

Genesis (2011) 44

- As we open Chapter 44, Joseph sits at a table a few feet from his eleven brothers
 - And as he watches them eating and laughing together, he ponders silently what to make of them
 - The last time Joseph sat in the company of his brothers dining, the situation was eerily similar
 - The brothers ate together without Joseph
 - Joseph was sitting alone in a pit left for dead
 - Now once again they eat alone, without Joseph at their table
 - But now Joseph wonders if their hearts have changed
 - Are they the same men who possessed so much hatred for him?
 - Have they truly changed?
 - Are they treating their younger brother Benjamin well because they love him
 - Or have they been on their best behavior out of fear of Joseph and a need for his grain?
 - Have they experienced the sorrow God produces leading to repentance?
 - Or have they simply experienced worldly sorrow?
- While Joseph contemplates his brothers' hearts, he considered this was only the second year of a 7-year famine
 - He knew his family couldn't survive outside Egypt for that long
 - After just a little more than a year, they were already dependent on Egypt's grain
 - They've come twice and they'll keep coming
 - But they don't know this yet
 - Joseph also understands that God has produced these circumstances to bless Israel

- The famine will soften hearts and bring the family of Jacob back together again
 - Eventually, they will all be in Egypt, just as the Lord promised Abraham
- So Joseph chooses his next step carefully
 - He has already applied two tests on his brothers
 - The first test was placing the money in the sacks to test the brothers' love for Simeon (and Jacob's willingness to release Benjamin)
 - The second test was whether the brothers continued to harbor resentment for Benjamin when they saw him receive five times the food
 - The brothers and their father passed these tests
 - But still Joseph wants to push harder against their hearts
 - If needs to know if their hearts remain stoney cold or whether they've come to life
 - So he begins the third and final test

[Gen. 44:1](#) Then he commanded 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.

[Gen. 44:2](#) "Put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph had told him.

[Gen. 44:3](#) As soon as it was light, the men were sent away, they with their donkeys.

[Gen. 44:4](#) They 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?'"

[Gen. 44:5](#) 'Is not this the one from which my lord drinks and which he indeed uses for divination? You have done wrong in doing this.'"

- Joseph's plan this time is similar to his second test, but with a twist
 - In the last test, Joseph returned each man's money back in his sack
 - This caused the men to fear they would be accused of stealing
 - Now as before, Joseph places the money back in each man's sack
 - Since they've seen this once before, this maneuver isn't the test

- By now the men won't be surprised much less bothered to receive a refund
- Joseph continues to give their money back because he doesn't want to take his father's money
- This time, however, Joseph instructs his servant to place a special possession in Benjamin's sack – a silver cup
- In v.5 Joseph instructs his servants to say this cup is used for divination
 - In ancient times, magicians attempted to discern future events using cups filled with water
 - They scattered small particles of gold and silver on the surface of the water and watched the patterns form
 - Demonic spirits would act on these particles to create messages
 - The pattern gave answers to yes or no questions
- What do we make of the fact that Joseph had a divining cup?
 - Are we to assume that Joseph actually practiced divination?
 - We know God's word strongly condemns divination
 - So we must assume Joseph would have known it was off limits to God's people
 - From the sense of the story, it seems clear Joseph wasn't a diviner
 - First, the cup isn't called a divining cup when Joseph first mentions it
 - Quite specifically, Joseph calls it just a silver cup
 - But then when he instructs his servants, he tells them to call it a "divining" cup
 - Joseph is playing a role as part of his test for his brothers
 - Joseph's power wasn't merely in his position
 - It was also in his knowledge and insight

- It was his ability to interpret dreams that gave him his position of power in the first place
- And he has used his knowledge of his brothers to impress them, particularly at the table when they ate
 - So Joseph has been working all along to leave the impression he can divine knowledge
 - And the brothers would naturally accept his claim
 - So he continues to play that part in this test
- A diviner's most prized possession would be his instrument of divination, whether a cup or some other tool
 - So when Joseph tells his servants to accuse Benjamin of taking his diving cup, it was a very serious charge
 - Like someone stealing Tim Duncan's sneakers
 - Like stealing Tiger Woods' putter
 - Like stealing Mick Jagger's chapstick
 - The penalty would almost certainly be death
- And that's the key difference with this third test
 - Only Benjamin is placed in jeopardy in this situation, so the test becomes whether his brothers will abandon him in his time of need
 - They could leave him behind to face Egyptian justice
 - They have an easy way to rid themselves of the last son of Rachel
 - And this time it would be through no fault of their own
 - They could legitimately claim innocence before Jacob and blame it on Benjamin
 - So Joseph is testing the brothers' hearts to discover whether they will act differently this time when a son of Rachel is in jeopardy
 - He even arranges to have the cup discovered while the brothers are still on the road
 - This places the brothers far from their father's influence, just as it was in Dothan nearly 15 years earlier

- Joseph has constructed a test perfectly matched to the moment when the brothers sinned against him

[Gen. 44:6](#) So he overtook them and spoke these words to them.

[Gen. 44:7](#) They said to him, “Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing.

[Gen. 44:8](#) “Behold, 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?”

[Gen. 44:9](#) “With whomever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord’s slaves.”

[Gen. 44:10](#) So he said, “Now let it also be according to your words; he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and the rest of you shall be innocent.”

[Gen. 44:11](#) Then they hurried, each man lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack.

[Gen. 44:12](#) He searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest, and the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack.

[Gen. 44:13](#) Then they tore their clothes, and when each man loaded his donkey, they returned to the city.

- The servants catch up to the brothers and speak all the words that Joseph commanded them to deliver
 - Naturally, the brothers are shocked at the accusations leveled against them
 - They defend their honor with a simple observation about their past behavior
 - They remind the servants that when they had discovered their money returned after the first trip, they brought it back from Canaan
 - Certainly anyone willing to bring back so much money wouldn’t be tempted in the theft of a single silver cup
 - Such a crime would make no sense
 - The brothers were so sure of their innocence, they offer a test of their innocence
 - In Egypt (and throughout the ancient east), an accused could propose his own test of innocence so long as he also named his own punishment in advance

- If his offer was accepted, then justice would be determined according to his own word
- In this case, the test the brothers offered was that a search could be conducted of their belongings
- If the cup was found, then the guilty one would die and the rest become slaves
- So in v.10 the servant agrees to the test, though he chose to modify it in the brothers' favor, which was allowed by law
 - So if the cup was not found, then the matter would end there and the brothers would be free
 - But if the cup was found, then the one holding it would become a slave of Joseph
- Obviously, the servant understood what Joseph was trying to accomplish, so he modified the agreement to support Joseph's purpose
 - First, he reduced the penalty for the guilty one to enslavement rather than death
 - If the penalty had remained death, then Benjamin would have been killed on the spot
 - Certainly this would have defeated Joseph's plan, for he had no intention of placing Benjamin's life in danger through this test
 - Secondly, the servant rejects the notion of making all the brothers slaves
 - This condition also supports Joseph's plan, because the point of the test was to put distance between Benjamin and the rest of his brothers
 - By placing only Benjamin in jeopardy, the brothers will be forced to decide whether they stand by him or abandon him
 - So the search is held, and of course the cup is found in Benjamin's sack
 - Immediately, the brothers are mourning their situation, which is evidenced in their tearing of clothes
 - The scripture doesn't record any conversation among the brothers at this point, but we can imagine Benjamin was trying to plead his innocence

- Perhaps the other brothers were questioning him for why he took the cup
- But the most interesting part of the moment is found in v.13
 - It says that every man loaded his own donkey and returned to the city
 - Only Benjamin was required to return at this point, according to the oath that was taken
 - The other brothers could have continued home
 - But instead, they accompany their brother back to Egypt
 - We're not told why they return, at least not at this point
 - But the reason becomes clear soon enough
 - They will not return to their father without Benjamin in their care
 - They have made that trip once before, when they sold Joseph into slavery
 - And they aren't interested in repeating that mistake again, it seems

Gen. 44:14 When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there, and they fell to the ground before him.

Gen. 44:15 Joseph 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?"

Gen. 44:16 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."

Gen. 44:17 But he 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."

- In v.14 we're left with a peculiar sense of timing
 - We're told Joseph was "still" at his house
 - This suggests that this scene is happening later in the same day when the brothers ate with Joseph
 - The meal was at noon, so this moment is likely happening later in that afternoon
 - Joseph has chosen to act quickly to conclude the test

- As the brothers arrive, they fall on the ground before Joseph
 - This is another fulfillment of the dream given to Joseph
 - Could the brothers have ever imagined themselves doing such a thing?
 - Actually no, since they themselves said to Joseph back in Chapter 37:

Gen. 37:8 Then his brothers said to him, “Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

- Joseph begins the encounter by asking the men how they thought they could get away with taking his cup, since he is a man who practices divination
 - Clearly, this comment was intended to make the men worry all the more and keep them off balance
 - Once again, Joseph is playing a part to create an impression with the brothers
 - He is not actually a diviner, but it helps his cause if they believe he is
 - Joseph’s seemingly limitless power of discernment leaves the brothers assuming they can hide nothing from him
 - The effect is to cause them to be transparent
 - To not play games with him
 - Then we’re told Judah leads the brothers in the conversation
 - The fact that Judah has taken this prominent role tells us that he is the leading brother in the family now
 - And it’s perfect justice, since Judah was the one leading the effort to sell Joseph
- Judah begins the brothers’ defense with no defense at all
 - The facts were undeniable, and yet they are exactly wrong
 - The men are not actually guilty of this crime and they likely knew it

- Judah must have believed his younger brother's denials
- It's likely that Judah suspected the cup was planted, like the money had been before
 - But interestingly, he doesn't try to make that argument
- Instead, Judah simply confesses the brothers' sin, and in doing so he uses some interesting words
 - He says, how can we speak? How can we justify ourselves?
 - The Hebrew word for justify is *tsadoq*, which means to acquit to declare innocent or righteous
 - Judah is asking a rhetorical question, because the answer is clear
 - They have no way to acquit themselves
 - They cannot stand before Joseph in righteousness
- Of course, Judah could not appreciate at this moment that his words were even truer than he realized
 - Not only were the brothers unable to acquit themselves over the theft of the cup
 - They couldn't stand before their brother Joseph in righteousness given their past sin against him
 - Judah's moment of confession may have been prompted by one situation, but it opens a much larger conversation
 - Joseph's brothers could never hope to acquit themselves of their offense done to Joseph
 - Only if Joseph shows mercy and offers the brothers grace will they be able to stand his judgment
- In the face of their apparent guilt, Judah offers for all the brothers to become slaves in Egypt
 - This was his original offer, and Judah continues to demand that all the family remain together
 - Once again we see him working to protect Benjamin
 - This is very different to Judah's behavior with Joseph

- In response, Joseph continues to play his part, by stating that it would be unfair to take the entire family as slaves
 - Instead, only Benjamin will be left behind
 - So now comes the climactic moment for Judah and his brothers
 - In the past, Judah used his power of persuasion and leadership skill to rally his brothers against Joseph
 - What will he do here?
- Joseph's test gives its result...Judah shows his new heart, giving the longest speech recorded in Genesis

[Gen. 44:18](#) 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.

[Gen. 44:19](#) "My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?'

[Gen. 44:20](#) "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.'

[Gen. 44:21](#) "Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me that I may set my eyes on him.'

[Gen. 44:22](#) "But we said to my lord, 'The lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.'

[Gen. 44:23](#) "You said to your servants, however, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again.'

[Gen. 44:24](#) "Thus it came about when we went up to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord.

[Gen. 44:25](#) "Our father said, 'Go back, buy us a little food.'

[Gen. 44:26](#) "But 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.'

[Gen. 44:27](#) "Your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons;

[Gen. 44:28](#) and the one went out from me, and I said, "Surely he is torn in pieces," and I have not seen him since.

[Gen. 44:29](#) 'If you take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.'

[Gen. 44:30](#) "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,

[Gen. 44:31](#) 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.

[Gen. 44:32](#) "For 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.'

[Gen. 44:33](#) "Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers.

[Gen. 44:34](#) “For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me – for fear that I see the evil that would overtake my father?”

- Judah’s speech is as powerful as it is unexpected
 - Judah approached Joseph to speak with him in a semiprivate manner
 - He informs Joseph of why they cannot leave Benjamin with him
 - This is not a defense for Benjamin’s behavior
 - Judah doesn’t try to acquit himself or anyone else
 - Instead, Judah simply explains why he can’t leave Benjamin behind
 - He tells the story Joseph doesn’t know, the story of what transpired back in Canaan when Jacob allowed Benjamin to travel to Egypt
 - Judah begins by reminding Joseph of the moment when he asked the brothers if they had a father or brother
 - Judah explains that the younger didn’t travel the first time because his father favors him as the last son of his mother
 - Judah’s story confirms to Joseph that his father is still showing favoritism to Rachel’s children
 - But because Joseph insisted that Benjamin return, their father had no choice but to allow it
 - Joseph had already assumed this much of the story, but then he hears about the deal Judah made to convince Jacob
 - Judah tells Joseph that he himself gave his own life as surety to his father to guarantee the life of Benjamin
 - If the youngest son did not return, Judah knows that Jacob would surely die in sorrow
 - He says it would cause Jacob to go to Sheol
 - Sheol is the Old Testament name for the place God held all the departed souls of mankind until the death of Jesus on the cross
 - Jesus relates the nature of Sheol in a story in Luke 16

- So to comfort his father, Judah promised he would give his life to save Benjamin's if need be
- From the beginning Joseph has wanted proof that the brothers' hearts have changed
 - In fact, Joseph has been working with the Lord through the famine and through his tests to actually produce that change
 - And now with the third test, he finally has the proof he was seeking
 - It was 15 years ago that Judah callously turned his back on his brother
 - And now Judah has placed his own life above Benjamin's
 - And 15 years ago Judah and his brothers gave no thought to how Joseph's disappearance would impact their father
 - If anything, they probably enjoyed the thought of inflicting some pain upon him after years of suffering for his favoritism
 - But now Judah is working hard to protect his father
 - Where do we go to explain this change? The answer isn't found in the circumstances of the famine or in Joseph's tests
 - These events merely served to expose the brothers' true nature
 - The engine for this change was the Spirit of God working to keep the promises of God
 - Which is the only power in the Universe with the potential to take cold, dead hearts and bring them to life
 - To foster love and compassion where only hatred, spite and jealousy can be found
 - To take a man like Judah, who would sell his own brother into slavery one day
 - But then offer his own life as a slave in place of another brother on a later day
 - This is the God we serve as well