

CCLEB SERMON

NOTES

SUNDAY MARCH 22, 2026
GENESIS 44:1-34

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF JUDAH



The title of the message is The Transformation of Judah. As we work through this chapter, I want you to listen for two major themes that rise out of the text:

Themes for Chapter 44

First, **honesty** is tested through repentance.

Second, **repentance** is proven through sacrifice.

Before we read, let's briefly remind ourselves where we are in the story.

In chapters 42 and 43, Joseph has already tested his brothers once. That first test was a test of honesty. Would they tell the truth about Simeon? Would they be honest with their father about needing to bring Benjamin back to Egypt? Would they return to Egypt with the money that mysteriously appeared in their grain sacks?

When the brothers including Benjamin returned to Egypt for more grain in **chapter 43**, Joseph learned they had passed that test. They were honest in all three situations. They told the truth about Simeon, they told their father about Benjamin needing to come, and they returned with the money that had appeared in their sacks.

Honesty:



But honesty alone is not the same thing as repentance. So now, in **chapter 44**, Joseph sets up a second test—not to see if they will tell the truth, but to see if there is fruit of repentance, true change.

Genesis 44:1-10

I don't like being tested. In a previous employment I had some character issues that were exposed; pride, portraying myself as something that I wasn't, that sort of thing. And through a series of God orchestrated events, I found myself and those things exposed - in the light. Light shining on your nakedness is uncomfortable. That was hard, and the consequences were also hard.

But the real test was whether I would stay at that employment where I knew I was exposed, and where I knew I could grow, or would I leave and go where I was no longer exposed - where I could be free to live in my pride as a poser. That was my test. The choice was easy. (I left and became a pastor - JK!)

In our passage Joseph sets up another test for his brothers. In this test Joseph instructs his steward to place his silver cup in Benjamin's sack and to put their money back in each brother's bag—again. Then he sends them on their way.

This is not random. Joseph is deliberately trapping his brothers in circumstances they cannot control and cannot explain. They are about to be confronted with something that feels deeply familiar—being accused of wrongdoing involving silver.

That detail about silver matters. Throughout **Genesis 42-44**, every time you see the word "money," the Hebrew word underneath it is the word for "silver". Silver is the currency of this entire test. And silver is also the currency of the brother's original sin—when they sold Joseph into slavery for twenty pieces of silver back in **Genesis 37:28**.

That Joseph keeps returning the brother's silver is almost as if Joseph is refusing to let them passively pay off their guilt with money. Every time they try to give silver for grain, Joseph gives it back to them. Symbolically, their sin debt could not be settled with silver / money.

The psalmist later picks up on this idea of sin debt not being able to be paid with money in **Psalms 49:8-9**.

Now back in our story, the palace steward overtakes the brothers and accuses them of taking the governor's silver cup.

And in response the brothers said in **verse 9**. "if you find his cup with any of us...let that man die".

In our study in Genesis we have seen stories or themes or sentences in Genesis repeat many times from generation to generation. In a very similar story from back in **Genesis 31:32** - when Laban was pursuing Jacob and his daughters, Laban accused Jacob of taking his - little idols. A very similar accusation as to what Joseph's palace manager made regarding taking Joseph's Silver Cup. And Jacob replied in that story to Laban, "let the person who has taken them die". Now in **chapter 44**, the brothers, who are sons of Jacob, make the same proclamation here to Joseph's palace steward in **verse 9**... "let that man die". An interesting parallel. Why does the past keep repeating in Genesis?

At this moment, the brothers are completely trapped. They cannot explain how the cup got there, and they cannot go home to their father without Benjamin. The only option left for them is return to Egypt to the governor and plead for mercy. And that scene is exactly what creates the opportunity for repentance. And that brings up our first point.

Honesty is tested with repentance.

Genesis 44:11-13. The cup is found in Benjamin's sack. Benjamin the beloved son of Jacob. And the brothers tear their clothes in grief. That detail is important and is another instance of Genesis repeating itself from generation to generation. This tearing of their clothes in grief is the exact same response Jacob had in **Genesis 37:34** when he believed Joseph was dead. And this is why the past keeps repeating itself. When the past repeats itself, the past is colliding with the present. And thru that old sin is being brought back into the light. And old sin requires a response of honesty and repentance.

Let's talk about the governor's silver cup. The steward had said that this was Joseph's cup used for "predicting the future", some translations say used for "divination".

Now check this out, the word "divination" in Hebrew is spelled with the same letters as the word "serpent" in **Genesis 3:1**, and "divination and snake" share the same root word. That's an interesting connection of past and present regarding sin and choices.



But Joseph practicing divination brings up a question. Now why would Joseph, a follower of YHWH, have a cup of divination? Many scholars debate this, Guzik suggests that the steward added this, however, my suggestion is that the cup of divination was part of Joseph's disguise.

It was common for Egyptian royalty and priests to use a divination practice called "lecanomancy" to observe patterns on the cup.



According to the IVP BBC and historian Robert Alter, sometimes the patterns were on the liquid in the cup - like when oil floats on the surface, sometimes the patterns were reflections, and sometime the patterns were drops running down the sides of the cups. And from those patterns in or on the cup, the priests would predict the future.

It fits the narrative that the silver cup of divination was part of Joseph's disguise to hide his identity from his brothers. This disguise was necessary for the tests to be effective.

Genesis 44:14-15

When the brothers return, something shifts in the story. For the third time, they bow before Joseph, fulfilling the dreams Joseph had years earlier.

Joseph continues his disguise, acting as the angry governor, and he asks them, "What have you done?" In Hebrew this is very close to the same question God asked Eve in **Genesis 3:13**

That connection to God questioning Eve creates an image here - of choices being brought into God's light. So as you read feel that intensity.

But here is the shift in the storyline, the text tells us something new: Judah steps forward. Not Reuben, the firstborn. Judah. This is the rise of Judah.



So, picture the scene. Benjamin, the beloved son of Jacob, was caught "red handed" with the governor's silver cup... and the brothers in response tear their clothes in grief/sorrow. All the brothers then return to Egypt to plead with the governor for Benjamin's life.

They all fall on their faces before Joseph, torn clothes expressing their grief, and Joseph acting in character of the governor is angry with them and questions them, just like God questioned Eve.

Then Judah, not Reuben the oldest, is the one to speak to Joseph.

Genesis 44:16

Judah asks three questions: “What can we say?” “How can we speak?” “How can we clear ourselves?”

Those questions reveal what repentance actually requires.

What repentance actually requires:

1. Judah doesn't argue innocence.
2. He doesn't blame circumstances.
3. He doesn't claim misunderstanding.
4. Instead, he acknowledges his guilt.

Judah says, “God has found out the guilt of your servants.”

Let's look at the words “God” and guilt. The Hebrew word for God is “El”. Lower case “el” is translated as “god”, but it also means “judge”. Now let's look at the word “guilt”.

You cannot repent without first being aware of sin. Awareness of sin is “guilt”—and guilt, rightly understood, is not the enemy of repentance. It is the doorway to it.

Let's press into repentance. In the Old Testament the word “repentance” means to “turn” or “return”. The idea is simple, if one is on the wrong path you “turn” off that wrong path to a different path. Or you stop heading down the wrong path by- “turning around” - “returning” - the idea of UTURN.

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You cannot turn unless you admit you're on the wrong path. Judah is no longer pretending. He stands before Joseph—the governor, the judge—and he owns his guilt.

In relation to God who is judge, repentance requires one to be truthful and be aware of sin/guilt, which can then lead to repentance. Here in **verse 16** we see Judah aware of his sins/guilt as he stands before Joseph – the governor, the judge.

And then Judah offers something remarkable. Judah offers all the brothers as slaves including himself. That's quite an offer. But Joseph refuses that offer.

Genesis 44:17

Joseph insists on a one-for-one exchange. Keep that ratio in mind. Only the one in whose sack the cup was found must remain as a slave. The rest are free to go.

That moment echoes the original sin against Joseph. Once before, one brother went into slavery while the others went free. And now the same choice is placed in front of them, one brother Benjamin a slave and the others go free. And this is where Judah's transformation becomes undeniable.

Genesis 44:18-29

Judah approaches Joseph alone. The others are on the ground, but Judah steps forward.

He begins to recount the story—not from his perspective, but from his father's. He speaks of a father who has already lost one son and cannot survive losing another. He even refers to Joseph, standing right in front of him, as **verse 20** “dead,” because that is what Jacob believes to be true.

Judah is telling the truth now—not just facts, but the emotional truth of the damage and intense pain he and his brother's sin caused in their family.

And then Judah reaches the heart of his plea.

Genesis 44:30-34

Judah offers himself as a substitute - One for one. This is the man who once suggested selling Joseph for profit. Now he is willing to lose his freedom so his brother can live. He is willing to bear the consequences, so another does not have to.

This is repentance - a true turn around - proven through sacrifice.

In Genesis we have already seen that freedom for a beloved son requires a substitute. Abraham was asked to give up Isaac, and God provided a substitute, a ram. Jacob gave up Benjamin to free Simeon and buy grain, and now Judah offers himself as a substitute for Benjamin.

Judah's repentance is not emotional only. It is costly. It is personal. It changes the direction of his life and the future of Israel.

Let's look at Judah's history. When we first met Judah in **Genesis 37**, he was self-interested and morally careless, it was his suggestion to sell Joseph for money, not to kill him - he wanted profit.

In **Genesis 38**, Judah's sin with Tamar exposed him, and in response he confessed, “She is more righteous than I.”

In **Genesis 43**, Judah personally guaranteed Benjamin's safety.

And here in **Genesis 44**, Judah offers himself in Benjamin's place.

This is transformation. And it happened because honesty led to repentance, and repentance was proven through sacrifice.

Let me close with these thoughts for your meditation and application. When Judah stood before Joseph like Eve stood before God, Judah had no answer to excuse his guilt. Remember his questions “What can we say?” “How can we speak?” “How can we clear ourselves?” God’s light was shining on him and there was nothing he could say to blame, excuse or rationalize what had happened.

What repentance actually requires:

1. Judah doesn’t argue innocence.
2. He doesn’t blame circumstances.
3. He doesn’t claim misunderstanding.
4. Instead, he acknowledges his guilt.

Just like with Judah, God is not looking for people who can explain away their sin. God the Father who loves us with the perfect love of a father, is looking for people who will tell the truth, turn around (repent), and live differently.

True repentance includes sorrow over sin, changed behavior, and a willingness to make things right—even when it costs us, like sacrifice.

Judah shows us that repentance is not proven by words, but by what we are willing to sacrifice.

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And here is the good news for us. Judah offered himself as a substitute for his brother. But generations later, one of Judah’s descendants, the last and final covenant bearer would offer Himself as a substitute for the world. Jesus, from the tribe of Judah, Jesus the Lion of Judah, did what Judah could only point toward.

Jesus took our place.

Jesus bore our guilt.

Jesus paid a debt we could never repay.

So, the question for us today is not whether we have sinned, **Romans 3:23** says, “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.”

The question is whether we are willing to turn—and let repentance truly change us. And will our repentance be proven by our actions.

BONUS CONTENT:

Sources:

1. The Pentateuch as Narrative: John H. Sailhamer
2. The Literary Structure of the Old Testament. David A. Dorsey
3. The Five Books of Moses - a Translation with Commentary. Robert Alter
4. The IVP Bible Background Commentary - Old Testament
5. "Enduring Word" website and podcast. David Guzik
6. "Joseph", Bible Project Classroom notes. Tim Mackie.
7. Blue Letter Bible website (for Hebrew words)
8. Genesis - A Parsha Companion - Rabbi David Foreman
9. Bema Discipleship Podcast - Season 1. Marty Solomon.
10. NET Bible notes.