

God Has Found Out Our Guilt (Gen. 44:1–34)

By Jacob Gerber

In the previous chapter, the meeting with the Egyptian ruler went as well as Jacob's sons could have possibly imagined. No one was concerned about the money that had reappeared in their sacks during their last trip, they are reunited with Simeon, and the ruler even serves them a great feast. Joseph, however, must probe to see whether his brothers' improved behavior only extends so far as it serves their own purposes, or whether they have genuinely changed. To do this, Joseph sets up one last, major test. In this test, the brothers will have the opportunity to repeat their sin against Joseph, but this time to their younger brother Benjamin. Moreover, the Lord will use this test to find out the evil and guilt of the brothers, to lead them to repentance. In this story, we see that *God finds our sin, so that we may find Christ.*

God Finds our Evil (Gen. 44:1–13)

After finishing the feast with his brothers, Joseph commands the steward of his house to do what Joseph had commanded on the brothers' previous trip to Egypt, by filling the brothers' sacks with food, with every man's money in the mouth of the sack (v. 1; cf. Gen. 42:25). This time, however, Joseph adds another command, instructing his steward to put his silver cup in the mouth of the sack of the youngest (v. 2a). The brothers had just finished feasting with Joseph. Therefore, they would have surely seen the silver cup when Joseph used it to drink (cf. v. 5), and, theoretically, they would have an opportunity to steal it during the course of the banquet.¹ The steward does just as just as Joseph commands, and the unsuspecting brothers leave at dawn the next morning (v. 2–3).

After a short delay, Joseph sends his steward to pursue after the brothers to capture them and bring them back to Egypt (v. 4a). In this, there is perhaps a foreshadowing of when another Egyptian ruler will dismiss the nation of Israel to return to Canaan, only to change his mind relatively quickly so that he sends his whole army to pursue the Israelites and bring them back into slavery (Ex. 14:5–9). Of course, those stories stand in stark contrast with one another, but in terms of the respective motivations of each Egyptian ruler, as well as in terms of the result that each ruler experienced from pursuing the Israelites.

Joseph tells his steward exactly what to say when he overtakes the brothers. First, Joseph instructs the steward to ask, "Why have you repaid evil for good?" (v. 4b). Once again, the Joseph narrative is bringing up this central theme of the contrast between good and evil.² On the surface, this question forms the basis of Joseph's accusation against his brothers in this test, since stealing the cup of a ruler who had just served them a banquet would have been wicked indeed. At a deeper level, though,

¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 558.

² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 220–21.

Joseph's question is probing their consciences deeply for the way that they had done evil to him twenty years earlier, in spite of the good that he had done to them in seeking their peace (cf. Gen. 37:14).³ In this, the narrative continues to move toward the ultimate resolution of this contrast between good and evil, when Joseph declares to his brothers that what they meant for evil, God meant for good (Gen. 50:20).⁴ The brothers repaid good with evil, while God works through evil in order to accomplish good.⁵

Second, Joseph instructs his steward to point out the folly of stealing the cup, since Joseph both drinks from it and practices divination from it. The fact that Joseph uses this cup for drinking means that stealing it would be foolish, since he would surely miss it.⁶ As for the issue of divination, the text does not necessarily suggest that Joseph would have practiced pagan forms of divination, even though we know that Egyptians did practice "oleomancy (pouring oil into water), or hydromancy (pouring water into oil), or the more general term lecanomancy (observing the actions of liquids in some kind of container."⁷ Instead, we should remember that Joseph has divined the future from the beginning of this story by his dreams (Gen. 37), and then for the dreams of the cupbearer and baker (Gen. 40), and finally for Pharaoh himself (Gen. 41). Here, he is working to divine the state of his brothers' hearts.⁸ More pointedly, this forms part of the test, by explaining how Joseph would have come to know that the brothers were guilty.⁹

When the steward arrives, he speaks to them the words that Joseph had instructed him to say (v. 6). The brothers, of course, are astonished by this accusation). In all, the brothers use four tactics to prove their innocence.¹⁰ First, they deny that they would have done it (v. 7a). Second, they utter an oath: "Far be it from your servants to do such a thing!" (v. 7b). Third, they appeal to their honest track record, by reminding the steward that they brought their previous money back (v. 8). Fourth and finally, they assert to their innocence by appealing to justice, insisting that anyone who has done such a thing should die (v. 9). At this, the brothers dismount their donkeys and open their sacks for inspection.

This scene, as the steward searches through the sacks of the brothers, resembles an earlier scene from the life of Jacob.¹¹ As Jacob was fleeing from his father-in-law, Laban, Jacob was unaware that his wife Rachel had stolen Laban's household gods. Certain of his innocence, Jacob also declared that whoever had stolen from Laban should die (Gen. 31:32). Also, the narrative builds up the tension of the search by leaving the guilty party until last (Gen. 31:33). Nevertheless, there is one important contrast between the two stories. Where Rachel had successfully hidden the idols from her father, Rachel's son, Benjamin, is discovered with the silver cup in his sack.¹² When the brothers discover

³ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 666–67.

⁴ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 220–21.

⁵ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:798.

⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 216.

⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 559.

⁸ Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 681.

⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 427.

¹⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 562.

¹¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 563–64.

¹² Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 424.

that Benjamin has the stolen cup in his sack, they tear their clothes in grief. Previously, when they had sold Joseph into slavery and led Jacob to believe that Joseph was dead, both Reuben and Jacob tore their clothes (Gen. 37:29, 34).¹³ As John Sailhamer writes, the “grief they had caused their father had now returned upon their own heads.”¹⁴

God Finds our Guilt (Gen. 44:14–17)

When the brothers return to Joseph’s house, they fall down in fear before Joseph (v. 14). Joseph confronts them, asking, “What deed is this that you have done?” (v. 15a). Throughout Genesis, this question appears repeatedly to echo the question that God asked Eve in Genesis 3:13: “What is this that you have done?” Here, Joseph takes the role of the Judge of Heaven and Earth as he interrogates his brothers for their sin. While Joseph knows that his brothers did not sin by taking the cup, he rhetorically asks, “Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?” (v. 15b). This question puts the brothers in a difficult bind. Though they know that they are innocent of this particular crime, they know that there is no way to prove their innocence. Benjamin had the cup in his possession, and the divination powers of Joseph have a perfect case against them. As Gordon Wenham writes, “They can only appeal for mercy, not justice.”¹⁵

Accordingly, Judah speaks for his brothers, acknowledging their helplessness. He asks a number of rhetorical questions to demonstrate that he and his brothers have no hope of offering a defense (v. 16a). Of particular importance is his question, “Or how can we clear ourselves?” since Judah uses the same verb there that he had used earlier to speak of Tamar: “She is more righteous than I” (Gen. 38:26).¹⁶ Intriguingly, while Judah never acknowledges guilt for stealing the silver cup, he nevertheless takes this opportunity to acknowledge their guilt, stating that “God has found out the guilt of your servants” (v. 16b).¹⁷ This word “found out” appears eight times in this narrative, highlighting its central importance in the theology of this passage.¹⁸ The “finding out” of the cup, then, is a vivid picture to illustrate the way that God has searched out their hidden iniquity from how they dealt with Joseph twenty years earlier.¹⁹ What was long hidden has now been found out. Because of this, Judah pledges that they all—Benjamin, and the other brothers alike—will remain in Egypt as Joseph’s servants.

Furthermore, the word Judah uses for “guilt” (אָוֹן; *‘āwōn*) is important. Often translated as “iniquity,” this word refers to religious and ethical sins against God, sometimes as a summary for the totality of sins against God.²⁰ It primarily describes what is crooked (rather than straight), or what is

¹³ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:800.

¹⁴ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 221

¹⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 425.

¹⁶ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:802.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 566.

¹⁸ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 664.

¹⁹ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:796.

²⁰ Alex Luc, “אָוֹן,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 3, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 351.

corrupt (rather than pure).²¹ This word does not so much describe individual acts of sin, so much as the whole corrupted, polluted sin nature that we have. When Judah acknowledges that God has found out the guilt/iniquity of the brothers, he is saying more than that God has uncovered specific transgressions. Rather, Judah is describing God’s work to lay bare the filthy, polluted, corrupted, crooked, twisted nature of their souls. It is *out* of that iniquity that the brothers committed their acts of evil against Joseph twenty years earlier. Now, Joseph is testing to see whether that same iniquity lies unchecked and untamed beneath the surface of their hearts.

In many ways, Judah’s acknowledgement that God has found out his guilt is exactly what Joseph has sought to see. Joseph, after all, is “not seeking revenge, but repentance.”²² Still, Joseph presses the tests the depth and reality of Judah’s repentance when he insists that he would by no means keep all of them, but only Benjamin, in whose hand the cup was found (v. 17a). The rest of the brothers, Joseph says, are free to return in peace to their father (v. 17b). Here, Joseph tests their constancy, to see whether they will continue to refuse to betray Benjamin.²³ If not, then they will do exactly what they did to Benjamin: selling their brother into slavery in Egypt, while the rest return to their father.²⁴ Still, this test will be harder than the original betrayal. Where the brothers earlier chose to sell Joseph for twenty pieces of silver out of nothing more than cold blood, here they have a pressing need: if they do not hand over Benjamin, they will remain as Egyptian slaves.²⁵ Furthermore, the brothers would have been able to rationalize leaving Benjamin in Egypt, since their father had already resigned himself to whatever will happen: “if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved” (Gen. 43:14).²⁶

So That We May Find Christ (Gen. 44: 18–34)

Nevertheless, Judah refuses to take the easy way out. He again speaks to Joseph, giving two reasons why he cannot relinquish Benjamin in a lengthy speech from v. 18–34: (1) for the protection of his father from sorrow and grief, and (2) because of his own oath to serve as a pledge for Benjamin’s safety.²⁷ The striking feature of this speech, however, comes in the way that Judah repeatedly acknowledges and accepts the special favor of his father toward Benjamin (e.g., “his father loves him”; v. 20). Indeed, Judah even summarizes the sentiments of his father by quoting Jacob with words that we never actually hear Jacob say to his sons: “You know that my wife bore me two sons” (v. 27).²⁸ By this statement, Jacob (in Judah’s words) acknowledges his favoritism of his wife Rachel, and of his two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. In the past, it was exactly this favoritism that led Judah, the son of Leah, and his brothers (the sons of Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah) to despise Joseph (Gen. 37:4). Rather than citing his father’s favoritism toward Benjamin as a justification for harming

²¹ A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will Toward Christ* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 82.

²² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 221.

²³ Kidner, *Genesis*, 216.

²⁴ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 221.

²⁵ Kidner, *Genesis*, 216.

²⁶ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:793.

²⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:372.

²⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 427.

Benjamin, though, Judah instead takes up his father's cause by pleading for the safety of Benjamin.²⁹

Furthermore, Judah cites his own responsibility for Benjamin. Judah explains to Joseph that he had become a “pledge of safety” for Benjamin (v. 32). As we discussed in our study of the previous chapter, this word for “pledge” is from the same word that appeared to describe the “pledge” that Judah gave to Tamar as a downpayment for her immediate services as a prostitute, until he could send her a goat from his flock (Gen. 38:17, 18, 20). Where Judah gave that pledge to indulge his selfish lust, here Judah makes good on his pledge out of deep love and compassion for his brother and father. In this, Judah takes up a remarkably self-sacrificial stance. Victor Hamilton writes, “He who once callously engineered the selling of Joseph to strangers out of envy and anger is now willing to become Joseph's slave so that the rest of his brothers, and especially Benjamin, may be freed and allowed to return to Canaan to rejoin their father.”³⁰ Indeed, it is this reconciliation to the father that forms the final word of this passage by the word “find out” that has appeared so often in this passage. God has “found out” the guilt of the brothers from their former evil (v. 16), but Judah now offers himself as a substitute so that evil may not “find out” their father” (v. 34). Judah gives himself up to serve his father and to serve the son who is more favored than he.³¹

Judah's speech accomplishes two important results. First, by this speech Judah demonstrates to Joseph the extent of his own transformation. Judah is not the self-serving, greedy, lust-driven scoundrel that he was at the beginning of this narrative. Judah has transformed into a loving, faithful, honest, and noble man. It is the extent of Judah's transformation that will drive Joseph to reveal himself to his brothers in the next chapter. Second, Judah also foreshadows the self-sacrificial love of his most illustrious descendent, the Lord Jesus Christ. Where we could not see hardly any genetic resemblance between Judah and Christ back in Genesis 37–38, we can hardly avoid the comparison. Judah willingly offers himself to take the place of a guilty brother, fulfilling a pledge in order to reconcile that condemned brother to their father.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How does God use Joseph's test to force the brothers to deal with the evil that they had committed against him twenty years earlier? How does the steward's searching out and finding the silver cup with the brothers parallel God's searching the hidden sins of the brothers, in order to bring those sins to light? Why does God insist that we deal with former sin, rather than to bury it and ignore it? How has God worked to bring your own past sins to remembrance, to lead you to repentance?
- 2) How does Joseph's refusal to hold any of the brothers except Benjamin increase the difficulty of the test? Why is the temptation to leave Benjamin as a slave in Egypt far more complicated than their decision to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt twenty years earlier? How does this test search out the remaining iniquity in the hearts of the brothers? Why must Christians be concerned not only with actions of sin, but with our underlying iniquity of sin?

²⁹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 217–219.

³⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 570.

³¹ “Simply, Judah so feels for his father that he begs to sacrifice himself for a brother more loved than himself.” (Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 427.)

3) How many justifications might Judah make to rationalize a decision to abandon Benjamin as a slave in Egypt? How do you think Jacob's favoritism toward Judah and Benjamin might have made him feel over the years? What, though, motivates Judah to remain faithful to his promise to serve as a pledge for Benjamin's safety? How is his pledge for Benjamin different from the pledge he gave to Tamar? How does this story illustrate Judah's dramatic spiritual transformation?

4) How does this story foreshadow the substitute sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, the offspring of Judah according to the flesh? Compared to Judah's character and behavior earlier, why is this story necessary for explaining the heritage of Christ through the line of Judah? How did Christ's substitution reconcile us to our Father in heaven, just as Judah's substitution reconciled Benjamin to their father, Jacob? How does this story plant a seed of self-sacrifice for the future king of Israel?