

## Prayer

Help me, Lord Jesus, when life is hard and everything I attempt fails. Help me when I am unsuccessful at work, and grant me Your assistance. Help me when I fall short of expectations, and assure me of your love. Help me when I make things difficult for others, inadvertently, and give me the courage to sort things out. Raise my spirit I pray above the trials of life, and invigorate my spirit with the joy of Your presence. I ask this in Your name, Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Church ministry

*Pray for those who are responsible for teaching of church leaders; ministers, priests, pastors, deacons and those exercising various forms of ministry, such as prayer and healing ministry.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for Israel and its surrounding nations – pray for peace*
- *Give thanks to God for the joy of work and achievement*
- *Pray for agencies that distribute food to people in need*

## Meditation

By the power of the Holy Spirit, may we master our emotions,  
So that our testimony of faith becomes marked by maturity.

May our anger be reserved for everything unjust;  
And not vented on ourselves or even our loved ones.

May our enthusiasm be directed according to Your will;  
Not used up on every bandwagon that afflicts the church.

May our love inform each and every decision we make;  
Not squandered upon our personal pleasures or wants.

May our sensitivities be used to judge right from wrong;  
Not used to pour scorn or criticism on what others do.

May our sorrows become the seedbed of growth in Christ;  
Not the source of fruitless questioning or lack of faith.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, may we master our emotions,  
For the good of the fellowship of God's people, the Church.

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## Bible Study - Genesis 44:1-17

<sup>1</sup> Joseph commanded the steward of his house, 'Fill the men's sacks with as much food as they can carry, and put each man's money in the top of his sack. <sup>2</sup> Then put my cup, the silver cup, in the top of the sack of the youngest, together with his money for the grain.' And he did as Joseph instructed. <sup>3</sup> As soon as the dawn came, the men were sent on their way with their donkeys.

<sup>4</sup> When they had not travelled far from the city, Joseph said to his steward, 'Follow these men immediately; and when you catch up with them, speak to them, "Why have you repaid good with evil and stolen my silver cup? <sup>5</sup> Is this not the cup from which he drinks, and which he uses for divination? By doing this you have done a great wrong."' "

<sup>6</sup> When he caught up with them, he repeated these words. <sup>7</sup> They protested, 'How can my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing! <sup>8</sup> Indeed, the money we found at the top of our sacks was brought back to you from the land of Canaan; why then would we need to steal silver or gold from your lord's house? <sup>9</sup> If it is found with any of your servants, let him die; and the rest of us will become slaves of my lord.' <sup>10</sup> 'That may well be so,' said the steward, 'what you say may be right, but whoever is found to have it will become

my slave, but the rest of you will go free.’<sup>11</sup> Each of them quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and opened it.<sup>12</sup> The steward began his search with the eldest and ended with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack!

<sup>13</sup> At this, they tore their clothes. Then each one of them loaded his donkey and they returned to the city.<sup>14</sup> Judah and his brothers came back to Joseph’s house while he was still there; and fell to the ground before him.<sup>15</sup> Joseph addressed them; ‘How could you have done such a thing? You should know that someone such as I can discover what has happened by divination?’<sup>16</sup> So Judah responded, ‘What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered the guilt of your servants; so here we are, my lord’s slaves, both ourselves and the one in whose hand the cup has been found.’<sup>17</sup> But Joseph said, ‘Far be it from me to do such a thing! Only the one who had the cup will be my slave; as for you, go in peace to your father!’

## Review

The part of the story of Joseph we have read today is well known, and stands near the climax of the long saga of Joseph and his brothers. After this, the rest of chapter 44 (tomorrow’s reading) contains Judah’s long speech to Joseph, which turns the tide of the narrative and forces Joseph to reveal himself (45:1f.). Although we may know many of the details quite well, some of them are still confusing; why should Joseph attempt to achieve the godly outcome of reconciliation by outrageously deceiving his brothers? Why is Joseph described as practicing divination (44:5,15), a practice banned in the Law of Moses (Lev 19:26, Deut 18:10)? Why does Joseph’s steward, and Joseph himself insist on the punishment of the culprit alone when Judah offers the servitude of all the brothers (44:9)?

In truth, the story of Joseph is no ordinary story, but a series of events that have divine meaning; God was at work throughout everything, and the key moment comes towards the end of our passage today, when Judah recognised that God was responsible for what had happened (44:16). After this, Judah was able to speak to Joseph with authority and as we will find out tomorrow, his words changed the relationship with Joseph completely.

The full picture was this. God wanted to find out whether the barriers between Jacob’s ten older sons and his two younger sons (Joseph and Benjamin) had indeed been healed. The younger brothers were the sons of Rachel, the favoured wife of Jacob, and family strife in Jacob’s household was driven by favouritism; it had been a problem in God’s chosen family since the time of Abraham. If Jacob’s family was to grow into the nation of God’s people as God intended, then the divisions between them due to Jacob’s favouritism had to come to a stop. When Joseph disappeared, apparently killed by a wild animal, Jacob kept Benjamin apart from his older brothers. But now, the time had come for the whole family to be reunited, and this could only happen if there was a believable change of attitude on the part of the brothers, now headed by Judah.

To show this, it was essential that Judah should take full responsibility for the actions of the younger Benjamin without any rebellion amongst the other brothers, reminiscent of what had happened to Joseph many years previously. It would have been easy for Judah and the brothers to leave Benjamin to his fate as a proven thief (44:10-12), and return to their father with another tale of the loss of a son; particularly when the steward excused the brothers as a whole from any punishment (42:10). Yet this time, all the brothers ‘tore their clothes’ (44:13) at the injustice done to Benjamin. They were prepared to live for each other, and a fundamental spiritual change had taken place.

The whole passage speaks to us of the amazing lengths to which God will go in order to bring His people together, and all the mysterious features of this story can be explained by this driving imperative. Joseph’s deception was used by God to force the brothers to accept responsibility for each other and for Benjamin; the mention of ‘divination’ (44:15) was part of Joseph’s disguise, for he was indeed an ‘interpreter of dreams’, something known by the Egyptians simply as divination.

It is often true that we are not fully aware of God’s plans as we go about our daily work and practice Christian discipleship, and the wider implications of what we do for God are often a mystery hidden from our eyes. God has a purpose for everything that happens, including some of the strange things that happen to His people today. Many find it hard to see anything of God’s hand within what is happening in the world today, yet God is always working according to His great plan of salvation. Even the small things we do will help towards His goal if we make certain that we keep close to words and deeds that are just and righteous, and we can only do this through the strength of Jesus Christ and the holy Spirit.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Setting off back to Canaan

- The guilt of Benjamin?
- Judah speaks for the brothers

## Going Deeper

The story line of chapter 44 appears relatively straightforward, but at each stage, there are hints about what Joseph is up to, and what God is trying to achieve through the tortuous events which unfold as we read. Each part of the story gives the reader clues about how this whole saga will resolve, as it will very shortly!

### ***Setting off back to Canaan***

After the great feast and camaraderie of the night before, the brothers would have considered their mission a success. God's purposes were surely achieved for they had kept Benjamin as their father requested, received Simeon back into the 'fold' and purchased the grain and provisions necessary to survive further drought back in Canaan. If the brothers persisted in cutting off their remembrance of what they had done to Joseph, then all was fine.

When morning came, Joseph put into action a trial that would test the brothers honesty and sincerity. Joseph's favoured 'silver cup' was placed in Benjamin's sack, along with money returned as before, and the trap was sprung. It is somewhat surprising that the brothers did not search their bags before they left, for they had already been deceived once before by the return of their money. Perhaps they felt secure in their new-found friendship with the Vizier of Egypt and saw no reason to worry if the same thing happened again. They had not counted on an addition to the deception, and the fact that events rarely repeat themselves; they move on with unexpected twists and turns.

The brothers set out at dawn, probably the worse for wear after the party the night before (43:34); and Joseph instructed his steward to chase after the brothers with the accusation of theft, and that they had 'repaid good with evil' (44:4). The silver cup placed in Benjamin's sack was highly symbolic, and it represented Joseph's powers of 'divination'. The Pharaoh who appointed Joseph as Vizier and gave him all authority in the land was considered to be divine, so the Vizier could make a good claim to 'divination'. Divination means the foretelling of future events by contact with the gods, and Joseph was one of the few who had contact with the 'god' Pharaoh. However, we also know that Joseph foretold the future by interpreting dreams given him by God, and this was the secret of his personal success. Joseph had publicly confessed Almighty God as the source of the interpretation of all dreams (41:16f.), but it is no wonder that the Egyptians considered his powers to be 'divination'.

There is one other possibility for Joseph's use of the cup; it is possible that Joseph wanted the brothers to spot the connection between the divining cup and the spiritual source of their problems, their unbelief in Joseph's dreams many years ago. The brothers were already clearly conscious of their guilt before God and their father concerning what they had done to Joseph, the 'dreamer', many years ago (42:32,36 etc.), so this clue could have helped them understand what was going on. Along with all we saw in yesterday's passage, Joseph left a whole trail of cues about who he was, but they were not picked up.

### ***The guilt of Benjamin?***

The whole story now continues on the basis of a falsehood, and it is a distasteful falsehood at that, for Benjamin was found guilty of stealing the cup, and the evidence, though we know it was planted, was irrefutable. The brothers were reported as stating clearly that the proper penalty for any theft discovered would be that the thief should die, and the rest of them made slaves (44:9). In this matter, they were correct, and ancient documents from Egypt confirm this. However, the steward reduced the penalty dramatically and focussed, apparently more equitably, on Benjamin.

The punishment for Benjamin's supposed 'theft' of Joseph's cup was that he would be separated from his brothers and retained in Egypt. Perhaps it was the other brother's sense of sheer horror at the consequences of this for the old man Jacob that finally tipped the balance and made the entire brotherly group, led by Judah, act as one by returning to Joseph to plead with him for Benjamin. They need not have done so; they could have abandoned Benjamin to his fate (and Simeon as well) and returned home and told the sorry tale to Jacob. This time they had every reason so to do, for although they had lied to their father about Joseph, all they knew now was that Benjamin had been a thief, and what he had done was not their fault.

This time, however, the brothers acted together in repentance, tearing their clothes (again, reminding us of the way they 'tore' Joseph's clothes, see 37:23,31) and promptly returned to Joseph's home. He had not gone to work, and was waiting for them.

### ***Judah speaks for the brothers***

In the last section of this reading, Judah has clearly assumed the leadership of the brothers, and it is significant that we hear little more of Reuben, the eldest, from this point onwards in Scripture. It is a reminder to us that God's ways are not always what we expect, and He will use those who make themselves available for His purposes, even if they are not who we might think of as the 'first choice'. Here, Judah accepted guilt before the Vizier (Joseph), speaking entirely collectively; 'what can we say to my Lord ... how can we prove our innocence' (44:16); and in an un-called for gesture, Judah offered the entire brotherhood to Joseph as slaves (44:16,17); a further act of obeisance to Joseph as foretold in Joseph's first dream (37:6).

As Joseph insisted on his own requirement for the punishment of Benjamin alone, the whole scene has a tense feel. It is as if Judah says that if Benjamin is to be taken as a slave, then the Vizier (Joseph) will have to deal with the whole brotherhood as well. But this is the heart of the test set by Joseph, and under Judah's leadership, the brothers have almost passed the test. All that remains is a long speech of appeal by Judah in the remaining verses of chapter 44 before Joseph decided to reveal himself.

## Application

Deception had been a problem for Abraham; as we read this story we must remember that Abraham deceived Pharaoh when fleeing to Egypt at a time of famine (12:10f.). He certainly had to deceive his own son in order to carry out God's command to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah (Gen 22) even though God stayed his hand at the last moment. Isaac was not without his own similar problems, deceptively protecting his own interests by passing his wife off as his sister just as his father had done before (26:6f.). Jacob was well known as a deceiver, working for years to gain the upper hand over his father-in-law using all manner of breeding trickery to gain wealth at his expense (Gen 30). Then, in his older years, as a man who had learned to be obedient to God's Covenant, he suffered the deception of his own sons concerning the supposed death of his favourite son, Joseph, the eldest son of his favoured wife Rachel. It is a cruel story; and this is why it was so necessary for things to be put right as the family group of Jacob (now named 'Israel') began to expand and needed the space to grow as a nation.

In our own world, there is much deception. Nations deceive each other to keep their own identity and reputation, consumers are deceived daily by advertising campaigns, and the world of film and media which claims to reflect the world, projects images which deceive young minds about the nature of reality and personal responsibility. The only answer to deception known to this world is the way of Jesus Christ, who showed that service is the only true leadership, the love of all is the only true humanity, and that God is found not in mystery or intellectualised religion, but in real life and real death, in Jesus Christ and His coming again in glory!

In our passage today, Judah takes command and acts for the good of all Jacob's family, dealing with something of the familial pattern of deception amongst God's people. His was not a leadership rooted in dominance or insistence upon his own way, but on godly action. He was a changed man from his earlier years, and he has much to teach us.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Was Joseph guilty of deception in this story, or were his actions justified? If so, how?
2. Discuss ways in which deception is a problem in society today.
3. Read through the whole passage again, and discuss anything new which you discover in it as you read it again, having read the study.

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*It is quite hard to get to the bottom of this passage of scripture, and the point that lies behind it may seem rather loose and difficult to apply. 'God is in control of all things' is a saying we tend to trot out when life is inexplicable, but not when we feel in control of things ourselves. However, who is really in control of life? Only God! Are we in a position to understand all that God is doing in our midst? Certainly not! We should rest assured that God will do His will whatever our perception of it and however we react to what is happening in the world. Our duty, as with Judah in this story today, is to stay close to Him.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- Look back upon your own experience of the life of the church. Consider whether it has always been clear what God has been doing, and recall times when it has been clear, and times when it has not.

*Sometimes, Christian people become very concerned if they cannot see the immediate evidence of the fruit of the Gospel or the work of the Kingdom; but why should we be worried? Is God not working all the time?*

- *Pray for any people in your church who are known to be pushing some agenda of church action. Pray that they will indeed be guided by the Lord and not carried along by religious 'bandwagons'.*

## **Final Prayer**

Give us humility, Almighty Father, in the face of the great truths of the Gospel. May we handle them with dignity and care, and always remember that we are dependent upon You for everything, including our wisdom and understanding. Guide us in all truth, Almighty Father; AMEN

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