

GENESIS—WEEK 34

JOSEPH LOSES IT



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is The Silver Goblet is Found in Benjamin's Sack by Alexander Ivanov (1806–1858) On display at Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Joseph keeps cranking up the pressure on his brothers. He wants them to repent.

But when Judah suddenly gets in his face and cries out in repentance, Joseph can't control his emotions and his plan falls apart.

It's the perfect climax.

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Thank you.

Genesis 43:26–45:3 — Joseph Loses It
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1 Genesis 43:26–34 (ESV)

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. 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. 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.

Remember, Joseph is speaking in Egyptian through a translator. Also, he's keeping his distance from them. He has to keep putting on airs, partly because Egyptian custom demands it, but also to prevent being recognized. He also wants to keep up the pressure on his brothers.

But Joseph still doesn't seem to have an endgame plan. He almost loses it (again) and has to rush off to cry. He cleans up and returns and, for now, manages to control himself. He then surprises his brothers by seating them in their birth order. Noticing this enormous coincidence, *the men looked at one another in amazement*. Then he shows great favoritism towards Benjamin. This puts even more pressure on the brothers. They've never been good with their father's favoritism towards Benjamin, nor towards Joseph. This is an “in your face” move.

The Bible doesn't say that this is meant as a test, but if it is, the brothers pass it. They simply enjoy the meal and everything seems pretty relaxed. They're perplexed by the whole scene, but that just sits in the back of their minds as an unsolved mystery.

At last, Joseph's brothers finally do something right. They're thankful for the good things they have without being resentful of things they don't have. They have plenty to eat in the middle of a famine, and they're even okay with Benjamin being favored.

We live in an age of plenty, but we all know people who have more than us. Our job as Christians is to help everyone who needs Jesus. That includes those with enviable wealth.

Beware of assuming that your calling is to help those in the greatest need—the poor, the downhearted, the unsaved. Seminary professors are specifically called to minister to people who aren't particularly needy, yet their contribution to the kingdom is priceless.

Be open to any calling. The body of Christ needs every kind of servant.

2 Genesis 44:1–13 (ESV)

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.’”

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.

It's now obvious that the steward is in on Joseph's schemes. He conspires with Joseph to ratchet up the pressure on Joseph's brothers. He puts the cup into Benjamin's sack, then pretends to discover it. Next, he reduces the punishment, instead of going along with the brothers' plan to execute the person who “stole” the cup.

This reduced punishment makes the scene match what the brothers did with Joseph many years ago. The brothers now face the prospect of telling their father that his favorite son is a slave. That was the story the last time, and they made up a lie that was worse than the truth. Now that option isn't open to them, and they're totally panicked.

They returned to the city, ripe for repentance.

Just as Joseph lays his brothers' sin before their eyes, we all need to be confronted with our sin. It's easy to come to a place where we pay lip service to our sin but think that we've advanced far enough that it's no longer a crisis.

Oh, but it is—for you and for me—and for the rest of our lives. Like Joseph's brothers, we need to have our eyes opened to our sin. We need newly repentant hearts. Ask the Lord for the courage to deal with the pain of admitting how bad we are. The truth is that we *need* a savior—not, we *needed* one.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. — 1 John 1:9 (ESV)

3 Genesis 44:14–23 (ESV)

When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell before him to the ground. Joseph said to them, "What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?" 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." But he said, "Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant. But as for you, go up in peace to your father."

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.'

Joseph's use of the word "divination" seems to be part of his strategy. He's hinting at divine revelation. He wants his brothers to think that God is angry at them.

And that's exactly what they are thinking. Judah says, "*God has found out the guilt of your servants,*" and he proposes that they should all become slaves. Then Joseph tightens the vise by saying only the thief who stole his cup should be enslaved. That's the perfect nightmare scenario for Judah, and he panics.

But in his panic, Judah does something that blows up Joseph's plan. *Judah went up to him.* Joseph has been keeping his distance, but now they're close. Judah doesn't recognize Joseph yet, but he might.

Joseph's plan is backfiring. Concealing his identity is essential. Given that he has had trouble controlling his emotions, having Judah right up in his face is a problem. Then Judah launches a groveling, rambling plea for mercy.

It's more powerful than he knows.

Judah's sincerity in coming before this lord is a perfect model for how we should be when we come before the LORD. Too often we offer up stoic prayers as if that's what God wants.

No. God's servants scream and cry. The book of Lamentations is part of the Bible for a reason.

Ever wonder what in the world Jesus was talking about when he said, "*I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers.*"? — Matthew 7:23b (NIV)

How's He going to know you if you're not yourself when you talk to Him?

4 Genesis 44:24–34 (ESV)

“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.”

This is the speech that causes Joseph to crack, which ends the whole ruse. Judah says almost everything Joseph could want him to say. He cares about Benjamin and he cares about his father’s grief. He’s aware of the pain he has caused and he regrets it greatly. All the pieces of repentance are there.

The only thing he hasn’t done is specifically confess what he and his brothers did to Joseph. That may be what Joseph is trying to get him to do. Whatever the case, Joseph’s scheme ends here. Something at the end of Judah’s speech breaks Joseph down. But what?

“I fear to see the evil that would find my father.”

It’s love. The old selfish, conniving Judah is gone. The new Judah is pouring his heart out to what he thinks is an Egyptian lord. He’s pleading to be allowed to sacrifice himself for his little brother, whom he’s supposed to resent.

Then he makes it clear that his motive isn’t the consequences he might suffer; it’s his love for his father.

Love isn’t always easy. We’re called to love everyone, even our enemies. But this can get complicated. Surely, there are times when letting someone off the hook is a bad idea—for us and for them too. Right?

Yeah, but let’s not focus on making excuses. Most situations aren’t so advanced. You don’t learn to love difficult people by reading books. You learn through practice.

But how are we going to get practice unless the Lord gives us difficult people to love?

Our growth in Christ is a big, high priority project. Sanctification doesn’t come cheap. God uses pain and trials to change us.

Appreciate the high stakes involved.

5 Genesis 45:1–3 (ESV)

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, “Make everyone go out from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

By using a video technique known as “morphing” (like was used at the end of *Saving Private Ryan*), it’s now possible to make a movie of this scene that conveys the incredible power of the moment. We know from Genesis 42:23 that Joseph has been speaking to his brothers in Egyptian through a translator. That helps conceal his identity; they don’t recognize his voice in Egyptian.

When Joseph loses it, he cries, in Egyptian, “*Make everyone go out from me,*” and everyone who speaks Egyptian leaves—including the translator. Then he looks directly at his brothers and says in Hebrew, “*I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?*” They recognize his voice. Then they recognize his face.

In an instant, this stranger in front of them turns into Joseph. The shock would have killed anyone with a weak heart. The face of this mysterious Egyptian lord suddenly morphs into the face of Joseph, right before their eyes.

But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

The Hebrew word translated as “presence” is actually the word for face (פָּנָי, pe-nay). They were struck dumb, not by his words, but by his face.

This isn’t Joseph’s plan unfolding. That just blew up. This is God’s incredible sense of timing on display.

Joseph wanted to make his brothers see the light, but he never worked out the details of his plan.

Fortunately, the One who planned everything from the beginning had worked out details that Joseph couldn’t even imagine. That plan continued to unfold, without missing a beat, when Joseph’s plan unraveled. Joseph was trying to school his brothers but got schooled himself.

Notice how the collapse of Joseph’s plan was the catalyst for the action here. Joseph coming unglued wasn’t just something God had to “deal with” or “overcome.” It was the secret sauce.

Think about that the next time you’re upset with yourself. Yes, we should always try to do the right thing and serve the Lord effectively. And we will often fail.

But the key is admitting our mistakes. When we fail we need to process our errors and move on. It’s not the end of the world; it’s a mistake.

Figure out the lesson and let it go.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How do you figure out (or see) what your calling is?
2. Have you ever had events jam your sin in your face?
3. Have you ever lamented to God?
4. Have you ever succeeded in learning to truly love someone difficult?
5. What mistake did you learn the most from?