



## Genesis - Chapter Forty Four

### **II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)**

#### **II.c Genesis 37:1-50:26 - Jacob's Descendants (continues)**

##### **Summary of Chapter Forty Four**

Still disguising his true identity from his brothers, Joseph sends them away after the meal. However, he gives instructions that his personal silver cup should be placed in the sack of Benjamin in order to accuse him of theft. Later, when the cup is found in Benjamin's sack, the brothers are forced to return and face Joseph once more. When Joseph threatens to hold on to Benjamin, Judah pleads passionately in a long speech that he should become Joseph's slave in place of Benjamin. Judah's action reveals how much his character has changed from when he proposed selling Joseph into slavery.

#### **II.c.ix Genesis 44:1-34 - Benjamin is Accused of Stealing**

Joseph allows his brothers to leave with the grain they have purchased and again has their money placed back in their sacks. He also has his own personal silver cup placed in the sack of Benjamin. This allows him to have the brothers arrested and brought back to him to account for their actions. Judah makes a plea that Benjamin be released and Judah held in his place.

##### **II.c.ix.1 Genesis 44:1-17 - Joseph Detains Benjamin**

Having completed their meal together, Joseph gives instructions for his brothers' sacks to be filled with food and for their money to be placed inside as well. In addition, he instructs his steward to place Joseph's own silver cup in the sack of Benjamin. When the brothers had travelled part of the way they were apprehended by the steward, who accuses them of stealing the cup. They deny the charge and say that if the cup is found in anyone's sack that person should be put to death. When it is found in Benjamin's sack all the brothers return with him.

<sup>1</sup> 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 top of his sack. <sup>2</sup> Put my cup, the silver cup, in the top of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain.’ And he did as Joseph told him.

### Genesis 44:1-2

As in 42:25, Joseph instructs the steward to place each man’s money into the mouth of his sack. Additionally, Joseph’s own silver cup is to be placed into Benjamin’s sack, for he was the youngest. Joseph does this with the intention of accusing Benjamin of theft, a crime that could lead to his execution.

<sup>3</sup> As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. <sup>4</sup> When they had gone only a short distance from the city, Joseph said to his steward, ‘Go, follow after the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, “Why have you returned evil for good? Why have you stolen my silver cup? <sup>5</sup> Is it not from this that my lord drinks? Does he not indeed use it for divination? You have done wrong in doing this.”‘

### Genesis 44:3-5

As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away. The brothers left Egypt in high spirits. They were treated well, had been given overnight accommodation, had their sacks full of grain, and Simeon was out of prison. It seemed that their father Jacob’s fear of something horrible happening would not be fulfilled.

Why have you returned evil for good? Some wrongly think that Joseph did this simply to use his position of power to torment his brothers in revenge for their cruelty towards him. Yet knowing the character of Joseph, this was certainly not the case. Guided by the hand of God, Joseph tested the hearts of his brothers and brought them to complete repentance.

**Scripture warns of the consequences of the practice of returning evil for good:** <<They repay me evil for good; my soul is forlorn>> (Psalm 35:12), <<Those who render me evil for good are my adversaries because I follow after good>> (Psalm 38:20), <<So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love>> (Psalm 109:5), <<Evil will not depart from the house of one who returns evil for good>> (Proverbs 17:13), and: <<Is evil a recompense for good? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them>> (Jeremiah 18:20). **As Jesus clearly stated:** <<You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when

*you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter>> (Matthew 12:34-36).*

My lord practices divination. Since these remarks are set in the context of an elaborate ruse, it is impossible to know whether they should be taken as reflecting something that Joseph actually did. It is possible Joseph did so because there was not yet any specific revelation from God that such a practice was forbidden: <<*Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the LORD your God does not permit you to do so*>> (Deuteronomy 18:14). Joseph clearly intended that his brothers should believe that he has powers of supernatural discernment (v.15). For further comments on divination, refer to the comment made on 30:27-30.

<sup>6</sup> When he overtook them, he repeated these words to them. <sup>7</sup> They said to him, ‘Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants that they should do such a thing!’ <sup>8</sup> Look, the money that we found at the top of our sacks, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan; why then would we steal silver or gold from your lord’s house? <sup>9</sup> Should it be found with any one of your servants, let him die; moreover, the rest of us will become my lord’s slaves.’ <sup>10</sup> He said, ‘Even so; in accordance with your words, let it be: he with whom it is found shall become my slave, but the rest of you shall go free.’

#### Genesis 44:6-10

Why does my lord speak such words as these? When the brothers are charged with theft, they naturally deny doing anything wrong. On the contrary, they appeal to their honesty in bringing back the money found previously in their sacks.

Should it be found with any one of your servants, let him die; moreover, the rest of us will become my lord’s slaves. Confident of their innocence, they propose that anyone found hiding the cup should be put to death, with all of them becoming slaves to the steward. The Hebrew term for servants also denotes slaves, but there is a distinction between them professing to be his servants, a normal term in the culture for one under authority, to them actually coming into servitude as his slaves. In reply, Joseph’s steward adopts a more lenient approach, merely requiring that only the guilty person be enslaved.

Even so; in accordance with your words, let it be: he with whom it is found shall become my slave, but the rest of you shall go free. The steward, on Joseph’s orders, did not repeat their offer of a death sentence because he wanted

no bloodshed. Joseph had a plan for agreeing with the brothers' suggestion that the guilty parties be taken as slaves.

<sup>11</sup> Then each one quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each opened his sack. <sup>12</sup> He searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest; and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. <sup>13</sup> At this they tore their clothes. Then each one loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city.

#### Genesis 44:11-13

The cup was found in Benjamin's sack. The reaction of the brothers showed that for them, this was the worst thing imaginable. Not only was the cup found among them, but that it was in Benjamin's sack - their father's favourite son, the one he worried about the most. Now Benjamin was sentenced to a life of slavery in Egypt, if not death.

They tore their clothes. This was an outward sign of inner anguish and grief, often associated with mourning, as confirmed by 37:29, where Jacob tore his clothes upon learning of Joseph's apparent death.

Then each one loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city. When Joseph was taken as a slave the brothers allowed him to go and thought nothing of it. Now they were willing to stand with Benjamin as he faced slavery or death. This demonstrated a significant change in the heart and attitude of Joseph's brothers, especially with regard to the impact it would have on their aging father.

<sup>14</sup> Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house while he was still there; and they fell to the ground before him. <sup>15</sup> Joseph said to them, 'What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that one such as I can practise divination?' <sup>16</sup> And Judah said, 'What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? How can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; here we are then, my lord's slaves, both we and also the one in whose possession the cup has been found.' <sup>17</sup> But he said, 'Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the one in whose possession the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father.'

#### Genesis 44:14-17

Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house while he was still there. The narrator isolates Judah from his brothers, drawing attention to him – possibly not only because he has become their spokesman but also anticipating his offer to take Benjamin's place as Joseph's slave.

They fell to the ground before him. This demonstrated that the brothers were desperate to gain favour with the Egyptian official to obtain the release of Benjamin. They knew it was a genuine disaster to lose Benjamin and to bereave their father. It again fulfilled the dream that Joseph had revealed to them so many years earlier, although they were not aware of it at the time.

Do you not know that one such as I can practise divination? Building on what his steward had said earlier regarding the silver cup (v.5), Joseph portrays himself as having the ability to discover secrets hidden from others. This may also be a ploy on Joseph's part in order to elicit information from the brothers. Now that he has created the impression that he can discover knowledge with divine help, his brothers may feel that they can no longer conceal their past actions. For this reason, Judah remarks: God has found out the guilt of your servants. In all probability Judah has in mind the brothers' treatment of Joseph, for he knows that they are innocent of taking the silver cup. The brothers are convinced that God is now holding them to account for their actions against Joseph.

On behalf of all the brothers, Judah speaks to Joseph: here we are then, my lord's slaves. Before, they had referred themselves as his servants, acknowledging his rank and authority. Now they believe they will be taken into servitude.

We and also the one in whose possession the cup has been found. With these words Judah insisted that the brothers would stick by Benjamin, although he was the favoured and more greatly blessed son. If they quickly abandoned Benjamin it would show little change of heart from 20 years ago, when they abandoned Joseph. There was a purpose for this even in Benjamin. Benjamin was innocent of the sin against Joseph, yet he still needed to be purged of all self-confidence and brought low before God.

Only the one in whose possession the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father. Joseph is a man who believes in justice and not revenge. He states that only the guilty should be punished, something that would later become enshrined in law: *<<Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death>>* (Deuteronomy 24:16). This is in stark contrast with the family's conduct at Shechem, where they punished, not just the one guilty of raping Dinah, but the entire population.

## II.c.ix.2 Genesis 44:18-34 - Judah Pleads for Benjamin's Release

This speech by Judah is one of the longest discourses in Genesis. He pleads with Joseph to allow Benjamin to return to his father, for he fears that the news that he had lost Benjamin would bring about his death. He offers his own life as a slave to Joseph in return for the release of Benjamin.

<sup>18</sup> Then Judah stepped up to him and said, ‘O my lord, let your servant please speak a word in my lord’s ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are like Pharaoh himself.

### Genesis 44:18

Then Judah stepped up to him and said. In this verse, which introduces one of the longest recorded speeches in Genesis, Judah begs Joseph for the opportunity to speak to him in private in order to ask an important favour of him. The tone of his opening words expresses total deference, for Judah recognises that Joseph is like Pharaoh himself.

<sup>19</sup> My lord asked his servants, saying, “Have you a father or a brother?”  
<sup>20</sup> 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; he alone is left of his mother’s children, and his father loves him.”<sup>21</sup> Then you said to your servants, “Bring him down to me, so that I may set my eyes on him.”<sup>22</sup> We said to my lord, “The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.”<sup>23</sup> Then you said to your servants, “Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall see my face no more.”<sup>24</sup> When we went back to your servant my father we told him the words of my lord.<sup>25</sup> And when our father said, “Go again, buy us a little food”,<sup>26</sup> we said, “We cannot go down. Only if our youngest brother goes with us, will we go down; for we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.”<sup>27</sup> Then your servant my father said to us, “You know that my wife bore me two sons;<sup>28</sup> one left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces; and I have never seen him since.<sup>29</sup> If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my grey hairs in sorrow to Sheol.”

### Genesis 44:19-29

Judah summarises for Joseph, mainly by quoting what different people said, the process that led to Benjamin’s being in Egypt. In doing so he highlights why his father will be so distraught at not having Benjamin returned to him.

Sheol is the proper name for the place where people go after death, although solid knowledge about the afterlife was lacking at this time.

<sup>30</sup> Now therefore, when 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,<sup>31</sup> when he

sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the grey hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. <sup>32</sup> For your servant became surety for the boy to my father, saying, “If I do not bring him back to you, then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.” <sup>33</sup> Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. <sup>34</sup> For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.’

### Genesis 44:30-34

Please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy. Building on what he has already said, Judah petitions Joseph to let Benjamin return to his father in Canaan in order to prevent him from dying of grief at the loss of a second son. To make this possible, Judah offers to take Benjamin’s place and become Joseph’s slave. For Judah, this would be preferable to witnessing his father’s distress if Benjamin remained in Egypt. The selfless attitude of Judah stands in sharp contrast to what he previously displayed when arguing that Joseph should be sold into slavery (37:26-27). On that occasion, Judah cared little about the impact that this would have on his father, i.e. I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father: <<*For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming on my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?*>> (Esther 8:6).

Judah was the one who suggested selling Joseph 20 years earlier. Here he sensitively offered to lay down his life for the favoured brother. This display of sacrificial love was another example of transformation in the brothers. Moses was willing to offer himself for the salvation of Israel: <<*So Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written’>> (Exodus 32:31-32), and so was Paul: <<*I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises>> (Romans 9:1-4). Sacrificial love is evidence of a believer’s transformation: <<*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends>> (John 15:12-13).***