

“How Shall We Clear Ourselves?”

Genesis 44:1-34

July 2nd, 2017

Ever have one of those days where nothing seems to go the way it's supposed to?

A newspaper in San Diego printed the story of a woman who had a little canary whom she affectionately named Chirpy. The little bird brought all kinds of song and beauty into their home.

One day while vacuuming, she thought, “My, the bottom of Chirpy’s cage is filthy! I’ll just vacuum out the bottom of his cage.” While she was completing that task, her phone rang. So when she reached over for her phone, she lifted up the vacuum cleaner and it sucked in Chirpy, all the way down the tube, down to the little filter bag!

The woman quickly opened the vacuum cleaner and cut the bag open, and there was Chirpy inside, shaking off all the dust and dirt. As you might imagine, the lady breathed a huge sigh of relief! But, noticing how dirty Chirpy was, she put him under a faucet and ran water all over him.

And then when she finished with him under the faucet, where he was about to drown, she dried him off... with a blow dryer!

A newspaper reporter asked, “Well, what’s the canary like now?” She replied, “Well, he doesn’t sing very much anymore!”

No doubt! Poor Chirpy – what a bad feather day!

Similarly, we will see that the 10 older brothers of Joseph also have a day with more downs than ups. Today, we move into the 44th chapter of Genesis. We’re well down the road in our continuing sermon series exploring the Bible’s opening book, *The Book of Beginnings: God’s Grace in Genesis*. Confronted with their sin, the brothers ask how they might be reconciled to the ruler in Egypt (they didn’t yet know the ruler was their younger brother, Joseph).

Genesis 44:1-34:

And he (Joseph) commanded the steward of his house, saying, “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. ² Also put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his grain money.” So he did according to the word that Joseph had spoken. ³ As soon as the morning dawned, the men were sent away, they and their donkeys.

⁴ When they had gone out of the city, *and* were not *yet* far off, Joseph said to his steward, “Get up, follow the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, ‘Why have you repaid evil for good? ⁵ *Is* not this *the one* from which my lord drinks, and with which he indeed practices divination? You have done evil in so doing.’”

⁶ So he overtook them, and he spoke to them these same words. ⁷ And they said to him, “Why does my lord say these words? Far be it from us that your servants should do such a thing. ⁸ Look, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan the money which we found in the mouth of our sacks. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord’s house? ⁹ With whomever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord’s slaves.”

¹⁰ And he said, “Now also *let it be* according to your words; he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and you shall be blameless.” ¹¹ Then each man speedily let down his sack to the ground, and each opened his sack. ¹² So he searched. He began with the oldest and left off with the youngest; and the cup was

found in Benjamin's sack. ¹³ Then they tore their clothes, and each man loaded his donkey and returned to the city.

¹⁴ So Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, and he *was* still there; and they fell before him on the ground. ¹⁵ And Joseph said to them, "What deed *is* this you have done? Did you not know that such a man as I can certainly practice divination?"

¹⁶ Then Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; here we are, my lord's slaves, both we and *he* also with whom the cup was found."

¹⁷ But he said, "Far be it from me that I should do so; the man in whose hand the cup was found, he shall be my slave. And as for you, go up in peace to your father."

¹⁸ Then Judah came near to him and said: "O my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's hearing, and do not let your anger burn against your servant; for you *are* even like Pharaoh. ¹⁹ My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?' ²⁰ And we said to my lord, 'We have a father, an old man, and a child of *his* old age, *who is* young; his brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.' ²¹ Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.' ²² And we said to my lord, 'The lad cannot leave his father, for *if* he should leave his father, *his father* would die.' ²³ But you said to your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall see my face no more.'

²⁴ "So it was, when we went up to your servant my father, that we told him the words of my lord. ²⁵ And our father said, 'Go back *and* buy us a little food.' ²⁶ But we said, 'We cannot go down; if our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down; for we may not see the man's face unless our youngest brother *is* with us.' ²⁷ Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons; ²⁸ and the one went out from me, and I said, "Surely he is torn to pieces"; and I have not seen him since. ²⁹ But if you take this one also from me, and calamity befalls him, you shall bring down my gray hair with sorrow to the grave.'

³⁰ "Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad *is* not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad's life, ³¹ it will happen, when he sees that the lad *is* not *with us*, that he will die. So your servants will bring down the gray hair of your servant our father with sorrow to the grave. ³² For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him *back* to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father forever.' ³³ Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. ³⁴ For how shall I go up to my father if the lad *is* not with me, lest perhaps I see the evil that would come upon my father?"

Reconciliation is the main theme of this chapter. As we've seen in the previous two chapters, God had been working on the hard hearts of Joseph's brothers. With today's passage, we see four things that build off that work to bring them to the brink of reconciling with Joseph. We'll also explore how this passage can apply to us.

MP 1 – From Delight to Disaster

MP 2 – From Disaster to Devotion

MP 3 – From Devotion to (new) Direction

The context of chapter 44 is set with the final verse of Chapter 43 – there we read (**Gen. 43:34**) "...So they drank and were merry with him (Joseph)." You'll remember that Joseph had his brothers over for lunch. Thinking they'd done something wrong to be called to see Joseph, the brothers arrived in fear. But, Joseph did not chastise them. Instead, he fed the hungry men.

With the beginning of chapter 44, a new day dawns, and the brothers, on donkeys loaded down with grain, make their way back to Canaan and their father, Jacob. Even so, we're let in

on a secret the brothers didn't know – Joseph instructed his steward to place his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. The steward is then to chase after the brothers and get the cup they "stole." It's at that point that the mood of **Delight turns into one of Disaster!**

1 – The first bad thing to happen to Joseph's brothers occurs when Joseph charges them with wrongdoing (end of verse 4 & beginning of 5), "Why have you repaid evil for good? ⁵ *Is not this the (silver cup) from which my lord drinks, and with which he indeed practices divination?"*

2 – The brothers answer Joseph's charge with a rash vow (never a good thing to do; the second bad thing). See verse 9, "With whomever of your servants it (Joseph's silver cup) is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord's slaves." *Now, if we hadn't yet read the verses to follow, wouldn't you expect such a lofty promise would somehow be deflated?*

3 – A third bad thing occurs in verse 12 – "...the cup was found in Benjamin's sack." (I wonder if this was where the idea of putting toys in cereal arose). The brothers simply cannot believe their eyes – "...they tore their clothes, and each man loaded his donkey and returned to the city."

4 – Upon their arrival, the brothers again come before Joseph. They have been undone by the presence of Joseph's silver cup in Benjamin's sack. And, we see evidence of guilt and shame they've been carrying since they treated Joseph harshly earlier becoming too heavy to carry. This 4th bad thing actually leads to their eternal good – reconciliation with God and Joseph.

Judah's words lay the groundwork for moving to our second point **from Disaster to Devotion**. Look again with me at verse 16 - "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; here we are, my lord's slaves, both we and *he* also with whom the cup was found."

One of those questions provides the title for this message – "...how shall we clear ourselves?" If you're looking at the *New International Version* or *the Message*, this question reads "How can we prove our innocence?" The *New American Standard Bible* puts it this way, "And how can we justify ourselves?"

With verse 18 through the rest of the chapter, we see a one-on-one conversation between Judah and Joseph. There is nothing defiant in Judah's words. He is fully submissive. His humility before Joseph is obvious. And, he demonstrates great reverence to Joseph. We also see that Judah has great concern for his father's welfare, and the well-being of his little brother, Benjamin. Judah is willing to do anything possible – up to sacrificing his own life – that his brother Benjamin might be freed as a slave and returned to Jacob.

Xerxes, King of Persia, was fleeing from Greece. The boat he was on was so crowded with people that it threatened to sink. Seeing they could save their king, most of the men on the ship jumped into the sea simply to save the life of their king.
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It is a noble deed to sacrifice oneself for one's brother or a king. But how much more so when the king sacrifices Himself for the lowliest in the kingdom! That is what King Jesus has done for His people – He came to earth to be a Substitute for His people. Although they

deserved death for their sins, Christ went to the cross in their place. *Is that King not worth following? Will you follow Him today?*

Our final point consists of a process gleaned from sacred Scripture on achieving reconciliation between ourselves and others. It is the vehicle to move **from Devotion to (new) Direction**. It's also provides a good answer to Judah's question, "How shall we clear ourselves?"

1 – We must own our own sin! Judah's words in verse 16 show the brothers' ownership of their wrongdoing – "God has found out the iniquity of your servants; here we are, my lord's slaves, both we and *he* also with whom the cup was found." Recognition that we have done wrong is the first step. We dare not rationalize why we did what God calls sin! And, to play the victim card is self-pity and excuse-making; it is not taking responsibility for your sin.

2 – We must forsake our sin! This means we must wholeheartedly turn away from it – we must assign the same hatred to it that God does. We must detest our sin, and do whatever we can to steer clear of it. This reminds me of a term we use in the military to survive NBC (nuclear, biological or chemical) activity. That term is "distance and shielding." The farther you are away harmful agents the better (distance). And the more stuff you can put between them and yourself, the better (shielding). So it is for sin in your life. Flee from it, stop trying to see how close you can get to it without falling into it. And put up barriers to prevent a reoccurrence.

3 – We must seek forgiveness from those we've wronged – both human and divine. This is not a mere apology "I'm sorry." It's to love peace so much that we ask those we've offended to forgive us of the wrongs we've done to them. And, if we're asked to forgive by a brother or sister in Christ, we have no choice but to release any thoughts or plans of revenge. We must love others so much that we accept the wrong done to us.

4 – We must then live humbly and obediently. Put simply, we must stop sinning! Two incidents from John's gospel account reveal that as God's command for true, lasting repentance and reconciliation.

A – The first is found in John Chapter 5 where Jesus healed a man in the Pool of Bethesda. The man had a 38-year illness and was hoping to be healed in the waters of the pool. Jesus healed the man by saying, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." In so doing, Jesus instructed the man to "Sin no more, lest a worse thing (were) to come upon (him)." (**John 5:1-15**)

B – The second is found in John 8 where Jesus forgave a woman caught in the act of adultery. Scribes and Pharisees brought the woman to Jesus to try to trap Him. Yet, Jesus asked the accusers that any without sin cast the first stone at the woman (stoning to death was the penalty for adultery). The men walked away, leaving the woman standing before Jesus. He forgave her of her sin, and instructed her to "go and sin no more." (**John 8:2-12**)

Reconciling with others is to be a priority for Christians. We have been forgiven much by a Holy God – our sin has been erased by Jesus through His perfect life and substitutionary death.

A husband and wife who became estranged from one another separated. They both left the city where they lived, and settled in different parts of the country.

One day, the husband returned to the city in which they both lived previously on business. While there, he went out to the cemetery to the grave of their only son.

He was standing by the grave, lost in memories, when he heard a step behind him. Turning, he saw his estranged wife. The first inclination of both was to turn away from each other. But they had a common, binding interest in that grave; and instead of turning away they clasped hands over that grave of their son, and were reconciled one to another.

It took nothing less than death to reconcile them! It takes nothing less than death, the precious blood of Christ, to reconcile man to God. The pronouncement, the proclamation, of that is the gospel message. We have, the great proclaimer of it said, "the message of his reconciliation." **(2 Cor. 5:19)**

Sitting beside one another as we partake of the Lord's Supper should remind us that we have much more in common with one another, than what divides us. Our differences should never be used to erect walls, or to cause outbursts of wrath, or create distrust. Neither should our preferences become the law which all should follow.

"So we share in this bread of life, and we drink of His sacrifice as a sign of our bonds of peace and love around the table of the King."