

The Family of Abraham - Part 34—Judah Intercedes for Benjamin

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[0 : 00] Welcome back to this, the 34th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 44 of the book of Genesis, in which Joseph's brothers return to the land of Canaan, but are pursued along the way, and they are discovered to have taken the silver cup of Joseph.

And Benjamin is found in possession of it, and then Judah intercedes for Benjamin to Joseph. Joseph, this is just coming up to the climax of the narrative, perhaps one of the most amazing narratives ever told.

It's a story that has incredible power and pathos, and at this point we can see so many of the themes starting to come together. And you've read this story many times before, I'm sure, but maybe you've not seen just how beautiful it is as the themes come together, and just how carefully orchestrated these details are.

We've seen this story play out before of Laban pursuing Jacob and Rachel and looking for the teraphim. Before that occasion, he says, he's told by God that not to say either good or evil to Jacob.

And he searches from the oldest to the youngest to see who is in possession of the teraphim, these instruments of divination. And they are in Rachel's possession, but he does not find them out.

[1 : 24] But Jacob, convinced that no one has actually stole these, declares a death sentence upon the person in whose possession they are found. They are not actually found, but that death sentence hangs over Rachel.

She eventually dies in birth to Benjamin. Her son Joseph is presumably torn apart, and bloodied garments are presented as proof of his identity.

Camels from Gilead, which is where they were, and she was seated upon a camel at the time, come and take her firstborn son. And now her youngest son, her only other son, is pursued.

It seems like the story of the teraphim is about to reach its terrible conclusion, with the sons of Rachel destroyed. And how is this going to be handled?

There are other things going on here. If you notice, the brothers, at this point, they're probably quite buoyant. They think that their mission has been a success. They've returned with Simeon.

[2 : 24] They can return with Simeon. Benjamin was welcomed. They've been given a fantastic welcome by the lord of the land. Now, they thought that they were going to be judged again, that he was going to presume that they were spies and make them his slaves.

But no, he gave them a great feast. He welcomed them. And now they're going back, happy. They've got the grain that they were going for, and they've returned their brother. They've got Simeon. But yet, something goes wrong.

And Joseph, at this point, commands the steward of his house, once again, fill the man's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and again, put each man's money in the mouth of his sack.

Also put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his grain money. So he did according to the word that Joseph had spoken. Think about this.

There are two key things that are put in, and they're both associated with the same substance. Silver. The silver, the money.

[3 : 31] And then the cup, the silver cup. The fact that the cup is made of silver is emphasised. This is not just a regular cup.

This is a silver cup. And we've seen earlier in the story of Joseph that Joseph was sold for silver. And then silver was restored to them on their first journey back.

And then it's connected with the guilt toward Joseph. And we'll see how that plays out. They have this sense of having stolen something. And it's connected also with the character of Joseph, unbeknownst to them.

And it's in the possession of Joseph's brother. The silver cup is also something that's associated with wine. Now think back through the story.

We've been reading this story and recognising the significance of Joseph as the one who is essentially the new baker of Egypt. Now we see he's a cupbearer too. Look back at chapter 40.

[4 : 32] You have two people having dreams. The cupbearer and the baker. And now we see Joseph provides bread. But he is also the one who divines using this cup of wine.

Joseph is the one who provides bread and wine to Egypt. And the silver is associated with both the grain that they receive.

The grain which is used to make bread. And the cup that is used to bear wine. And so we need to connect all these themes together. To see within the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker that these aren't just accidental figures.

These are figures that stand for what Joseph will become. God is going to provide wine and he's going to provide bread. And he's going to connect Joseph to the provision of both of these things.

Joseph is the one who's going to provide rest and goodness. He's also the one who's going to provide the strength and sustenance of bread to the land of Egypt and others round about.

[5 : 34] And this connection of the silver with the bread and the wine is also the connection of the silver that was used to sell that was received for the sale of Joseph.

And Joseph being the bread and the wine that was taken as it were. There's also the theme of knowledge here. That there is in the minds of the brothers this suspicion.

This ruler in Egypt. He actually is a diviner. He has the ability to perceive things. And he knows a lot more than he's letting on.

By some miraculous divine power he can discern which of us is the oldest, which is the youngest and put us all in order of age. He's someone who can see our guilt.

And even though we are not guilty in the matter for which he has accused us, being spies, he sees something. He perceives something. He knows more than he's letting on. And his actions towards us are driven by this insight into our guilt.

[6 : 38] And so the supposed divination of Joseph is a means by which their guilt is brought back to them. Their psychological guilt. Because there are so many events that are reminiscent of what happened with Joseph.

The loss of the son. This son being taken from them. One of their brothers. It's also connected with Benjamin. The threat to Benjamin. And the threat that their father might go down to the grave in sorrow.

The cup is Joseph's cup. And so it's a direct symbol of his authority and identity. An assault upon those things. An attempt to grasp those. And Joseph, of course, was grasped by the brothers and sold into Egypt.

And now this is a symbol that represents him. It's not just any old cup. They didn't just steal a silver cup from his palace. They sold his cup.

The cup that represents his act of divination. And they are people who are ultimately man-stealers. They stole Joseph.

[7 : 44] And they are responsible for him being down in Egypt. And now they declare confident in their innocence that the person who's found in the possession of the cup should die. And the rest of them become slaves.

They are man-stealers. And ultimately they must die for it. But the person who has taken this cup, the person who has taken the cup that represents Joseph himself, must die. And so on one level there is this judgment concerning the theft of the physical item.

But that physical item represents a number of other things. It represents wine. It represents silver. And that silver is connected with the sale of Joseph. And it represents Joseph himself and his authority and his power of divination.

Now, the steward seems to know the order of the brothers as well. And he searches from the oldest to the youngest. Much as Laban searched from the oldest to the youngest, starting off in the tent of Leah.

And then eventually ending up in the tent of Rachel. And again, they have a sense that this man knows something more. He knows something about our guilt.

[8 : 50] Even if he can't put his finger upon it exactly what it is, he can sense that there is something wrong about us. That we have done something wicked and this is it coming back to haunt us.

Now, note that the brothers don't know for certain that Benjamin didn't in fact steal the cup. The cup was presumably part of the feast that they had in Joseph's house. And perhaps Benjamin has, he aims to rise above his station.

Maybe he wants to set himself up as a diviner. He knows that this is a cup of divination. And so he takes it, hoping that he might have that status in time. Now, they've already had experience with a brother who sets himself up.

He sets himself up as a dreamer. A dreamer of great dreams that concern the future. And now maybe they have another brother, another son of Rachel, the loved wife.

And they believe that maybe he's trying to set himself up in this way. For all they know, that might be the case. And so their reaction to this is similar to the way that they must react in the case of Joseph.

[9 : 58] When Joseph had his dreams, how were they supposed to react to someone who sets himself up as a dreamer? Now they have a brother who might be trying to set himself up as someone who can engage in divination.

He has taken the cup, much as Joseph pursued his dreams as a means of authority, seeing it as something that may have set him above them. Their response, however, when the cup is found in Benjamin's sack, is significant.

They all tear their clothes. We've read in chapter 37 of someone tearing his clothes. We saw Reuben, Reuben's reactions when Joseph had gone.

And we saw the reaction of his father. And they tear their clothes. But the rest of the brothers don't. In this instance, they all tear their clothes.

They're united in their grief and their sorrow. They're united with Benjamin, this son of the favoured wife. And so at this point, they're described as Judah and his brothers.

[11 : 07] Now that's looking forward to the fact that Judah will be the leader of the brothers. We've already seen that Judah, in the first instance, he was the leader of the brothers.

In chapter 37, he was the one that they listened to. They didn't listen to Reuben. And Reuben seemed to have to concoct a plan, apart from the other brothers, in order to rescue Joseph, which ultimately failed.

Judah is the one who seems to be next in line. Simeon and Levi don't seem to be effective leaders of the brothers. And so Judah is the one that they take the course of action from.

And Judah and the brothers will ultimately go to the house of Joseph. And Judah will be the one that intercedes. Judah is the one who can unite the brothers.

He's the one who led the brothers earlier in chapter 37. And now he's the one who can reunite the brothers. Even Joseph and Benjamin. He can bring the whole family together.

[12 : 08] And that's associated with Judah's willingness to confess. His willingness to acknowledge what he has done. Something connected with his name. His name is connected with the idea of praise.

And also with the idea of confession. Judah is someone who confesses in the story of Tamar. And he confesses here as well. And these actions are some of the things that equip him to be the leader of all.

Partly it's because he has a natural authority. People respond to his voice and his leadership. He doesn't have to force himself. They naturally respond. They naturally see him as a leader. But then there is also the fact that he is the one who is suited to bring people together.

He confesses his fault. And he is the one who can reunite a broken family. At this point they are admitting their guilt.

They know their guilt. And that knowledge of their guilt is also associated with... There's a theme of knowledge playing throughout the story more generally. There's the theme of the imbalance of knowledge.

[13 : 13] That Joseph knows things that the brothers do not. And there is also the theme of things being made known or not known. In this case, they, for all they know, Joseph can smell their guilt.

And what they have at this point is not just a sense of their guilt concerning the cup. No, they recognise that there are all sorts of connections between this and the sale of Joseph.

All these reminders of the sale of Joseph, the silver. They think of the way it's Benjamin. Why would it be Benjamin? This child of the unloved mother.

Of the loved mother and the favoured mother. Why would it be that he is singled out? Why would it be that he is connected with divination and with something that is associated with dreams?

Why is he the one in this situation? Why is it the one that is favoured by the father? All these things that would remind them of the story of Joseph. And yet, this is what sets it up for the conclusion.

[14 : 26] They are Joseph's slaves at this point. Step back and think about the dreams that Joseph had in chapter 37. Joseph had these dreams that his brothers would bow down to him.

His brothers have bowed down to him as a sign of honour to the lord of his rule in Egypt. But now, it's gone even further. They're not just bowing down to him.

They are his slaves. And Joseph sets things up in another way. He says that they all say, the person who has it in their possession will die and the rest of us will be slaves.

And Joseph's steward's response is, no, just the person in whose possession it is found will be a slave. Now, that gives them a position where they have an out.

They can leave Benjamin behind and they can go back. They're guiltless, according to the steward, that there's nothing that they're responsible for beyond that.

[15 : 21] They just have to hand over the person who has it in his possession. And once that is done, they can go their way. And yet, to do that would be to leave Benjamin behind and to go back to their father and lead to the death of their father in all likelihood.

Judah's intercession at this point is amending of the breaches in the family. The breaches between the brothers and with the father. And it's notable that he acknowledges the truth of the situation.

The truth of the situation that must have been incredibly difficult for a son of Leah to acknowledge. The favoritism of his father is acknowledged quite openly.

He says that... Then your servant, my father, said to us, You know that my wife bore me two sons.

And the one went out from me, and I said, Surely he is torn to pieces, and I have not seen him since. But if you take this one also from me, and calamity befalls him, you shall bring down my grey hair with sorrow to the grave.

[16 : 28] Now, my wife... He's talking about Rachel, the loved wife, not his mother. He recognizes that his father far favors Rachel and her children over his mother and her children.

This is a situation where envy was excited in the previous story. They resented Joseph. They could not speak peaceably to Joseph. And they envied him because of his dreams and the father's reaction.

They knew that their father favored Joseph, and that he was secretly hoping that Joseph would come out on top. And yet, what you see here is Judah acknowledging that.

Acknowledging that he is not one of the favored sons. It is as if his father only has two sons. This lost son Joseph and Benjamin, this son that his heart is bound up with.

And he acknowledges that he is not the loved son. As we've read through the story of Genesis, we've seen this struggle between sons. The struggle that's shaped by one being favored and another not.

[17 : 41] Even when we go back to the story of Cain and Abel. One is favored in his gift, in his offering, and the other is not. How does the unfavored son react to that?

How does the unfavored son react when the other is favored over him? In the same way, how should the favored son relate to the less favored son?

These are things that we see in the story of Esau and Jacob as well. In the story of Joseph in chapter 37, these themes are all playing out. How do you relate to someone who is more favored than you?

How do you relate to someone who is less favored than you? As we look in the dreams of Pharaoh in chapter 42, or chapter 41, and the response of Joseph to them.

Joseph could have heard those dreams, the beautiful cows as associated with Rachel and her side of the family. Benjamin and Joseph were beautiful cows, whereas the ugly cows were the sons of Leah and the handmaids.

[18 : 56] And they seem to devour the beautiful cows. But what should the beautiful cows do in that situation? They should provide for the life of all. They should use their advantage, not for their own rule over the others, but in order to bless the others.

Likewise, the unfavored sons should recognize that, and not seek to usurp the favored sons, but seek in their less favored condition to bring the best of all.

And as we read this story, this is what we see Judah doing. Judah offers himself as a sacrifice in exchange for Benjamin. His brother, his brother from his half, from Rachel, who's not his mother, and the favored wife over his mother.

He offers himself in exchange. It's almost precisely the opposite of what happens in the story of Joseph. They have the opportunity to let Benjamin go back to Egypt and they return to the land of Canaan.

Benjamin will be a slave in Egypt, much as his older brother was, and they will return to their father. They'll bring grief to their father, but that's it. They'll have to live with that.

[20 : 19] And in this situation, we've also seen that the brothers have tried to usurp their father at various points. The story of Reuben following the death of Rachel and his line with Bilhah, his wife's concubine, and the handmaid of Rachel.

He tries to usurp the position of Rachel and her children and the position of his father. Do they really care about their father that much?

But yet, as you read this story and you read the speech of Judah, what does he do? He repeats father 14 times. Within this narrative, you're seeing that sense of Judah's heart being bound up with the fate of his father.

His father cares about this son and he cares about his father, so he is not going to let Benjamin go. Now, he may not be favoured by his father.

He may not be deeply loved by his father. But he is a faithful son and he will stand for this son that is favoured over him. It's a remarkable thing.

[21 : 29] It's the precise action that they failed to perform in the case of Joseph earlier on in the story. This relationship between Judah and Benjamin plays out in the rest of Scripture.

Judah is the one who intercedes for Benjamin. Later on, we'll see the relationship between Benjamin and Judah in the story of David and Saul or between Esther and the Jews.

These are stories in which Benjamin and Judah have that significant relationship. He is prepared to lay himself down for the sake of his father and the favoured son.

And this is about how favoured sons and unfavoured sons should relate. There are other things that happened within this speech of Judah. This is the first time that Joseph will have discovered his father's reaction to the news of his supposed death.

You can imagine how that hit Joseph. Joseph may have suspected that his father was complicit in all these events, but he did not know how grieved his father was at his supposed loss.

[22 : 35] And now he does. And it changes a number of the, a lot of his sense of the situation. He already had some sense that his father was not aware of what had happened to him.

But now he knows the depth of his father's reaction. And as you read this speech, another thing to notice is just how deeply it describes the father's feeling for his son, his lost son, and for Benjamin, the loved son that might get lost.

As you read that description, you should have a sense of just how attentive Judah has become to the heart of his father. That he cares about the heart of his father so much that he, even at his own loss, even when he might be seen as a less favoured son, he will give up for the sake of the loved son, for the sake of his father.

He will allow himself to be lost so that another son can be restored, the son who is favoured over him. This is a remarkable action. And as we think about the significance of what Judah's doing at this point, we've thought about Joseph as a type of Christ.

Judah is a type of Christ here too. Judah's action in giving himself up for his brother is similar to the way that Christ gives himself up for us all.

[24 : 04] This is an action of self-sacrifice. It's an action where he is prepared to take the place of Benjamin and ultimately of Joseph himself. He was the one who offered, who suggested to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt.

And now, he is the one who is prepared to take that position of slavery upon himself. This is a remarkable transformation. And in each step, it is taking back what was once done.

Judah is put in the position where he can replay all these themes of the original sale of Joseph. And at each point, he undoes those previous actions.

God in his providence and Joseph in his contrivance of the situation have put Judah and the brothers in a situation where they can replay those former events, where they can put themselves in Joseph's shoes as well, where all these symbols are at play, the symbols of Rachel and her being pursued and the threat of death upon her, this threat of death that was playing out in her side of the family.

Joseph, ultimately, is the one who is the beautiful cow, as it were, who provides for the well-being and the survival of all the cows. And here we see the ugly cows prepared to lay down their lives for the beautiful cow of Benjamin.

[25 : 28] There is a reconciliation of the family, both sides laying down their lives for each other. It's a remarkable story. It's got the symbols of the silver, it's got the symbols of the bread and the wine.

Pay attention to all of these things because as they fit together, what you see is not just a beautifully intricate story, but something that has all sorts of resonances, all sorts of redolent reminders of the story of Christ and what he does.

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God bless and thank you very much for listening. Thank you.