



Jacob's Sons Return to Egypt Genesis 43-44

Introduction

The famine continued and Jacob's family depleted the grain which had been brought from Egypt. Yet the father and his sons "*lingered*" (Genesis 43:10), apparently unwilling to confront the problem which faced them. On their first trip, Joseph had demanded that Benjamin be brought to him to confirm their honest intentions and to save their lives (Genesis 42:20). Jacob's sons dared not return to Egypt without their youngest brother.

OUTLINE of GENESIS 43-44

I. Jacob's Difficult Decision - Genesis 43:1-14

II. The Brothers' Fear - Genesis 43:15-28

III. Joseph's Tears and Testing - Genesis 43:29-44:15

IV. Judah's Plea - Genesis 44:16-34

I. Jacob's Difficult Decision - Genesis 43:1-14

With the severity of the famine, Jacob's sense of need finally overcame his reluctance to face the issue of returning to Egypt. He gave the order for his sons to go and buy food.

A. Judah's Appeal - Genesis 43:1-10

It was Judah, Jacob's fourth son, who stepped up to remind his father of the necessity of taking Benjamin on the return trip to Egypt. Reuben (the eldest son) had failed in earlier attempts to persuade Jacob of this need (Genesis 42:37-38). Simeon, the second son, was imprisoned in Egypt, and Levi, the third son, had been a ringleader in the murder of the men of Shechem (Genesis 34). This left the next in line, Judah, to take firm leadership in the family and insist that Benjamin join the brothers on their trip to buy food. Judah pointed out to Jacob that his refusal would mean certain death for himself, his eleven sons and his grandchildren.

Judah promised to take personal responsibility for Benjamin's safety. Commentators see this as a turning point in Judah's life. This was the moment he began to assert leadership in his family and his character continued to build from this point on. Judah's past was not exemplary. He had come up with the plan to sell Joseph. He had taken a wife from among the Canaanites. He had fathered twins by his daughter-in-law, Tamar. But his life was taking a turn which would see him ultimately live up to the meaning of his

name: "praise". See Genesis 49:8-10, Matthew 1:2, and Luke 3:23-33 for proofs of Judah's perpetual place of leadership in the family.

B. Jacob's Consent - Genesis 43:11-14

Reluctantly, Jacob agreed, "*if it must be so*" (verse 11), "*take your brother*" (verse 13), "*if I am bereaved, I am bereaved*" (verse 14).

1. Jacob's gifts - 43:12-13

Jacob prepared a lavish present of balm, honey, spices, myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds to appease the powerful man in Egypt whom he did not know was Joseph. This is remarkably similar to his actions when he had feared meeting his brother Esau (Genesis 32). In addition to the the money which had been returned to them on their first trip, Jacob also sent double the money his sons would need to buy grain. These extravagant efforts show Jacob's lack of faith. In his fear, he perceived a need and thought he had to meet it. He was looking at the circumstances instead of at God Almighty.

2. Jacob's prayer - 43:14

However, in a humble demonstration of his latent faith, Jacob prayed to "*God Almighty*", the Hebrew "*El Shaddai*". El points to the power of God Himself and Shaddai signifies one who nourishes, supplies, and satisfies. It is God as El who helps, and it is God as Shaddai who abundantly blesses with all manner of blessings. Jacob prayed for God's mercy in the release of Simeon and Benjamin. Then by faith he resigned himself to his fate, leaving the results in God's hands.

Application

Jacob's faith had been tested and seemingly defeated as he lamented in Chapter 42, "*All these things are against me.*" But now, as he faced the facts of his situation through his sorrow, he remembered and took courage in the fact that God is Almighty. As believers today, we have the further encouragement that, "*all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose*" (Romans 8:28).

Is your faith presently being tested through worldly troubles and sorrow? Take courage and strengthen your faith in God Almighty who is your helper and the

source of all blessing. He is *“very compassionate and merciful”* (James 5:11) and *“This is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith”* (I John 5:4).

II. The Brothers' Fear - Genesis 43:15-28

The brothers arrived in Egypt with money, gifts and Benjamin. Joseph saw them coming before they ever saw him. He ordered his steward to take them to his house and prepare a feast.

A. Guilt and Peace - Genesis 43:15-23

Still plagued by their guilt and not knowing what was going to happen next, the brothers *“were afraid”*. Ironically, their fear of being taken as slaves (verse 18) was exactly what they had inflicted upon Joseph. The brothers voiced their fears to the steward of Joseph's house who spoke *“peace”* to them and reassured them that it was *“the God of your father”* who had previously returned their money in their sacks. He also brought Simeon out to them.

It is interesting that the steward spoke of God. Perhaps Joseph had told those in his household of the true and living God. Perhaps the steward knew the whole story of Joseph and his family.

B. Presents and Questions - Genesis 43:23-28

When Joseph returned home at noon, the brothers presented him with their gifts and bowed before him, again fulfilling the prophecy of Joseph's childhood dreams (Genesis 37). Joseph's concern, however, was not with the gifts or honors but with his father. Two years had passed since he had instructed his brothers to return with Benjamin (Genesis 45:6). Perhaps the reason they had finally come was that their father was dead. Joseph was no doubt relieved and happy to learn that his father was still alive and well.

III. Joseph's Tears and Tests - Genesis 43:29-43:15

A. Tears - Genesis 43:29-33

When Joseph saw his brother, Benjamin, he spoke words of blessing to him, *“God be gracious to you, my son.”* Benjamin was his full brother, the child of his mother, Rachel, and was sixteen years younger than Joseph. As Joseph gazed upon Benjamin, his *“heart yearned”* for his brother. He was overcome by his feelings. The literal expression is *“his emotions boiled over”*. Joseph went to his room and wept.

When Joseph returned, he ordered the meal to be served. According to the caste system of Egypt, Joseph,

because of his exalted position, sat at the head table by himself. His Hebrew brothers sat at a separate table by themselves. The Egyptians sat at their own table and were served food which had been prepared according to strict rules of ceremonial cleansing. It was an abomination for the Egyptians to eat with the Hebrews who ate meat from the cow, a sacred animal in Egypt.

The last time the brothers had shared a noon meal in the presence of Joseph, he had been at their mercy in the bottom of a pit (Genesis 37:24-25). Now he astonished them by seating them at the table in the order of their birth and generously lavishing them with the best food of Egypt.

B. Tests - Genesis 43:34-44:14

1. Test for envy and animosity - 43:34

In an obvious display of favoritism, Benjamin was served five times as much food as his brothers. This was to test the character of the brothers. Joseph wanted to be sure they harbored no envy or animosity toward Benjamin. He wanted to be sure that the hearts of those who had once treated him so cruelly had been changed. The situation brought out the best in the brothers who showed no signs of jealousy. Rather, they drank and were merry.

2. Test for repentance and fidelity - 44:1-13

Joseph's steward filled the brothers' sacks with food, and at Joseph's command returned the money of each in his sack. But Joseph was not yet ready to send his brothers back to Jacob. First, he tested the sincerity of their repentance and their concern and compassion toward Benjamin.

a. The cup - verses 2-5

Joseph gave the order to secretly place his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. The value of the cup was in its use for foretelling the future. Such cups were commonly used in pagan lands of the day. Oil or water was poured into the cup and omens were read according to the appearance of the liquid. It is unlikely that Joseph actually used such a cup to practice divination. His statement in verse 15 is that a man such as he *“can certainly practice divination”*. He did not say that he **did** practice divination.

b. The confidence - verses 6-9

The eleven brothers were sent off early in the morning with sacks full of grain. You can imagine their overwhelming sense of relief, their joy in the success

of their journey and their eagerness to return home to their father and families. God had answered Jacob's prayers!

The brothers did not even seem overly concerned when Joseph's steward caught up with them and accused them of stealing Joseph's divining cup. They were so confident of their innocence that they suggested the extreme penalty of death for the thief and slavery for all the rest if the cup was found in their possession.

c. The search - verses 10-15

One by one, from eldest to youngest, the sacks were searched. In Benjamin's sack, the very last one opened, the silver cup was found. The brothers "*tore their clothes*" and headed back to Joseph's house. Tearing of one's clothing was customarily a sign of personal distress and pain of heart. The brothers' tearing of their clothing showed their agony which sprung from love and commitment to both Benjamin and their father.

It is significant that the brothers did not turn their backs on Benjamin as they had on Joseph. They willingly and immediately returned to Egypt, demonstrating both repentance over what they had done to Joseph and fidelity to Benjamin. In verse 10, the steward had demanded only that the guilty brother return and be his slave. In his words, the rest would be "*blameless*". The ten could have returned home and sentenced Benjamin to be a slave in Egypt as they had done to Joseph so many years before. But their hearts had changed and restoration was taking place in the family.

IV. Judah's Plea - Genesis 44:16-34

When they appeared before Joseph, the brothers had another opportunity to leave Benjamin and return home. As the brothers "*fell before him on the ground*," Joseph made his intentions clear. Only Benjamin would stay and be his slave. The rest were to return home to their father in peace. But Judah stepped up and gave a precious and poignant plea, exposing his repentant heart. He and his brothers had sold Joseph, but they would not abandon Benjamin.

Judah's plea before Joseph is a beautiful heartfelt prayer. Martin Luther commented, "I would give very much to be able to pray before our Lord God as well as Judah prays here before Joseph. For this is a perfect pattern of prayer, yes, of the true feeling which should be in a prayer" (Luther's Works).

A. Judah Submits to God's Justice - Genesis 44:16-17

Standing humbly before Joseph, Judah asked, "*What shall we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves?*" He

longed to prove their innocence, but saw that God had uncovered their guilt. The brothers were not guilty of stealing Joseph's silver cup, but they were guilty of other sins. They now stood convicted of those sins, and would submit to God's justice as slaves of this mighty man of Egypt, Joseph.

B. Judah Pleads for Mercy - Genesis 43:18-31

Judah's eloquent plea shows heartfelt concern for both his father and for Benjamin. He relayed to Joseph the story of his elderly father's reluctance to allow the "*child of his old age*" to leave his side. He told Joseph of the old man's love for the boy because he was the only one left of his mother's children and how Jacob grieved because of the loss of the brother who had surely been "*torn to pieces*". The old father's life was "*bound up in the lad's life*" and to return home without him would be a fatal blow.

C. Judah Presents Himself as Substitute - Genesis 43:32-34

Judah explained how he had promised himself as surety for Benjamin, promising his father that if he did not bring Benjamin safely home, he would bear the blame forever. Judah presented himself to Joseph as the substitute for Benjamin. He begged to stay in Egypt in Benjamin's place so his little brother could be set free to return home. The man who had sold one brother into slavery was now asking to be a slave for another.

This is the first instance of human substitution in the Bible. It is a sweet foreshadowing of what Jesus Christ would do in His voluntarily suffering to set men and women free from slavery to sin and restore them to a right relationship with God. As a picture of Christ, Judah made intercession and presented himself as an offering and a sacrifice. See Romans 8:34; Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 7:25 and 27.

Application

Judah made his plea before Joseph as a changed man. Changed from the jealous, vengeful brother, rebellious son and foolish father-in-law, he recognized the need for repentance in his life and he acknowledged the righteousness of God. As a result, he stood before Joseph as an instrument of healing and restoration in his family. What sins in your life demand repentance right now? "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9). How might your personal repentance be instrumental in bringing healing and restoration in your family and other personal relationships?