

The Cup Test

HN 12/09/04 pm

Reading: Genesis 44, John 21

Study: Genesis 44

Psalms: 38:1-4, 38:8-12, 39:5-10, 40:1-3

The brothers dined with Joseph at noon. They had a sumptuous feast especially Benjamin. Joseph had their donkeys loaded to the hilt with grain and they set off early the next morning. Things had worked out better this time they thought. They were all on their way home this time.

But Joseph was up to his tricks again. He not only returned their grain money but also planted his special cup in Benjamin's sack. What was he up to? Why did he do this? Was he being vindictive and out to destroy his brothers? Did he want to take them all as slaves? Did he just want to keep Benjamin, his blood brother with him? But if this was his aim he could have done it all by force without all this trickery.

Joseph was not acting in his own selfish interests. He was under the direction of the Spirit of God. God was using him to reform his brothers, to bring them to repentance and submission to the divine will. They were the future leaders of the people of God.

The Test Cup

Joseph continued to act harshly towards them, accusing them of stealing his special cup – although as we have already seen his love and grace caused him to weep for them often. He sent his steward to overtake the brothers as they happily set out to return to Canaan. He had to catch them quickly for the plan to work. This steward was in the know. He was a faithful, even if bewildered, servant.

The brothers were dumbfounded when he accused them of doing evil, of stealing his master's cup. They denied the charge and said that if anyone is found with the cup let him die and we also will be my lord's slaves.

Unlike his mother Rachel, Benjamin was not able to hide the cup – he did not know about it of course. Remember how Rachel stole the household idols and Laban came out after them (Genesis 31). The cup was found in the sack of the youngest, Benjamin's sack. What a disaster. What were they to do now? What could they do?

Well they could have abandoned Benjamin. Joseph's steward said he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and you shall be blameless. They could have saved themselves and left their young brother to fend for himself. That is what they would have done a few years earlier. Indeed, they even sold their young brother Joseph into slavery at an earlier time (Genesis 37). This time it would not even be their fault. They could wash their hands clean as it were – even though their hands were still stained with the blood of Joseph.

When Joseph was taken off as a slave only Reuben tore his clothes; and that was more out of self-pity than love for Joseph. But this time they all tore their clothes out of concern for Benjamin. Tearing of ones clothes was a sign of grief, a symbol of the tearing of ones heart (37:34). They tore their clothes and returned to the city where they fell down before Joseph pleading for mercy. They

were pleading for mercy for Benjamin who was accused of stealing the cup.

This cup was one that Joseph said he could use for divination. God gave Joseph the power to interpret dreams, but just what he meant by divination we cannot be sure. It may have been something like reading the tealeaves, but such practices were forbidden in the Law of Moses (Leviticus 19:26). Joseph may have said this simply to make the theft appear more serious.

Judah's Plea

Judah was the spokesman for the group. What could he say to Joseph? How could he speak? How shall we clear ourselves? All they could do was plead for mercy.

But note carefully the words of Judah – God has found out our iniquity. The plea for mercy was on the basis of confession. He was not confessing to stealing the cup for they were not guilty of that. But they were guilty of selling Joseph into slavery and deceiving their own father. God was still dealing with their sin of many years before. He was doing this even as he was preparing them to be the leaders of his own people.

Judah's speech from v.18-34 has been called 'the finest specimen of dignified and persuasive eloquence in the Old Testament'. It comes as the climax to this period of testing at the hand of Joseph, the servant of God. The brothers had returned to plead with Joseph not only for the sake of their young brother but for their father.

'This entire speech is motivated by the deepest empathy for their father – by a real understanding of what it means for the old man's life to be bound up with that of the lad'. The word 'father' is mentioned no less than 14 times by Judah as he pleads on behalf of the brothers for Benjamin to be allowed to return to his father. Your servant my father he kept saying to Joseph. He was of course your father and my father.

These brothers who had once so callously deceived their father into thinking that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast – these hard hearted brothers who stood watching their own father grieve on the basis of a lie – these same brothers now showed compassion for their father. Their hearts had been changed through this time of testing. They had been brought to confess their sin and turn from their selfish and wicked way of life.

Judah was deeply concerned for his father, concerned that he would die if they failed to return with Benjamin. He himself had gone surety for Benjamin and so as he concluded his plea before Joseph he offers himself as a slave instead of the lad.

The road to true repentance had been long and thorough for Joseph's brothers. These men who were guilty of violence and incest, in addition to having the blood of Joseph on their hands, had been humbled not only before Joseph but before God Almighty. The Lord used Joseph to bring them to this point. He had been harsh with them, even as he loved them, that they might repent and conform to the will of God.

The Lord disciplines those he loves. Has the Lord ever tested you – remember illegitimate children he does not discipline. Has the Lord ever used someone to bring you to repentance? Of course, it is only his Word and the power of the Holy Spirit that can bring men and women to repentance. The word

of God is living and powerful, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit (Hebrews 4:12). The Word of God has certainly been powerful in this congregation of late, piercing many hearts. But is it bringing repentance?

The apostle Peter denied Jesus three times. The resurrected Jesus came to him to test him and to restore him. Simon son of Jonah do you love me, do you love me more than these? This he asked Peter three times. Peter was grieved because he asked him three times. But Peter was being tested by Jesus. Do you love me more than these? Some among us grieve as their love for Jesus is being tested.

Is Jesus asking you the same question? Do you love me, Jesus Christ the son of God who offered himself up in your place? Or do you love the traditions of men, the doctrines of men, more than Jesus Christ. May the Lord have mercy! May we all be led to repentance and to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ and him alone! May we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.

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