

Genesis 44:1-34, No. 69**“The Heart of the Gospel”****October 1, 2017****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Credit to whom credit is due. I grew up knowing the Joseph story, having read it and heard it many times. Never once in all of that time was I taught or did I realize that the true hero of that history was not Joseph – good and faithful man that he was – but Judah, the fourth oldest son of Jacob and Leah. The older commentators did not realize this either, and you will not find in them this understanding of the history recorded in these chapters of Genesis. My first exposure to this understanding was in a sermon preached in this church by Prof. Bruce Waltke in August of 1996. His sermon was entitled “Judah: A Paragon of Love” and the text was our text this morning, Genesis 34:1-34. I was away when Dr. Waltke preached that sermon but I listened to it on tape. I then listened to his taped lectures on the book of Genesis. The sermon and the lectures fundamentally changed my understanding of this material and opened up to me riches I had not known were here. Dr. Waltke would tell you that many of these insights were relatively new to him as well and were the result of the new appreciation in biblical scholarship for the narrative genius on display in the book of Genesis. The reason the emphasis on Judah’s transformation and Judah’s sacrificial love was not fully appreciated through centuries of biblical study is that the narrator communicated those developments in subtle ways. They are not explicitly taught. One must read or listen with discernment and with attention to the importance of detail and the structure of the narrative. But when one realizes that everything in the narrative is there for a reason, when one appreciates the subtlety of the author’s technique, *the lesson jumps off the page*. There are a few things, in our benighted age, that we do better than more godly generations did before us, but one such thing is mining the riches of the first 39 books of the Bible!

We finished chapter 43 with the brothers feasting together at Joseph’s table, the ten eating and drinking freely with Benjamin, even though their younger brother had been given portions five times larger than theirs. Now Joseph put all of this brotherhood and comradery to a supreme test. He was to test them at precisely that point where they failed so terribly twenty-two years before: their loyalty to a brother, and a brother more loved by their father than they were. He was going to apply terrible pressure because real faith and love can take it!

- v.3 The brothers must have thought that they had enjoyed tremendous success. The great Egyptian had behaved in such a friendly manner; he had filled their bags to the very top; they had Simeon back and had Benjamin with them. All of this, however, was part of Joseph’s strategy: the test would come from out of the blue, devastate their short-lived relief, and force them to respond instantaneously to a life-threatening trial. In other words, Joseph had made the test as demanding as he could. Character is best tested in the heat of crisis, not when one can calmly and slowly work out all the implications of various courses of action.
- v.5 The accusation, without explanation, was designed to provoke maximum fear. As in v. 15, a claim was made that Joseph practiced divination, a practice forbidden in the Law of Moses. It is doubtful that this was Joseph’s real practice. Rather, it was one more way of

preserving the pretense. Divination by means of goblet is well known from the ancient world, something like reading tea leaves. [Sarna, 304]

- v.10 “Slave” would be the more accurate translation. You see the way in which the steward changed the arrangement. What the brothers proposed, however severe on themselves, would not be the test Joseph was after. And the steward was obviously in on Joseph’s plan. The test must be that the brothers be free to turn their back on Benjamin. So that is what the steward said: the one who was found to have the cup would become a slave (as had Joseph) and the rest would be free to go. What will they do when Benjamin was found out? Remember, Joseph was treating Benjamin as his surrogate. He was enabling the brothers to relive what they had done to him and, in reliving that history, he provided them with an opportunity to redeem themselves. We see here the brilliance of Joseph and his spiritual insight; Joseph the God-figure, as we said last time, orchestrating events to bring good things to pass for his people.
- v.11 The alacrity with which they dismounted was a demonstration of their confidence in their own innocence. Of course they had not stolen the Egyptian’s silver cup!
- v.12 The drama of this scene, the building tension, is intensified by the comment, “beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest.” With each unsuccessful search their hopes rose, only to be dashed at the very end.
- v.13 To make matters worse, Benjamin looked guilty. But they stood with him and returned with him. They hung in with their brother, they trusted in his innocence and, when they could have walked away in safety, they risked their own life and liberty for Benjamin’s sake. They all tore their clothes. That little detail is very significant. *When Joseph disappeared years before, only Jacob had torn his clothes (37:34).*
- v.15 Joseph was piling on the psychological pressure.
- v.17 Joseph made the offer once more and the test couldn’t have been clearer. “You ten brothers can go home; only Benjamin needs to remain here a slave.” After all, he looked guilty. They could have told Jacob that it had been Benjamin’s fault. In that case they were not responsible for him. Joseph was giving them every opportunity to do again what they had done *to him* twenty-two years before.
- v.24 Judah tactfully omitted in his retelling the charges of spying, their imprisonment, or Simeon’s being held hostage.
- v.29 In a stunning reversal, so it must have seemed to Joseph, Judah was even willing to recall his father’s words that he had but two sons, as if the other ten were not his sons.
- v.30 He was also willing to admit sympathetically that his father’s life “was bound up” with Benjamin.

v.31 Before they were utterly careless of their family responsibilities. But now we see a new sympathy, a new love, and a new responsibility.

We have before us in chapter 44 the climax of the whole Joseph story and, in vv. 33 and 34, the “grand climactic moment” in the transformation of the ten sons and the reconciliation of them to one another, to Joseph, and to God.

Joseph devised the supreme test for his brothers. (Here is something we should ask ourselves: what exactly is the Lord doing now that I am under a test, a trial? How might he be testing me? What might he be intending to accomplish in my life through this trial through which I am passing now?) And, since clearly, Judah had by this time assumed the spiritual leadership of the family, the test was met by him on behalf of the others. The narrator indicates that already in v. 14 when he tells us that “Judah and his brothers” had returned to Joseph’s house. That little detail, “Judah and his brothers,” we now realize is significant.

And it was Judah who spoke. In v. 16 it seems likely that Judah was confessing the far greater crime of their sin against Joseph years before. The Egyptians, of course, would have thought that he was admitting that they stole Joseph’s silver cup, but Judah knew they had not (even if he didn’t know how it had got into Benjamin’s sack). But, that seems not to be Judah’s point or the concern of his heart anymore. He cannot escape the similarity of situation; he cannot fail to see the connection between what was happening to them and what they had done to Joseph twenty-two years before. In other words, he could not help seeing what Joseph had taken such pains to ensure that the brothers would see. They were likely to be enslaved in Egypt just as they had enslaved their brother long before. In that sense, under the conviction of that ancient sin, believing, as he said in v. 16, that God himself was now uncovering their guilt, it made perfect sense for him to offer all of them as slaves to the Egyptian, appropriate punishment for what they had done.

But Joseph would have nothing of that. Remarkable as the change that seems to have come over Judah was, to accept his offer would ruin the test. No, it must be Benjamin and the brothers must be put in a situation in which they were free to abandon their brother to his fate and save themselves. He tells them outright, “Go back to your father in peace.” He opened the door and pointed the way.

But Judah was not the same man he once was. He was not the man any longer whose idea it was to get rid of their brother and make some money on the side. He was no longer the man who raised boys so disreputable that God executed them in the middle of their lives. He was no longer the man who refused to fulfill the duties of a patriarch and see to the needs of his daughter-in-law and, as a result, later committed incest with her, thinking her a prostitute. *Now we know why we had to be treated to that lengthy and sordid account of Judah’s sinful life in chapter 38. We needed to know what sort of man Judah had been to appreciate what kind of man Judah had become!*

When the Egyptian offered him and his brothers their freedom at Benjamin’s expense, he rose to speak and to plead. And what follows, in vv. 18-34, is the longest speech and the most passionate

speech in the book of Genesis. Delivered by Judah, of all people! It is a speech one commentator describes as a “speech of singular pathos and beauty.” [Driver]

Scholars of Hebrew narrative technique have subjected Judah’s speech to careful examination. And this is what they point out. The speech represents a “point-for-point” undoing, both morally and psychologically of the brothers’ earlier violation of fraternal and filial bonds. That is Judah walked back their betrayal of their brother Joseph and their father Jacob years before.

After years of obvious neglect by their father, after being shown in one way after another that Jacob loved Joseph and Benjamin in a way he did not and never would love them, after the years of bitter resentment toward Rachel’s two sons and toward their father, the brothers had now come to terms with the fact that their father’s love, however arbitrary, indeed however unjust, was nevertheless the true love of his heart. They were prepared in the teeth of Jacob’s indifference toward them to consider the interests of Jacob more important than their own, to treat him as they would wish to have been treated themselves, even to love their enemy, for, in certain ways Jacob had been their enemy.

Judah admits with apparent sympathy and understanding that his father had singled out Rachel’s second son for a special love, for the kind of favoritism from which the other sons of the family had suffered for long years. But now these men were reconciled to that favoritism. It isn’t what they would have hoped for – it certainly wasn’t the way Jacob should have treated Leah’s sons – but it was the way Jacob felt. They knew that their father’s life was *bound up* with the life of Benjamin, and Judah was now willing to argue that this was the reason why he should remain a prisoner in Egypt while Benjamin should be set free. Judah’s concern for his youngest brother and for his father was such that he was willing to quote sympathetically (in v. 27) Jacob’s typically hurtful statement that his wife bore him two sons, as if Leah, Judah’s mother, was not Jacob’s wife and Judah and his nine brothers were not Jacob’s sons.

Twenty-two years earlier Judah, bitterly resentful of his father’s favoritism, had engineered the selling of Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Now he was prepared to offer himself as a slave so that the other son of Rachel, the other favored son of Jacob, could be set free. Twenty-two years earlier, Judah had stood with his brothers and watched when the bloody tunic they had brought to Jacob as a means of covering up their crime, sent their father into a fit of anguish that was to last for years on end; now he is willing to do anything in order not to have to see his father suffer that way again.” [Robert Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 174-175]

If you knew nothing about the family history, Judah’s offer to substitute himself for Benjamin would strike you as admirable, even heroic. But to someone who knows the family history, to someone who knows Judah’s personal history – the selfish indifference he once showed to his own family and his obligations to his family – Judah’s speech represents nothing less than a shocking and sublime transformation. From a betrayer of his family he became the savior of it. From a selfish and indifferent son, brother, and father, he had become a man whose love for others was a power sufficient to make him offer his own life for theirs. Remember, when Judah made that speech, he fully expected never to see his family or his homeland again. That he should have offered as an argument for his own self-sacrifice his father’s favoritism for Rachel

and for Benjamin betrays a spirit of heroic and amazing love and devotion. [M. Sternberg, *The poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 308]

Jacob was a miserable father. We've had more than enough evidence of that in the narrative so far. He was a godly man in some ways, but a miserable father. But Judah, what had become of him? He too had been a miserable father. He was a terrible brother and a terrible father. How can the despicable figure of chapter 38 say and do what he does here? Though we are given no explanation for the transformation of this man, though we are not told when or how it occurred – though clearly Joseph's test was the final part of his transformation – Judah's new mind and heart is impossible not to notice. The attentive reader of Genesis and of these previous chapters is taken aback. Where did this Judah come from? Here is a man who was once utterly careless of his father's feelings. In this speech he mentions his father fourteen times and always with sympathy and affection.

And the culmination in vv. 33-34 seals the point. Judah, after all, was not speaking rhetorically. He had no reason to believe that his offer would not be accepted and that, as a result, he would remain a slave in Egypt for the rest of his life, just as he must have imagined his brother, Joseph, had done as a result of Judah's own perfidy years before. He was a wealthy man, he had property, he was an important figure in a very important family, and all of that he was giving up for the life of his brother and his father.

This is the first instance of human sacrifice in the Bible, of one man laying down his life for another: Judah offering up his life for the sake of Benjamin and his father Jacob. And when, from the heart, he made that offer the family was healed. As we will see in the next chapter Joseph could no longer maintain the pretense in the face of such love. Reconciliation then followed between both Joseph and the brothers and Joseph and Jacob in the next chapter as the denouement of the story. Judah's self-sacrifice is the climax!

And Judah *is* the center of this story. There is no doubt about that. Judah is the developing, the changing character. Joseph, worthy though he is, is a much more static figure. It is Judah who was transformed and, if the truth be told, Judah who rose higher, even than Joseph. Joseph was righteous, he did many wise things, but he never demonstrated the Christ-like compassion for others that Judah did here. Can we be sure of that? Can we know that this is the narrator's own understanding of this history?

Yes we can. We are told that in the most unmistakable way. When Jacob later blessed his sons, the blessings of which we read in chapters 48 and 49, Joseph was blessed as the prince of his brothers; he received a double portion as if he were the eldest. He got, in other words, the first blessing, the blessing that Jacob had received from his father Isaac.

But the greatest blessing was not given to Joseph, it was given to Judah instead. We read Judah's blessing in 49:8-12 – I invite you to turn there, for a moment. The rest of the brothers will bow down to Judah. That is, of course, a very striking promise, following as it does the dreams that Joseph had been given, dreams that portrayed his brothers bowing down to *him*. And, not only will Judah rule over the family of Israel, he will go in conquest over his enemies.

That is the sense of the statement in v. 8 that Judah's hand shall be on the neck of his enemies and as well the sense of Judah portrayed as a lion in v. 9. Judah is a fierce lion that has seized its prey, returned to its lair, and lies there daring anyone to challenge it.

And then the momentous promise in v. 10. The scepter and the staff are signs of royal authority. The king, will come not from Joseph's line, not from Reuben's, the firstborn, but from the line of Judah, Leah's fourth son. The phrase "between his feet" is a euphemism for the private parts and refers to Judah's progeny, his issue, his descendants. [Wenham] From Judah will come the king who will rule over the nations – the first specific promise of the coming King, the Messiah, who will be given the nations as his inheritance and who will rule over them as the King of Kings.

And then, in vv. 11-12, there is a picture painted of the prosperity of the reign of this coming king who will be Judah's descendant. "He will tether his donkey to a vine..." Ordinarily one didn't tie a donkey to the vine because he would eat up the grapes. But the image here is of such plenty that no one cares if the donkey eats its fill. There will be more than enough for man and animal alike. The next line, about washing his garments in wine has the same sense. There will be so much wine that one can wash his clothes in it. Throughout the OT, the golden age, the age of consummation is described in these same terms of bumper harvests and unimaginable plenty.

The sense of verse 12 is debated. It could be a description of the king's beauty: eyes like wine, teeth white as milk. Or, it could be a continuation of the previous thought. His eyes are dark with wine, there is so much of it and his teeth white with all the milk he drinks. In any case, it is clear that what Jacob was prophesying was that from Judah would come the great hope of the world and especially of the people of God.

Or, going back to 44:33: the king will come from Judah and from no other. The one who was willing to sacrifice himself for others is alone worthy to be the king of God's people. "Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friends." Judah's greatest descendant taught us that and then proved it by giving up his life for us. It is, finally, Judah, not Joseph, who is the truest Christ-figure in this history, and the Christ-figure will be the father of the Christ himself!

There is the Holy Spirit's own verdict on the events of the biblical history. What Jesus Christ, the Savior, will be is someone who will give his life a ransom for many. It will be the Son of God's self-sacrifice that will save the world. We hadn't yet been told that. But here, we are. We are told it and we are shown it.

Here, still so early in the history of redemption, most of two-thousand years before the appearance of the Son of God in the world, we learn what is going to distinguish the coming king from all other men and all other rulers of men. He will be a king whose rule is exercised in selfless love for others, he will save his people not by leading armies on the field of battle, but by giving up his own life in their place and for their sake, and he will do that in defiance of the fact that those for whom he gives up his life did not deserve such love; in fact had done everything possible to kill such love in his heart. The King of Kings will be the King of Love. All of that Judah shows us and because he does it will be the tribe of Judah that ever after will be the leading tribe in Israel. The tribes that hailed from Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, would

eventually go the way of the ten northern tribes into exile and into oblivion in the later years of the 8th century B.C. The tribe of Judah would remain and remains today. It would become in fact the entire Jewish people after the exile – indeed the word “Jew” comes from the name Judah. You see from all of this the place that Judah was given in the history of the people of God. Why? Because his life was the demonstration of the saving grace of God and an enacted prophecy of the work of the coming King who would love the unlovely and give his life for their salvation. All of this so beautifully demonstrated in the personal history of this one man.

How it happened that the Judah of chapter 38 became the Judah of chapter 44 who can say. But that it happened is the hinge upon which the entire history turns. Ours is a religion of moral and spiritual transformation, of the conquest of sin by the grace of God, and of the hope that we can and will become so much better people than we have been or are today. And in the center of that understanding of life and of the future stands the Lord Jesus Christ who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. That the world was taught where he would come from, what his motivations would be, and how he would save us from sin and death long centuries before he ever came into the world is proof, if proof were needed, that *the Son of God's self-sacrifice* and nothing else is the central fact of human existence and that *he* and no one else is the central figure of human history, the meaning of life and the hope for the future of every human being.

Those long centuries past we were also shown what sort of life God's grace would make of a human being, sinful and selfish as we all are by nature. As Judah's greatest descendant would one day put it, “As I have loved you, so you love one another.” “Be imitators of God...as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us.”