commanded. Joseph brought his brothers into his home and shared a meal with them, giving special treatment to Benjamin. Although Joseph was deeply moved to be with all his brothers for the first time in at least seven years, he continued to hide his identity from them.

Joseph Taunts His Brothers

¹Then he [Joseph] 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, ²and 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. ³As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. ⁴They 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? ⁵Is it not from this [the silver cup in Benjamin’s sack] that my lord drinks, and by this that he practices divination [שָׁבֵת nāhaš]? You have done evil in doing this.’” ⁶When he overtook them, he spoke to them these words. Genesis 44:1-6 (ESV)

I find two aspects of this passage a little disconcerting.

First, Joseph seems to have been wantonly toying with his brothers' emotions here, purposely putting terror of him into their hearts. Joseph knew that they felt guilty about having sold him into slavery. He no doubt expected that they would conclude God Himself was punishing them. In Genesis 42:25 when Joseph gave orders to replace his brothers' money in the necks of their grain sacks, we might have assumed (as his brother and father should have) that Joseph simply wanted to bless them. But here in Genesis 44:1-6, Joseph clearly laid a trap for them designed specifically as emotional torture.

Of course, Joseph had every right to be angry and bitter with his brothers, but we most certainly know that Joseph also recognized God's sovereign will and benign purposes in allowing him to first suffer in slavery but then rise to a position of great power in Egypt. Joseph knew even in the moment what we know from hindsight – that God had ordained the events of Joseph's life in Egypt as His means to ensure the survival of the nation of Israel through the great famine. Of course, Joseph couldn't know that God would use Israel's survival through the famine to bring forth Jesus the promised **מֶשֶׁיחָ** centuries later.

Some English translations preface this passage with the heading, “Joseph Tests His Brothers.” But if Joseph truly understood and trusted in God's sovereign will working through these events, why would he need such a test.

Even more disturbing is Joseph's direction that his steward tell his brothers that Joseph used the silver cup for divination. The Hebrew word in Genesis 44:5 is **שָׁבֵת nāhaš**. It means to practice fortune telling or to seek out signs and omens – idolatrous practices that God clearly forbids.

^{26b}...You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes. Leviticus 19:26b (ESV)

Genesis 44 – Joseph and His Brothers-Part 3

Of course, God's prohibition against **שָׁמֶן nāhaš** was not formalized in the written Law of Moses until centuries after Joseph died. Nevertheless, the principle of such prohibition was still God's will even before it was codified in the Law. God's reasons for prohibiting **שָׁמֶן nāhaš** are also clear and unchanging. God knows and warns us in His Word that such occult practices open the doors of our minds to manipulation by our great adversary who desires to lead us out from under the leadership and protection of God's Holy Spirit into a debauched life enslaved to our enemy's wicked agenda.

The question then becomes whether Joseph truly used the silver cup to practice **שָׁמֶן nāhaš** or just told his steward to say so, helping him continue effectively hiding his identity from his brothers. After all, they likely assumed that any high Egyptian official rumored to have the power to interpret Pharaoh's dreams would also practice **שָׁמֶן nāhaš**.

7They 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 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? 9Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die, and we also will be my lord’s servants.” 10He 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.” 11Then each man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. 12And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. 13Then they tore their clothes, and every man loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city.

Genesis 44:7-13 (ESV)

This mention of the money the brothers found in the mouths of their sacks may be a bit confusing. They were referring to the money Joseph had ordered to be returned to them when they returned to Canaan after their previous trip to Egypt. Recall from Genesis 43:12 that Jacob had told them to return with it to Egypt when they went down the second time, saying that perhaps it was returned by accident.

Genesis 44:9 contains an important life lesson for all of us. Popular legend holds that Abraham Lincoln once said, “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.” Joseph's brothers were so certain none of them had stolen Joseph's silver cup that they were willing to stake their very lives on Joseph's steward not finding it among their belongings. Of course, the steward knew better. It is always prudent to wait until all the facts of any life situation are revealed before drawing any conclusions or making any comments about it.

Before we move on, notice that the brothers tore their clothes before returning to Joseph. Why? The tearing of one's clothing was a traditional expression of grief or sorrow, but also a show of anger and frustration. We find many examples in God's Word. When he returned to the pit at Dothan into which Joseph's brothers had thrown him, Reuben tore his clothes when he found Joseph missing (Genesis 37:29). Then when the brothers brought Joseph's special robe soaked in goat's blood to their father Jacob, he tore his clothes in grief (Genesis 37:34).

Ironically, Jephthah the judge made a rash vow to God very similar to the hasty offer Joseph's brothers made centuries before to his steward here in Genesis 44:9. In return for God's provision of victory in battle, Jephthah promised to give as a burnt offering to God whatever he first saw coming out from his tent when he arrived home. But when he got there, his only daughter was the first thing

Genesis 44 – Joseph and His Brothers-Part 3

to come out from his tent. Jephthah was as much angered at his own foolishness as he was grief stricken about his daughter when he tore his clothes after seeing her (Judges 11:30-35).

¹⁴When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell before him to the ground. ¹⁵Joseph said to them, "What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?" ¹⁶And 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." ¹⁷But he [Joseph] 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."

Genesis 44:14-17 (ESV)

Notice that Joseph didn't actually tell his brothers in Genesis 44:15 that he practiced divination with the silver cup. When Joseph said, "**Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?**," he was really saying, "Didn't you think I'd catch you in the theft?"

Judah's statement in Genesis 44:16 that God had found out the brothers' guilt is a bit confusing. They all knew (including Joseph) that they had stolen neither the money nor the silver cup. The brothers all believed that God was punishing them for selling Joseph into slavery. Recall that they had said so in Joseph's presence the first time they came to Egypt, thinking he did not understand Hebrew (Genesis 42:21-28).

Of course, Joseph made his offer to punish only Benjamin for stealing the silver cup knowing full well that Benjamin was Jacob's favorite son. Recall (Genesis 43:33-34) that Joseph too had greatly favored Benjamin at their lunchtime meal the day before, but his brothers were baffled by it, since they still didn't know who Joseph was. They were also amazed that they had been seated at that meal in age order. How could Joseph or his servants possibly know the order of their birth? Joseph must have been quite amused by their confusion, but he also knew that if he didn't send them back to Canaan, Jacob's family would die in the famine. By making the offer to retain only Benjamin, Joseph took the opportunity to mess with them just one last time before sending them on their way. Joseph also knew that if they refused his offer, he would be forced to reveal himself. That may have been his plan all along.

¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father, or a brother?' ²⁰And 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.' ²¹Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.' ²²We said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.' ²³Then you said to your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.' Genesis 44:18-23 (ESV)

Genesis 44 – Joseph and His Brothers-Part 3

Here in this passage, Judah reminded Joseph of their conversations they had when his brothers came to Egypt. Joseph already knew these things, so why did Judah bother repeating them? Judah wanted to make sure Joseph would understand his argument for not returning to Canaan without Benjamin.

ASIDE – Notice that Judah acted as spokesperson for the brothers in their discussions with Joseph. This role should have fallen to Jacob's firstborn son Reuben. It was also Judah who proposed selling Joseph into slavery in the first place. Recall that Reuben had intended to rescue Joseph out of the pit. Neither of them was aware that God would later use Joseph to rescue all of them out of starvation in the coming seven years of famine. After the nation of Israel finally left Egypt over 400 years later, it was the tribe of Judah who led the march throughout their wandering in the Sinai wilderness. God later ordained that the kings of Israel would come from the tribe of Judah. Of course, Jesus of Nazareth the King of Kings was born of the tribe of Judah. Here in Genesis 43 and 44, we find the beginnings of Judah's leadership of the nation of Israel.

24“*When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord [Joseph]. 25And when our father said, ‘Go again, buy us a little food,’ 26we 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.’ 27Then your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons. 28One left me, and I said, “Surely he has been torn to pieces,” and I have never seen him since. 29If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil [תַּהַרְאֵ - sorrow] to Sheol.’* Genesis 44:24-29 (ESV)

Joseph had probably already surmised the gist of Jacob's response when his sons had told him about Joseph's insistence that they must not return from Canaan without Benjamin. Nevertheless, Judah wanted to make it clear to Joseph why they couldn't leave Benjamin behind in Egypt.

Notice that Judah had also drunk the Kool Aid of Jacob's favoring Rachel over his other wives (including Judah's *own* mother Leah). We see that here in Genesis 44:27 where Judah told Joseph about Jacob's wife (Rachel) rather than all four of his wives who bore him 12 sons – not 2.

Note that in Jacob's family, the concept of an afterlife was already accepted. In fact, we find the first mention of **שָׁׁׂל** – **Sheol** – the Hebrew name for the abode of the dead – given by Jacob himself when he first learned of Joseph's presumed death (Genesis 37:35).

CAUTION – Sheol is also mentioned eight times in the book of Job which most scholars believe is older than Genesis.

I am not aware of anything in the Old Testament to indicate a belief in resurrection from the dead or divine judgment to determine the ultimate eternal fate of people's souls. But those concepts must have become part of Hebrew theology sometime before Jesus' ministry, because Jesus Himself preached in his parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16) about two different states for the righteous dead and the unrighteous – Sheol and 'Abraham's Bosom.'

We also know that the concept of resurrection from the dead was a topic of debate among Jewish theologians of Jesus' time. The Pharisees believed in it while the Sadducees did not. Recall Jesus' own argument supporting the concept of resurrection in His response to the Sadducees.

Genesis 44 – Joseph and His Brothers-Part 3

26*And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? **27**He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong."* Mark 12:26-27 (ESV)

Of course, the concepts of eternal life, resurrection from the dead, and divine judgment to separate the righteous from the unrighteous are integral to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself made this clear in His parable of the sheep and goats.

31*"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. **32**Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. **33**And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. **34**Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. **35**For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36**I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' **37**Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? **38**And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? **39**And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' **40**And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'*

41*"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. **42**For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, **43**I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' **44**Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' **45**Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' **46**And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."* Matthew 25:31-46 (ESV)

In recounting to Joseph the brothers' conversation with Jacob, Judah was doubtless aware that the Egyptian religion also embraced the concept of an afterlife and of an underworld abode of the dead. The Egyptians had an elaborate burial tradition focused on preparing the dead for this afterlife.

Before we move on, note that the ESV renders the Hebrew בָּרַעַת ra' in Genesis 44:29 as "...in evil." Other English translations render this word as "with sorrow," "in sorrow," or "in misery" in this verse.

30*"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, **31**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. **32**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.' **33**Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead*

Genesis 44 – Joseph and His Brothers-Part 3

of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. 34For 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.” Genesis 44:30-34 (ESV)

Judah's offer trying to persuade Joseph to release Benjamin to return to Canaan and retain Judah as a slave in Benjamin's place needs no further exposition.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll see that Judah's offer to remain in Egypt as a slave in Benjamin's place caused Joseph to finally break down and reveal his true identity to his brothers.