

LESSON 7

Judah's Plea

Now please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave, in place of the boy. Let him go back with his brothers.

— Genesis 44:33

Genesis 44 offers the brothers their freedom for the price of one brother, and the man who once sold a brother for silver offers himself instead.

Introduction

THE MORNING STARTS WELL.

That's important to see, because nothing else in this chapter goes the way anybody expects. The brothers wake up in Egypt with every problem solved. Simeon is out. Benjamin is safe. The governor fed them in his own house, and the silver they were so afraid of has been waved off by a steward who told them not to worry. At first light they load the donkeys and point them toward Canaan.

Our previous lesson ended with a warning the brothers never heard: they don't know what's going to be in one of those sacks.

Joseph has watched these men under accusation, and he has watched them at a feast. He has one test left, and it is the one the whole story has been leaning toward since the cistern. Twenty-some years ago, ten brothers stood over their father's favorite and found out what he was worth to them. Twenty shekels (37:28). Now Joseph is going to set the same choice before them again, with Rachel's other son in the middle of it. This time the reward for walking away is their own freedom, and they'll be able to tell their father the plain truth when they get home.

We've been asking whether guilty men can change. Genesis 44 answers the question. It comes out loud, in the longest speech in Genesis, from the brother who first suggested the sale.

The last exercise of our previous lesson asked you to count something in that speech. Hold on to your number. We'll get there.

My Cup, the Silver One (44:1–5)

Joseph gives his steward the orders while the brothers are still sleeping off the wine. *Fill the men's bags with as much food as they can carry, and put each one's silver at the top of his bag. Put my cup, the silver one, at the top of the youngest one's bag, along with the silver for his grain.*

Silver again. It has followed these men since Dothan. They sold Joseph for silver. They found silver in their sacks on the first trip and nearly died of fright. They brought double silver back to Egypt to make it

right. Hughes, following Sarna, catches what Joseph is doing: the brothers once traded him for silver, and now he tests them with it.¹⁰⁶

This time the returned money is not the trap. It is only one more kindness, one more good thing the brothers will seem to have repaid with theft. The trap is the cup.

They haven't gone far from the city when Joseph sends the steward after them with a speech to deliver word for word. *Why have you repaid evil for good? Isn't this the cup that my master drinks from and uses for divination? What you have done is wrong!*

Did Joseph actually read omens in a cup? Genesis doesn't say. Israel's law would later forbid divination outright (Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10), and Kidner allows that the steward's line might be read as a boast that the master would certainly find out about this. What matters in the story is the part Joseph is playing. He is an Egyptian lord with a lord's powers, and the brothers believe every bit of it.¹⁰⁷

The Search (44:6–13)

The brothers are indignant, and they have good reason to be. *Your servants could not possibly do such a thing. We even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the silver we found at the top of our bags. How could we steal silver or gold from your master's house?*

It is a fair argument. Thieves don't drive a week's journey to return money nobody missed.

Then they say something rash. *If it is found with one of us, your servants, he must die, and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves.*

Their father said almost the same thing once. When Laban chased Jacob down and accused him of stealing the household gods, Jacob told him that whoever had them would not live (31:32). He had no idea Rachel had taken them. Now his sons make the same vow over the same kind of search, and the stolen thing is sitting in a sack belonging to Rachel's son. Genesis doesn't connect Jacob's vow to Rachel's death on the road a few chapters later, and we shouldn't either. But it does let the echo ring.¹⁰⁸

The steward trims their offer. *Only the one who is found to have it will be my slave, and the rest of you will be blameless.* No death, and only one slave. Everyone else goes home clean.

So the sacks come down. *The steward searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest.* Last night they sat at the table in exactly that order and couldn't explain how the man knew it (43:33). Now they stand in it again on the road. Reuben's sack is clean. Then Simeon's. Then Levi's and Judah's. Every empty sack loosens the knot a little. Ten men come up innocent.

And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack.

Genesis doesn't record a word. It records what they did. *Then they tore their clothes.*

Here is a garment for your list. When Joseph disappeared, two men in this family tore their clothes. Reuben did it at the empty cistern, and Jacob did it over the bloody robe (37:29, 34). None of the others did. They had nothing to grieve; they had twenty shekels. Now every one of them stands on the road ripping his own robe over Rachel's son.¹⁰⁹

Then the line that matters most in the first half of the chapter. *Each one loaded his donkey and returned to the city.*

Each one. The steward has already told them they are free. Nobody takes him up on it. Nobody turns his donkey toward Canaan and says the boy must have done it. Eleven loaded donkeys go back through the gate.

God Has Exposed Your Servants' Iniquity (44:14–17)

When Judah and his brothers reached Joseph's house, he was still there.

Notice the name. *Judah and his brothers*. In chapter 42 the eldest did the talking (42:22, 37). Somewhere on the road from the city gate, the family's voice changed hands.

They fell to the ground before him. That is the third bowing on the list from the front of your workbook. Each time Genesis words it a little differently, and this time the brothers don't bow so much as drop.¹¹⁰

Joseph keeps the mask on. *What have you done? Didn't you know that a man like me could uncover the truth by divination?*

Judah answers.

What can we say to my lord? How can we plead? How can we justify ourselves? God has exposed your servants' iniquity. We are now my lord's slaves—both we and the one in whose possession the cup was found.

Three questions, and all three have the same answer. There is nothing to say. Then comes the sentence that should stop you. *God has exposed your servants' iniquity.*

Which iniquity? They didn't take the cup. Every man in that room except Joseph believes Benjamin is innocent, and they know he is. Judah could argue. He could point out that a man who returns silver doesn't steal silver. He could say they have been framed, which happens to be true.

He doesn't. Kidner hears a double meaning, and the chapters behind us make it hard to miss. On the first trip, standing in front of this same man, the brothers said to each other, *We are being punished for what we did to our brother* (42:21). Judah is talking about a cup, and he is thinking about a cistern.¹¹¹

Here is what he cannot know. He has just confessed his old sin, out loud, to the brother he sinned against.

And then Joseph offers them the door.

I swear that I will not do this. The man in whose possession the cup was found will be my slave. The rest of you can go in peace to your father.

In peace. There is that word again, *shalom*, the one we followed all through chapter 43. Joseph is offering these men peace, and it costs exactly one brother.

Think about how perfectly the old scene has been rebuilt. A father at home. A favored son of Rachel in strangers' hands. Ten brothers free to walk away. And this time they wouldn't need a goat or a robe.

They wouldn't need to say a single false word. They could go home and tell Jacob the truth: the cup was in Benjamin's sack, and the Egyptian kept him.¹¹²

Then Judah Approached (44:18–29)

But Judah approached him.

He steps toward a man who can have him killed, and he knows it. *My lord, please let your servant speak personally to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, for you are like Pharaoh.* The Hebrew behind *speak personally* is a word *in my lord's ears*. Centuries later, a woman named Abigail will fall at David's feet, take the blame on herself, and ask him for the same thing in nearly the same words (1 Samuel 25:24).

What follows is the longest speech in Genesis.¹¹³ Judah retells everything. The governor's questions about their father and brother. The demand to bring the boy down. The old man's refusal. The famine that left them no choice. He tells it like a man laying evidence on a table.

Now, about your homework. How many times did you count *father*?

In the CSB, Judah says it fourteen times between verses 19 and 34. Hughes, counting in his own translation, gets fifteen.¹¹⁴ Either way, it is the word Judah can't stop saying. Here is what he never says even once: *cup*. He doesn't defend himself or Benjamin. He doesn't mention the theft at all. The whole speech is about an old man waiting at home.

Listen to how he talks about Benjamin. *We have an elderly father and a younger brother, the child of his old age. The boy's brother is dead. He is the only one of his mother's sons left, and his father loves him.*

His father loves him. It is the same word Genesis used at the start: *Israel loved Joseph more than his other sons* (37:3). That love is what made these men hate. Judah says it now as the reason the boy has to go home. There is not an edge anywhere in it.

Then he quotes his father, and the quotation should hurt. *You know that my wife bore me two sons.*

My wife. One wife. Judah is Leah's son. So are Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, and Zebulun. Their mother spent her whole marriage knowing she was the one Jacob didn't choose, and here Jacob talks as if she never bore him a child. Judah repeats it to a stranger without a flinch. He has stopped fighting his father's favoritism. He is simply carrying it.¹¹⁵

One is gone from me—I said he must have been torn to pieces—and I have never seen him again.

Hold still and look at that moment. Judah stands in front of Joseph, quoting the conclusion his brothers let their father reach over a goat-bloodied robe. Joseph is hearing, for the first time, what was said at home the day he didn't come back. And the brother who suggested selling him is the one telling him.

Back in Lesson 1, you were told to set this speech beside Genesis 37. Here is the comparison. At Dothan, Judah's question was *What do we gain?* (37:26). In Egypt, he never asks for anything for himself.

In Place of the Boy (44:30–34)

Now Judah tells the governor what will happen if Benjamin stays.

So if I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us—his life is wrapped up with the boy's life—when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die. Then your servants will have brought the gray hairs of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow.

Down to Sheol. Jacob said it over the robe (37:35), and he said it again when Reuben offered his sons (42:38). Kidner notes how deeply the line sank into this family. Judah has heard it for twenty years. And look at whose fault he makes it. *Your servants will have brought him down.* Judah doesn't blame the governor, or the cup, or Benjamin. If the old man dies, it is on them.¹¹⁶

Then he reaches the verse you were told to find.

Your servant became accountable to my father for the boy, saying, "If I do not return him to you, I will always bear the guilt for sinning against you, my father."

That is 43:9, repeated almost word for word. *Became accountable* is the same Hebrew verb, *'ārab*, the one we traced last week back to the pledge Judah couldn't redeem at Timnah. Notice whom he is telling. An Egyptian official has no reason to care about a private promise a Hebrew herdsman made to his father in a tent in Canaan. Judah says it anyway. The promise binds him whether anybody in Egypt honors it or not.

And then he makes the offer.

Now please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave, in place of the boy. Let him go back with his brothers.

In place of. Judah asks to trade himself for Benjamin. The man who once said *Come, let's sell him* is asking to be sold.¹¹⁷

Go back to the price. At Dothan a brother went for twenty shekels. In Egypt Judah offers the only thing he has left to give, which is the rest of his life. Kidner calls it a plea for leave to suffer in another man's place, and that's the right name for it. Judah is asking for the sentence.

His last words are about his father again. *For how can I go back to my father without the boy? I could not bear to see the grief that would overwhelm my father.*

Twenty-some years ago these men watched their father's grief and lived with it. They sat in the tent while he refused to be comforted, and they kept their secret. Judah can't watch it again. That is the whole change, and it took two decades, a famine, a widow named Tamar, and a cistern none of them can forget.

The chapter ends there.

Judah stops talking. Ten brothers stand behind him with torn clothes. Benjamin waits to hear whether he'll ever see Canaan again. And the man on the other side of the room, the one they all think is Egyptian, hasn't said a word.

Looking to Christ

The New Testament never quotes Genesis 44. No apostle stands up and points to Judah's offer. So, as last week, hold this loosely.

But you can't read *in place of the boy* without thinking of another son of Judah. Jesus said of himself that he came to *give his life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10:45). Peter put it this way: *Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God* (1 Peter 3:18). Hughes sees Judah's offer as a shadow of that substitution, and the shape is real. One man stays a slave so another can go home to his father.¹¹⁸

Watch where the likeness breaks, though, because that is where it teaches most. Judah is guilty. He offers himself for a brother who is innocent of the charge. Jesus is innocent, and he gives himself for brothers who are guilty of every charge. Judah's offer came out of twenty years of conscience. Jesus had no conscience to clear.

And Judah never had to pay. The man he was pleading with turned out to be his own brother, the one he'd wronged, already planning to forgive him. Jesus did pay. That difference is the gospel.

Applying the Text

Expect the easy exit. Joseph didn't test his brothers by making it hard to abandon Benjamin. He made it easy, legal, and honest. Most of our tests come that way. The moment you find out whether you've changed is usually the moment walking away would cost nothing and nobody would blame you.

Stop defending the small charge. Judah could have proved they didn't steal the cup. He named the sin they did commit instead. Some of us hide behind the argument we can win so we never have to face the one we can't. Ask whether there's an old wrong you keep covering with a newer, smaller defense.

Make peace with the love you didn't get. *His father loves him.* Judah said it about the son his father preferred, and he felt no bitterness. If you grew up beside a favorite, that resentment can follow you into middle age and into every family holiday. Judah shows it can be set down.

Keep the promise nobody else is holding you to. No one in Egypt cared what Judah swore to his father in a tent. He kept it anyway. Your word is still your word when the person you gave it to isn't in the room.

Measure repentance by what you'll give up. At Dothan, Judah calculated what a brother was worth to him. In Egypt he offered himself. If you've changed, you're willing to lose something you wouldn't have lost before.

For Discussion

1. Compare the brothers' offer in 44:9, the steward's terms in 44:10, and Joseph's in 44:17. What changes each time? Why do you think Joseph kept making it easier for them to leave?

2. In 44:16 Judah says *God has exposed your servants' iniquity*. What iniquity is he talking about? How does 42:21–22 help you answer?

3. Read Judah's words in 37:26–27 beside 44:33. What do you think happened to him in between? Look back at 38:26 before you answer.

4. Judah repeats his father's line *my wife bore me two sons* (44:27) to a stranger, and he's Leah's son. What does that tell you about where Judah's heart had come to rest?

5. Was someone in your family loved more, or did it seem that way? Could you say *his father loves him* about that person today without an edge in your voice? What would it take?

6. Judah's change finally showed up in what he was willing to lose. Is there anything you would give up now for someone else that you wouldn't have given up five years ago? Is there anything you still wouldn't?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 8: Joseph Reveals Himself (Genesis 45)

Joseph has heard enough. He clears the room, and the man the brothers have been bowing to since their first trip finally tells them who he is. They can't say a word. What Joseph says next is the closest Genesis has come yet to explaining what God was doing in the pit, the prison, and the palace.

Before you come: read Genesis 45. In 45:4–9, underline every time Joseph says who sent him to Egypt. Then look at what he gives his brothers when they leave (45:22), and remember the last time this family fought over a set of clothes.

¹⁰⁶ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:1–2 he follows Nahum Sarna in connecting the silver cup to the twenty pieces of silver for which the brothers sold Joseph, so that Joseph now tests them with silver. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 44:1 he notes that the returned money was not meant to incriminate this time, only to add one more good that the brothers would appear to have repaid with evil (44:4), since after 43:23 and the feast the governor was plainly treating them as guests.

¹⁰⁷ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 44:5 he follows Vergote in allowing that the clause may be rendered *about this he would certainly have divined*, which sharpens Joseph's question in 44:15, and he judges divination fundamentally alien to Israel (cf. Numbers 23:23). Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:15 he notes that the text does not make clear whether Joseph practiced divination with the cup, and that the practice was later forbidden as pagan (Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10). Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. In their background note on 44:4–6 they describe a form of divination in which objects were poured into water and the water's reaction interpreted.

¹⁰⁸ The CSB cross-reference at 44:9 points to 31:32, where Jacob pronounces the same sentence on whoever holds Laban's household gods, unaware that Rachel has taken them (31:19, 34). Rachel's death follows at 35:16–19; the narrative draws no causal link between the two.

¹⁰⁹ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:13 he quotes Gordon Wenham's remark that when Joseph disappeared only Jacob tore his clothes, and that now all the brothers do, the first sign of fraternal solidarity. Genesis 37:29 records that Reuben also tore his clothes at the empty cistern, and the CSB cross-reference at 44:13 points there. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 44:1–17 he names the unanimity of the brothers' response (44:13) as one sign that the chastening had done its work. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 44:11–12 they picture the brothers' apprehension easing as each sack is found empty, until the last.

¹¹⁰ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:14 he traces how the description of the bowing changes on each occasion (42:6; 43:28; 44:14), and here hears abject submission. He also notes that it was still early morning, and Joseph had not yet left the house.

¹¹¹ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 44:16 he finds a double meaning in Judah's words, as the heart-searchings of 42:21–22 and 42:28 indicate. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:16 he reads the sentence as a confession of the brothers' long-standing guilt rather than of the cup, and observes that, having sinned together, they commit themselves to suffer together. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 44:16 they allow that Judah may simply be acknowledging where the cup was found, or may be expressing his conviction that God is at last punishing them for selling Joseph; in their history-of-interpretation note they cite Ephrem the Syrian for the second reading.

¹¹² Kidner, *Genesis*. On 44:1–17 he compares the threat to Benjamin with the judgment of Solomon and observes that, when the steward turned the brothers' challenge into a chance of freedom at Benjamin's expense, every condition was present for another betrayal, at a far more compelling price than the twenty pieces of silver: their liberty. He notes that Joseph repeated

the offer (44:17). Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:17 he describes Joseph as having restored the original grouping of the first betrayal: father, brothers, and the youngest son. The Hebrew of 44:17 reads *go up in peace* (lēšālôm); the CSB smooths the verb to *go*.

¹¹³ Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 44:18–29 they call Judah’s plea the longest speech in Genesis. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 44:18–34 he finds its force in cumulative factual reminder (44:19–23), graphic portraiture (44:20, 24–29, 30b), and a selfless concern proved in a plea not for mercy but for leave to suffer vicariously (44:30–34). The Hebrew of 44:18 asks to speak a word *in my lord’s ears*; Abigail’s request in 1 Samuel 25:24 uses the same idiom.

¹¹⁴ The count of fourteen runs from 44:19 through 44:34 in the CSB. Hughes, *Genesis*. In his summary at the opening of his exposition of chapter 45 he says the brothers affirmed their love for their father by mentioning him fifteen times. The figure shifts with the translation and with where the count begins.

¹¹⁵ The verb in 44:20 is *’āhab*, the same verb used for Jacob’s love of Joseph in 37:3–4. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:25–29 he observes that Judah’s quotation of *my wife bore me two sons* could be heard as a delegitimizing of himself and his brothers, and argues that the sons of Leah had come to terms with their father’s favoritism; on the same verses he notes that this is the first time Joseph learns what happened at home when the brothers returned without him. The phrase *torn to pieces* in 44:28 (*ṭārōp ṭōrāp*) repeats Jacob’s cry over the robe in 37:33. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 44:20 he notes that Benjamin, though called *the boy*, was at least in his twenties and more probably his thirties, since Joseph was now about forty (cf. 37:2; 41:46, 53).

¹¹⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 42:38 he observes that Jacob’s words about Sheol left a deep impression on the family, who quote them back at 44:29, 31, and 34. On 44:30 he notes that *his life* translates *nepeš*, the very self, and compares the same figure in 1 Samuel 18:1 of Jonathan’s devotion to David. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:30–32 he notes that by making the old man’s lament their own, the brothers accept the responsibility for it. The verb behind *became accountable* in 44:32 is *’ārab*, as in 43:9.

¹¹⁷ The preposition behind *in place of* in 44:33 is *taḥat*. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 44:33 they quote Victor Hamilton’s observation that the man who once callously engineered Joseph’s sale to strangers is now willing to become a slave so that his brothers, and especially Benjamin, may go free. Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 44:14–34 he summarizes Judah’s appeal as an offer to become a slave in Benjamin’s place, marked by touching concern for his father. Borthwick, *Life of Joseph*. In his closing notes he recommends setting Judah’s speech in 44:18–34 against his words in chapter 37. The Hebrew of 44:34 reads *how can I go up to my father*; the CSB renders it *go back*, which hides the down-and-up vocabulary.

¹¹⁸ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:33–34 he calls Judah’s offer a foreshadowing of the substitutionary, vicarious atonement of his ultimate Son, and on 49:8–12 a prophetic shadow of Christ’s substitutionary death. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 44:18–34 he compares Judah’s plea with the intercession of Moses (Exodus 32:9–14, 31–32), noting that Moses’s was made by the innocent on behalf of the guilty.