

Genesis 44 The Transformation of Judah

Introduction

His life had contained many highs. From a professional point of view serving as a Special Counsel to American President Richard Nixon (a legal post to advise the President on all legal matters relating to his administration) must have ranked as the pinnacle of his political career, but sitting on the platform in a crowded Delaware State Prison in preparation for addressing the inmates Charles Colson recognised a more significant qualification for the ministry to which God had called him. His arrest and subsequent imprisonment had changed him as a person for good, far more than all the awards and plaudits as his career had advanced. In his book *Loving God* he wrote these words: 'It was not my success God had used to enable me to help those in this prison, or in hundreds of others just like it...All my achievements meant nothing in God's economy. No the real legacy of my life was my biggest failure- that I was an ex-convict. My greatest humiliation –being sent to prison- was the beginning of God's greatest use of my life.' [Charles Colson, *Loving God*, p.24] In our lives all of us have successes and failures; times we look back on with pride and great joy and others with embarrassment, regret, or possibly even shame. We would like to think that the most significant moments are our successes (few though they may have been), but for many people they have come in their darkest hours or in those times when they least expected it; not necessarily directly from the predicament they had experienced, but through the time they had unexpectedly gained to reflect on what was really important in life. When we read biographies or study the lives of the individuals highlighted in the Bible there are so many occasions that appeared of little significance at the time, but later turned out to have been formative for the future direction of their lives. Here in Genesis 44 we see the moment when the black sheep of Jacob's family, Judah, becomes the man God intended him to be. The young man over whom his father probably despaired, but from this day onward would be immensely proud of him. The transformation of Judah recorded in Genesis 44 was the culmination of a process of God's work in his life over a number of years. It teaches us clearly not to give up on men and women who have failed to realise the potential in life given them by God. If God could bring about such a change in perspective in this man then there is hope for each one of us today, and for those for whom we pray for God's transforming grace to be operative in their lives.

1. An Indisputable Fact (Genesis 44:1-17)

God was at work in this situation very clearly to us looking back at the scenario unfolding through the pages of Genesis. However, the participants at key times, for example, since the onset of the famine and their trips to Egypt, did not sense it with such clarity. These brothers had perceived only negative associations with the name 'Egypt' and the associated place, because it was the place to which their brother Joseph had been taken as a slave, and could not see how it could be a part of God's solution for their problems. They had seen themselves as strong men, self-reliant and with everything under control. Now this was far from the case with a famine that made everyone's life more precarious in the region, together with this mysterious Egyptian official who seemed to take an excessive interest in the wellbeing of their family. What they and we at times can struggle to grasp is that it is often when we feel weak and vulnerable rather than strong and (over?) confident that we can be most effectively used by God to carry out His work. Paul struggled with this lesson as he revealed in II Corinthians 12:9-10. He had been pleading with God to take away his health problem, but God chose not to heal him, instead promising to give him the strength to carry on with his

work despite the difficulties. He wrote: ⁹ *But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.* ¹⁰ *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* At the next encounter with the Egyptian official, Judah, Joseph's brother, would make an offer which would be transformative in bringing about a reconciliation within this fractured family. It was not something he was expecting to do in advance, but God had been at work in his life preparing him for the next step of his faith journey.

(a) **The relief they felt** (Genesis 44:1-3) *Now Joseph gave these instructions to the steward of his house: 'Fill the men's sacks with as much food as they can carry, and put each man's silver in the mouth of his sack. ² Then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's sack, along with the silver for his grain.'* *And he did as Joseph said.* ³ *As morning dawned, the men were sent on their way with their donkeys.* The brothers had gone to Egypt deeply apprehensive about what lay ahead of them. It was the first visit back to the country after being accused of spying. They must have had doubts about the wisdom of this course of action, yet there was absolutely no alternative course of action to take so they had to set off once more and with younger brother Benjamin. In addition, they must also have wondered what fate had befallen Simeon, not least because of the lengthy delay they had had since their previous visit. Had the official punished him in some way because of their reluctance to return? Yet these fears and worries were unfounded as the official had treated them better than they could ever have dreamed. Their word had been accepted. Telling the truth had worked. They had had the best lunch in years and now were on the way back home with both Simeon and Benjamin. Their attitude to money was now healthy and still they were in pocket and with the resources for further food trips to Egypt. There would have been a lightness of step as they began the long journey home. All of us at times fear the 'what if...' scenarios. Yet the Lord Himself knows this. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount addressed this topic in Matthew 6:25-34: ***Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?*** ²⁶ *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?* ²⁷ *Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?* ²⁸ *And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin.* ²⁹ *Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.* ³⁰ *If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?* ³¹ *So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?"* ³² *For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.* ³³ ***But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*** ³⁴ ***Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*** The words are easier to believe in theory than to live in practice when the pressure is really on! However, it is reassuring that our heavenly Father does not wish His children to be debilitated by worry about the future and how our needs will be met or our concerns addressed. His advice for us to put God first and to do the best we can is the only way forward. At times when we do the right thing and other people misjudge our motives or misinterpret our actions we cannot change that, but the issue is always am I right before the Lord. Is my motivation pure? Is my conduct with the best of intentions as a follower of Jesus? Usually, in circumstances where we can give a 'yes' to these questions God will honour us for endeavouring to do what we genuinely believe is honouring Him or extending his kingdom. Sometimes like the brothers here we do the right thing because we don't have an alternative, rather than because we are filled with enthusiasm for the pathway before us. However, He understands and can bless our obedience more than we deserve because of His amazing love

and grace towards us. At times it may be only relief not exhilaration when things go well, but the Lord is on the throne and we trust Him for the future.

(b) **The confusion they felt** (Genesis 44:4-11) ⁴ *They had not gone far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, 'Go after those men at once, and when you catch up with them, say to them, "Why have you repaid good with evil? ⁵ Isn't this the cup my master drinks from and also uses for divination? This is a wicked thing you have done."* ⁶ *When he caught up with them, he repeated these words to them. ⁷ But they said to him, 'Why does my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to do anything like that! ⁸ We even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the silver we found inside the mouths of our sacks. So why would we steal silver or gold from your master's house? ⁹ If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves.'* ¹⁰ *'Very well, then,' he said, 'let it be as you say. Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame.'* ¹¹ *Each of them quickly lowered his sack to the ground and opened it. The journey homewards was slow and steady as the donkeys bowed down by the heavy sacks of grain were unable to travel any faster. Each step outside the city, though, was one step nearer home. As the sight of the city and its boundary grew smaller in the skyline the distance between them and their aged Father was reducing. They could not wait to share with him the good news of their successful visit. Yet at the very time when they thought the pressures were over and their trials had finished there would be the unpleasant surprise of some final challenging experiences. In our own lives we all know that at some time there will be ill health and bereavement as part of our lot in life whether personally or within the family circle. However, it is the unexpected challenges more often that we find hardest to deal with. There are some issues that we suspect might contain difficulties or some relationships that will require extra work to succeed, but our most difficult moments often come from very unexpected quarters. For some people the infidelity of a spouse of many year standing; it could be the disloyalty of a friend with whom we had grown up; or the misconduct of a colleague at work on whom we had previously depended. They can be the hardest burdens to bear. Yet the Lord Jesus understands the heartache we can experience through these trials. In John 6 after the 'Bread of Life' sermon which proved rather controversial a majority of Jesus' disciples chose to leave Him and walk away –possibly for good. John 6:66-67 contains some haunting words: *From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.* ⁶⁷ *'You do not want to leave too, do you?'* Jesus asked the Twelve. You can hear the pain in these words and the genuineness of the question. Unless we have sensed the cost here to Jesus we have misunderstood the passage. The mission He had come to carry out was very different to what many of these disciples had wanted and so they left Him. Jesus was in the right honouring God's call but it was not popular with many of the people that day that had been expected to accept it. Popularity is a fickle thing –sometimes present and sometimes not, but having no necessary link to a commitment to a right course of action.*

Joseph after some hours sent a detachment of troops and officials to catch up with the brothers and look for his missing cup. There must have been total incredulity on the brothers' part hearing the accusation raised against them. It would have been an insane thing to do when they were so dependant on the Egyptian official for food to survive the drought. What is more he had kept his word and freed Simeon, allowed them all to return home safe and well with the food they had come to purchase, even apart from the special meal he had provided. Under these circumstances it would have taken a pretty hardened criminal to want to take advantage of the situation by stealing the official's property. In addition, given that he would have had guards on hand at all times, and the fact that he and the Egyptian officials had eaten in a different part of the room from the brothers, ensured that an extraordinary level of ability was required to take this special drinking cup without it being missed at the time. It is no surprise that the brothers protested loudly when the accusation was made. Genesis 44:7-8 states: *But they said to him, 'Why does my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to do anything like that! ⁸ We even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the silver we found*

inside the mouths of our sacks. So why would we steal silver or gold from your master's house? Their argument was truthful and their protestations of innocence correct. Yet they couldn't prove it –if there was circumstantial evidence that appeared to point in the opposite direction. The sincerity of their protests recorded in Genesis 44:9, although exaggerated, emphasised how ludicrous they thought the accusations were: *If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves.*' This level of punishment went far beyond what the law of the day required as the official pointed out in verse ten: ¹⁰ *'Very well, then,' he said, 'let it be as you say. Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame.* However, under Egyptian law at the time and in some countries today the two parties in a case at law can negotiate a settlement of the lawsuit with a range of terms depending on the nature of the crime committed.

(c) **The pain they experienced** (Genesis 44:12-17)¹² *Then the steward proceeded to search, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack.* ¹³ *At this, they tore their clothes. Then they all loaded their donkeys and returned to the city.* ¹⁴ *Joseph was still in the house when Judah and his brothers came in, and they threw themselves to the ground before him.* ¹⁵ *Joseph said to them, 'What is this you have done? Don't you know that a man like me can find things out by divination?'* ¹⁶ *'What can we say to my lord?'* Judah replied. *'What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves – we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup.'* ¹⁷ *But Joseph said, 'Far be it from me to do such a thing! Only the man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace.'* I suspect there were very much mixed emotions when this search was going on. Indignation -that they had been wrongly accused of stealing from their host; secondly resignation that they had to let the officials get on with it, like customs officials checking your suitcases at an airport. If you haven't done anything wrong you ought to be okay under these circumstances. Then, a degree of relaxation as the older brothers' sacks and donkeys were declared to be containing only what ought to be there. The one time a strong emotion of tension would be present was undoubtedly when little brother Benjamin's donkey was searched. The sight of the official's cup in Benjamin's sack, which none of them could deny, would have been sickening. It would have been, emotionally, one of the toughest days of their lives. A family with a history of arguing and excuses, I suspect, would have been reduced to a deafening silence –no words were adequate for this situation. What could you say? Probably most if not all of us have had a few occasions where we wanted to say something to someone, but no words came out of our mouths. No words seemed adequate to do justice to the crisis unfolding before our eyes. I can vividly remember one pastoral visit in my previous ministry where the agonies of a grieving family were such that I spoke no words that day and none were expected. On the many subsequent visits words were used but not that day. I thank the Lord He enabled me to keep silent that day. These men must have agonised in their hearts all the way to the official's house. What would they say when a response was demanded and who would step up to the plate and speak on their behalf? Culturally Reuben had that place, but he didn't front up and accept responsibility. Instead it was Judah, the one who had offered to take personal responsibility for Benjamin (Genesis 43:9) to their elderly father. He had 'talked the talk' in the home. Now he was willing to 'walk the walk' and do what God wanted him to do. What did Judah say when the brothers were put on the spot? Genesis 44:16 states: *'What can we say to my lord?'* Judah replied. *'What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves – we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup.'* These are extraordinary words from a member of this family. It's no longer about 'me' but 'us'; we are in it together. We may be the sons of four different mothers but we are one family and we stand or fall together. This is a revelatory moment for which Joseph had longed for over many long years. In Genesis 42: 21, while they had their time out in prison God enabled them to see the cause of their troubles: *They said to one another, 'Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw*

how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us.' This is what it took for God to get through to these brothers. The challenging question for us is this: what does it take for God to get your attention and mine? When we are not listening to God what does He have to do to enable us to be receptive to His voice? This is a very serious question both to us as individuals, in our families and in our church family and for the Christian Church collectively in this land. The low spiritual state of many local churches –including some claiming an 'Evangelical' identity- is a sobering fact. God is not biased against Scotland it is our responsibility to seek His face and ask Him to work in our lives that we might be the people that truly honours and glorifies His name as we should.

2. An Unrecognisable Man (Genesis 44:18-34)

(a) Reviewing past history (Genesis 44:18-32)¹⁸ *Then Judah went up to him and said: 'Pardon your servant, my lord, let me speak a word to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself.'* ¹⁹ *My lord asked his servants, "Do you have a father or a brother?"* ²⁰ *And we answered, "We have an aged father, and there is a young son born to him in his old age. His brother is dead, and he is the only one of his mother's sons left, and his father loves him."* ²¹ *Then you said to your servants, "Bring him down to me so I can see him for myself."* ²² *And we said to my lord, "The boy cannot leave his father; if he leaves him, his father will die."* ²³ *But you told your servants, "Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again."* ²⁴ *When we went back to your servant my father, we told him what my lord had said* ²⁵ *'Then our father said, "Go back and buy a little more food."* ²⁶ *But we said, "We cannot go down. Only if our youngest brother is with us will we go. We cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us."* ²⁷ *Your servant my father said to us, "You know that my wife bore me two sons. One of them went away from me, and I said, 'He has surely been torn to pieces.' And I have not seen him since."* ²⁹ *If you take this one from me too and harm comes to him, you will bring my grey head down to the grave in misery.* ³⁰ *'So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father, and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy's life,* ³¹ *sees that the boy isn't there, he will die. Your servants will bring the grey head of our father down to the grave in sorrow.* ³² *Your servant guaranteed the boy's safety to my father. I said, "If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life!"* The brothers had regained Simeon, but for the first time were unwilling to be divided again. They are now at their lowest place emotionally and legally –assuming the accuracy of the charge against Benjamin. They have no case to argue; they can only plead for mercy. Judah's speech which he has rehearsed, I suspect, many times by day and in bed at night is now vocalised to the Egyptian official. The argument was clear and truthful. Little did he know that the man listening to his presentation was none other than his brother Joseph! The agonies of old Jacob were fairly and calmly laid out. The mask of the old Judah was gone. The man God intended him to be was now showing his face. The challenge of this story is simply this –am I in my character and conduct the person God wants me to be or have I been hiding behind 'the mask'?

(b) Proposing future plans (Genesis 44:33-34)³³ *'Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers.'* ³⁴ *How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father.'* The justice of the Egyptian law code was accepted as fair- and Judah offers to be the one who takes the punishment on Benjamin's behalf, and a whole life term at that. Remember all those years earlier in Genesis 37:26-28 what Judah proposed to his brothers as the solution to 'the problem of Joseph'. ²⁶ *Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?'* ²⁷ *Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.'* His brothers agreed.²⁸ *So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.* Now it has come full-circle brother Joseph can make the

same choice concerning his elder brother Judah. It is in times like these that we see very clearly whether we believe in a primarily law-based or a grace-centred faith and lifestyle. Would Judah be treated as he ‘deserved’ because of his past mistakes or would he be forgiven and the past become a closed chapter. It is a costly choice but it is where we see how much of the Gospel we are willing to live. At one level if a fellow believer has made wrong choices in the past we might say- ‘I’ll never trust you again because your judgement was faulty back then –maybe even naming an event or a date’. Or we might choose to say ‘I appreciate that you now see things differently – let’s see how we can go forward together in Christ’. Which scenario do you think pleases Jesus when His children make that choice? In John 8:1-11 there is the story of Jesus with some angry Pharisees who had brought a woman (but not the man) caught in ‘the act of adultery’. The law said ‘stone her’. Was Jesus a law keeper or law breaker? What was His response to those angry men? *But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.* ⁷ *When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’* ⁸ *Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.* ⁹ *At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.* ¹⁰ *Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’* ¹¹ *‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’* (John 8:7-11). When God’s people ask for a fresh start will we deny them that opportunity? Moses pleaded for Israel after their sin with the golden calf in Exodus: 32:31-32: ³¹ *So Moses went back to the Lord and said, ‘Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold.* ³² *But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.’* Paul did the same for the Jewish people, Israel, in Romans 9:1-4a: *I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit –* ² *I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.* ³ *For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race,* ⁴ *the people of Israel...* The challenge comes to us –is there a situation where in biblical terms we could ‘legally’ walk away and say its not my problem, but the voice of God speaks into our situation and enquires do you want Me to treat you as you deserve or should unmerited grace characterise your response to other Christians, to other people? The transformation of Judah is a nice story, but it cannot remain only that –is it your story and mine? Are you and I willing to be the Good Samaritan picking up the pieces, offering the helping hand in the name of Jesus? The Lord entrusts that choice to each of us individually and also collectively as a church, Amen.