



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Transformed Genesis 43:1-44:34

Fr. William Klock

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God is about the business of transformation. When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come," this is what we're asking for: for God's rule to transform his people and for that transformation to spread through the whole earth until that time, as St. Paul says, when God will be "all in all"—for that time when all rebellion has ceased and nothing stands against the will and rule of God. And in the story of Jacob's sons, we've seen God's transforming grace at work. Here in small scale we see God working through his "severe mercies" to save, to redeem, and to transform. What he does for Jacob's sons, he has done in much larger scale for the world through Jesus.

In Chapter 42 Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph recognised his brothers, but more importantly, he recognised God at work. And so Joseph set a plan in motion to save and restore his family. In the last chapter we saw the first of three tests. He wanted to know if these were still the same evil men who had sold him into slavery, so he accused them of spying on Egypt, he imprisoned them, and then he allowed nine of them to return home, while keeping Simeon in custody. He insisted that if they wanted Simeon released, they would have to return to Egypt with their youngest brother, Benjamin—Jacob's favourite. To test them further, he secretly returned their money to them. When they got home, they discovered their bags of silver hidden in the sacks of grain they'd bought. Twenty years before, they had sold Joseph in exchange for twenty shekels of silver—they valued money over family. This a lot more money, but it

will prove to Joseph whether they've changed. Will they risk returning for Simeon despite their fear that the Egyptians will accuse them of stealing the silver?

Initially Jacob absolutely refused to let the brothers return to Egypt, but that changes as we come to Chapter 43. Look at verses 1-2:

**Now the famine was severe in the land. And when they had eaten the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go again, buy us a little food."**

In the verses that follow you can sense Judah's frustration as he reminds Jacob that returning to Egypt will mean taking Benjamin with them. "Dad, Have you forgotten that Simeon is still sitting in prison in Egypt because you refused to let us take Benjamin back so that we could prove our innocence to the vizier? Not only that, but he warned us, 'You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.'" But in his pleading with Jacob we see the transformation that has taken place in Judah. Look at verses 8-10:

**And Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice."**

Judah offers to stand as surety for his brother and in that he foreshadows the work of Jesus, the Messiah who will come from Judah's line. Through Tamar's confrontation, through the Lord's provision of two sons to replace his two older, evil sons whom he had struck down, and finally through Joseph's confrontation and testing, God has transformed Judah. And we see, too, that Judah is beginning to take on the role of leader.

As his tribe will one day lead Israel, so now he starts to lead his brothers.

Jacob finally gives in and agrees to let his sons return to Egypt, this time with Benjamin. He tells them to take double the money this time so that they can prove their innocence by returning what the Egyptians will assume was stolen. But in good Jacob-style, he also sends gifts to ingratiate them to Joseph: "a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds" (Genesis 43:11b). And as he sends his sons off he prays, asking for God to have mercy on them as he resigns himself to God's sovereignty, "If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved" (Genesis 43:14b).

When the brothers return to Joseph and he sees Benjamin with them he arranges for them to have lunch at his home. Of course, they have no idea what's going on and are naturally afraid. When they arrive at Joseph's home, they plead with the steward, explaining to him their side of the story and insisting that they're innocent. Remember that they took all of their trouble to mean that God was punishing them for what they had done to Joseph twenty years before. Now Joseph's steward tells them that it's actually just the opposite. Look at verse 23:

**He replied, "Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money."**

"*Shalom*—peace—be with you," he says. "Don't be afraid; your God is looking out for you." And as if to make his point clear, the steward restores Simeon to them, provides food for their donkeys, gives them water to wash their dusty feet, and announces that Joseph will eat with them.

Simeon's return shows that they passed Joseph's first test. He wanted to know if they still valued money

over family. Here the storyteller links Simeon's release not with Benjamin's having been brought to Egypt, but with the return of the money Joseph had hidden in their sacks of grain. But this now sets the brothers up for Joseph's second test. Starting in verse 26 we read:

**When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present that they had with them and bowed down to him to the ground. And he inquired about their welfare and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" They said, "Your servant our father is well; he is still alive." And they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. And he lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!" Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there. (Genesis 43:26-30)**

Joseph is overcome. Not only is he realising that his brothers have changed; not only has he been reunited with his little brother, Benjamin; but he's also realising here that God truly is at work. In the last chapter he remembered the dreams God had given to him in his youth—dreams of his brothers bowing before him. But the last time only ten of his brothers were there. Was it the dream or wasn't it? But now Joseph has confirmation as all eleven of them bow before him. Joseph long ago forgave his brother for what they had done, but now he's overcome with emotion—with compassion for them. Joseph is starting to see his family as God sees it and he has to rush out as he weeps. He's still not ready to reveal himself. He still wants to be sure they've changed.

**Then he washed his face and came out. And controlling himself he said, "Serve the food." They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. (Genesis 43:31-32)**

As Joseph gets a glimpse of God's plan the storyteller now gives us a glimpse into those same plans. Joseph extends his hospitality to his brothers, but they eat at their own table. Brothers and sisters, right here is the whole rationale behind God's plan to bring the covenant family to Egypt. Egyptians did not mix with foreigners. It was an abomination to them. And this stands in stark contrast to the Canaanites. The Canaanites were always ready to accept God's people into their midst. Think of Abraham and the people of Gerar, of Lot and the men of Sodom, of Jacob and the men of Shechem. Think of Judah, who associated with the pagan Canaanites, took one of them as his wife, worshipped their gods, and raised two sons so evil that God was forced to strike them down. The early days of the covenant family were spent struggling against compromise with the pagan Canaanites. God is about to remove that struggle as he transplants the fathers of the twelve tribes into a nation that will never mix with them—that will keep them always at arm's length. In Egypt these twelve men and their children can grow into the nation God has promised they will become, but in Egypt they will have time to grow without the risk of losing their identity as the children of Abraham. God is ensuring the future of his people and of his kingdom.

Now comes the second test.

**And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth. And the men looked at one another in amazement. Portions**

**were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. And they drank and were merry with him. (Genesis 43:33-34)**

Joseph seats them all in the order of their birth and then feeds them generously. His reception of them is exactly the opposite of the reception that had given him all those years ago when he had sought them out at Dothan to check on their *shalom*—on their wellbeing. They must have been utterly bewildered by the way this highly placed Egyptian received them. But the real test lay in how they treated Benjamin. Joseph feeds his brothers generously from his own table, but he heaps a portion on Benjamin five times greater than he does his other brothers. Joseph favours Benjamin the same way his father had favoured him all those years ago. And it was that favour that his brothers had resented. And yet, even with Benjamin shown greater favour, Joseph watches as his brothers drink and make merry with each other. No one shows any resentment towards Benjamin. But to be sure, Joseph plans a third and final test. The brothers may control their jealousy in the company of others, but what about on the road home? Look at Chapter 44, verses 1-5:

**Then he commanded the steward of his house, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack, and put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph told him.**

**As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. They had gone only a short distance from the city. Now Joseph said to his steward, "Up, follow after the men, and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid evil for good? Is it not from this that my lord drinks,**

**and by this that he practices divination? You have done evil in doing this.”** (Genesis 44:1-5)

Joseph’s steward is in the know the whole time. Joseph gives him specific instructions as to what to do and say. He wants to scare his brothers so that he can see how they respond. The Hebrew doesn’t use the ordinary word for cup. This is Joseph’s large krater used for mixing and serving wine. As part of the ruse and to scare his brothers further, he leads them to believe that he practices divination using this same cup. Ancient people would sometimes mix various liquids, like wine and oil, and foretell the future based on the patterns the liquids made when mixed. Whether he actually practiced divination or not, Joseph is sending the message to his brothers that there’s no use lying. Once he’s got his cup back, he’ll be able to find out the truth.

**When he overtook them, he spoke to them these words. They said to him, “Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing! Behold, the money that we found in the mouths of our sacks we brought back to you from the land of Canaan. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord’s house? Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die, and we also will be my lord’s servants.” He said, “Let it be as you say: he who is found with it shall be my servant, and the rest of you shall be innocent.” Then each man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. Then they tore their clothes, and every man loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city.** (Genesis 44:6-13)

The brothers protest: “Look, this is crazy. When we got home after our

last trip we found our silver still in our sacks. If we were dishonest we’d have kept it, but instead we returned it to you. Why would we now steal your master’s cup? We don’t have it! In fact, we’re so confident we don’t have it, that you can search our sacks. If you find it, you can kill the culprit.” So the steward searches their sacks of grain, just as Joseph instructed him. And just to heighten the tension and the impact, he searches them from the oldest to the youngest. And, lo and behold, he finds the cup in Benjamin’s sack.

The old brothers—the brothers who had sold Joseph to slavers—probably would have thrown Benjamin under the bus. “Fine, Mr. Steward. You can take our brother. Execute him for all we care. Just let us be on our way.” But the brothers are different men after two decades. This time they tear their clothes—together they mourn the situation in which Benjamin finds himself. And they don’t simply hand him over to the Egyptians; as a group they all return to Egypt where Joseph confronts them.

**And Judah said, “What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord’s servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found.”** (Genesis 44:16)

Judah gives up. And he doesn’t just give up fighting Joseph, more importantly he gives up fighting God. He knows that Benjamin didn’t steal the cup, but he also knows he can’t prove anything to Joseph, and as the reality of their situation hits him, he gives himself over to punishment at Joseph’s hands with the realisation that it’s really God who is at work here, bringing him and his brothers to justice for their twenty-year-old guilt in selling Joseph into slavery. Judah’s like a man being given an unjust ticket for speeding by a crooked cop, but

choosing not to fight it because he knows that he habitually speeds every day and simply hasn’t been caught.

Joseph protests: “No. You needn’t all stay. I only intend to punish the one who was found with my cup.” Again, remember the test. Joseph wants to know how his brothers will treat Benjamin and so he keeps pushing them on this issue. “You can go home, but your little brother stays here with me to be punished.” In response, Judah pleads with Joseph for his brother in the longest speech in the book of Genesis.

**Then Judah went up to him and said, “Oh, my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord’s ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, saying, ‘Have you a father, or a brother?’ And we said to my lord, ‘We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother’s children, and his father loves him.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.’ We said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.’**

**“When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. And when our father said, ‘Go again, buy us a little food,’ we said, ‘We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down. For we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’ Then your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons. One left me, and I said, “Surely he has been torn to pieces,” and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and**

**harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol.'**

**"Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.' Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father." (Genesis 44:18-34)**

Judah was the one who set this whole story in motion when he convinced his brothers to sell Joseph, his father's favourite son, into slavery. Now it's a very different Judah who refuses to "sell" Benjamin, his father's new favourite, into that same slavery. Judah's pleading speech reveals all. Whereas the callous brothers had, twenty-two years before, presented their father with Joseph's fancy coat, torn and bloody, leading him to believe his son was dead and launching him into a deep and inconsolable mourning, now Judah pleads with Joseph not to compound their father's grief. And like the messiah who will spring from Judah's line in the future, Judah offers himself as a substitute for his brother, willing to take Benjamin's punishment on himself. Judah is the first person in Holy Scripture who offers up his own life for the sake of another, in that act he proves that he's ready to lead the covenant family. Joseph may receive a double portion in Jacob's blessing, but it's Judah who is blessed with kingship, prefiguring King Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, I started this morning with those words we pray from the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come". When we pray those words, we pray for God's transforming power to change our lives. But do we really realise what that means? Too often we pray "Thy kingdom come" while thinking about everything that we think is wrong with the world. We think of transformation, but we think of it in terms of God transforming the people who stand in our way and of God transforming the situations that are thwarting our desires and our wills. We don't very often pray "Thy kingdom come" while thinking of our own need for transformation.

The story of Joseph and his brothers reminds us that God's kingdom comes first amongst his own people. And dear friends, that means that transformation first needs to take place in us. Those difficult people, those trials and tribulations that thwart our plans: we need to realise that those may well be God's severe mercies, through which he's working to transform *us*. They may stand in our way, but they don't stand in God's. We need to learn to trust him in these severe mercies. Dare I say: We need to ask for them, because it's often the severity of God's mercies that's needed to break the inertia of our sinful complacency.

We joke about never praying for patience. Pray for patience, we say, and God will give you plenty of opportunities for practise. Last Wednesday I made some chocolate-dipped candied bacon for the men's fellowship group and I joked that it was an extreme test of self-control. But in reality, God's teaching mercies are often *much* more serious, *much* more difficult. And they're serious because we've so often got such great inertia to remain as we are. In Judah's case it took the death of two of his sons and being caught engaging in what he thought was pagan temple prostitution to break his sinful inertia.

It might take the loss of a job or a stock market crash that wipes out our retirement savings to teach us to entrust our finances to God. It might take the exposure of a man's Internet habits to break his addiction to pornography or being caught in the act and publicly shamed to break a habit of sexual immorality. It might take the destruction of a reputation to break the inertia of a gossip who has destroyed the reputations of others. All too often, whatever the specifics, it takes a long, hard sojourn in the wilderness for God to get our attention, to pull us away from sin, and to bring us to the point where we cling to him and trust him with our all. But brothers and sisters, it's at precisely that point that God's kingdom truly has come into our hearts. It's at the point where we give up our rebellious wills to Jesus that we see the answer to our prayer. It's at that point that his kingdom enters our hearts and it's at that point that his will is done on earth—in our lives and hearts and families and churches—as it is in heaven.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we acknowledged in today's Collect that without your help we can do nothing to please you. Pour your gracious Holy Spirit into our lives that our inertia in sin and our rebellious wills might be broken. Send us severe mercies as we need them, Father, and give us the faith to trust you through them, that we might learn to seek your kingdom and your will in all things. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.