

Main Idea: As we watch Joseph’s interaction with his brothers in Genesis 44, God’s Word offers us practical insight into dealing with a stubborn past God’s way. We see three things.

- I. We see the reality test (1-13).
- II. We see the response (14-34).
 - A. There was personal guilt (16).
 - B. There was personal responsibility (32).
 - C. There was personal change (33-34).
- III. We see vital ramifications regarding repentance.
 - A. Here’s what biblical repentance is *not*.
 1. It’s *not* just saying, "I'm sorry."
 2. It’s *not* merely feeling badly about what you did.
 3. It’s *not* doing penance.
 - B. Here’s what biblical repentance is.
 1. I must admit two things.
 - a. Admit that what I did was *wrong* in God's eyes.
 - b. Admit that I have no intention of doing it again.
 2. I must accept two things.
 - a. Accept personal responsibility.
 - b. Accept God's unmerited pardon through Christ.

The Bottom Line: Divine grace is more than sufficient for a stubborn past.

Scripture Reading: 1 John 1:5-2:2

The past. We all have one. Some want to live in it. Others try to run from it. For most of us, the past includes some pleasant memories, and some not so pleasant ones. It’s the latter that can make life difficult in the present.

I’ve entitled this message, “Dealing with a Stubborn Past.” How can we deal with our past so that we can move ahead joyfully for the glory of God?

Thankfully, the eternal God has provided a way for sinners like us to deal with our past, by His grace. In His Word He addresses this important question for us in Genesis 44, as we’ll see today.

When I was a seminary student, I was also a resident director for a men’s residence hall. Which meant I was at times involved in discipline meetings involving students who had violated the guidelines spelled out in the student handbook. One of the biggest changes the deans and RDs faced was determining if the student was truly repentant, or just sorry they got caught.

How can you tell? That's sort of the question Joseph sought to answer in Genesis 44. He wondered, of course, about his ten older brothers.

When he was 17 years old, his father treated him as the favorite son, to the consternation of his ten older brothers, who hated him for it. When the ideal opportunity came for them to get rid of Joseph, they did, by selling him to a band of slave traders heading for Egypt. Then they covered their tracks by convincing their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast.

Nearly 25 years had passed since that cruel deed. God's hand was upon Joseph, and the sovereign Lord took him from a forsaken prison to the palace in Egypt. Then He sent a famine that devastated the Middle East, a famine He intended to use to take the whole chosen family to Egypt, as part of His amazing plan to provide a Savior for the world.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ This message is adapted from two series at WBC in 1992 and 2002.

When the brothers arrived in Egypt looking for food, they obviously didn't know that the man selling the food was the brother they'd betrayed. But he knew them. And there was a question that seems to be forefront in his mind, as for any person who's been hurt as he has.

Were his brothers really sorry for what they had done to him? How could he tell? He devised one final test in Genesis 44, not to get revenge, but in pursuit of God-honoring reconciliation.

As we watch Joseph's interaction with his brothers in Genesis 44, God's Word offers us practical insight into dealing with a stubborn past God's way. We're going to see three things.

I. We see the reality test (1-13).

When we left off last time, Joseph had invited his brothers to his house for a big noon meal. Now it's time for them to go home. Here's what happened...

Verses 1-2, "Now Joseph gave these instructions to the steward of his house: 'Fill the men's sacks with as much food as they can carry, and put each man's silver in the mouth of his sack. ² Then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's sack, along with the silver for his grain.' And he did as Joseph said."

That's interesting. Unbeknownst to his brothers, Joseph put their money back in their sacks, just like he did the first time. Why? Is he refusing to accept their money because they are family? Maybe that's part of it. But so is this.

He sees God's hand in this, so he's doing the God-honoring thing. Overcoming evil with good. He will later tell them, "But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance (Genesis 45:7)."

Joseph did something else. He inserted his "silver cup."

What was this "silver cup"? Apparently, it was Joseph's personal cup from which he drank daily. In addition, in verse 5 Joseph's steward says it was his "divination cup."

What's that? In ancient times, a divination cup was filled with water. Then oil was poured on the water. On the basis of the forms and shapes that the oil took on the surface of the water, the future was predicted.

Divination was "attempting to discover hidden knowledge through mechanical means, the interpretation of omens, or the aid of supernatural powers."²

God would later forbid divination for His people Israel (Leviticus 19:26) because "it reflected a pagan concept of the world controlled by evil forces, and therefore obviously not under the sovereign rule of the Lord."³

By mentioning the divination cup in Genesis 44, Moses isn't condoning its use. In fact, he seems to be indicating that Joseph, who is in Egypt, is playing the part of a good Egyptian as he tests his unsuspecting brothers.

Now watch the reality test develop. Verses 3-5, "As morning dawned, the men were sent on their way with their donkeys. ⁴ They had not gone far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, 'Go after those men at once, and when you catch up with them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid good with evil? ⁵ Isn't this the cup my master drinks from and also uses for divination? This is a wicked thing you have done.'"

So that's what Joseph told the steward to say. In verses 6-10, we're told what he actually said, as well as the brothers' response.

² NIV Study Bible, p. 51, commenting on Genesis 30:27.

³ NIV Study Bible, p. 51, commenting on Genesis 30:27.

Verses 6-10, "When he caught up with them, he repeated these words to them. ⁷ But they said to him, 'Why does my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to do anything like that!' ⁸ We even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the silver we found inside the mouths of our sacks. So why would we steal silver or gold from your master's house? ⁹ If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves.' ¹⁰ 'Very well, then,' he said, 'let it be as you say. Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame.'"

Can't you see the humor in this? You'd think the brothers would check their sacks before sticking their necks on the line, especially after unexpectedly finding their money on the first trip (42:27, 35).

Please note how the steward lessened the penalty. Why? He doesn't say. But notice what happened next in this nail-biting drama.

Verses 11-13, "Each of them quickly lowered his sack to the ground and opened it. ¹² Then the steward proceeded to search, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. ¹³ At this, they tore their clothes. Then they all loaded their donkeys and returned to the city."

So the steward began his search with the oldest brother, Reuben. No cup. Then the next to the oldest, Simeon. Then Levi. Then Judah. And right on down the line. I wonder if the brothers didn't start getting a little over confident at this point. Until he came to the last brother. And horror of horrors, there was the cup, in Benjamin's sack!

So what did the brothers do? According to verse 13, two things. First, they tore their clothes (a cultural expression of intense grief). And secondly, they *all* returned to the city.

That's important to the story. They *ALL* returned. Don't miss that. Instead of saving their own hides, instead of saying, "Tough luck, Benjamin! Hope things work out for you. See you later!," they stuck together.

So why did Joseph, in essence, frame Benjamin? And why did he put his other brothers in this quandary? What was his reason for this test? Since the Scriptures don't specify his motive, we can't be dogmatic, but my hunch is this. I think that Joseph is giving them a reality test. Sure, they've taken some good steps, but that's because they want food. Have they really changed? Are they any different than they were 25 years prior when they thought only of themselves and abandoned another brother?

That brings us to the second thing we see in Genesis 44.

II. We see the response (14-34).

The caravan retraced its steps back to Joseph's house. Verse 14 states, "Joseph was still in the house when Judah and his brothers came in, and they threw themselves to the ground before him."

You can't help but recall Genesis 37 at this point. Remember the dreams Joseph had? Remember how he told his brothers that one day they'd bow down to him? Remember how they hated him, and scorned him, and told him, "No way! We'll never bow down before you!"

Famous last words, right? It's like the teen that says, "When I'm a parent, I'll never do to my kids what my parents did to me..." And the worker who boasts, "If I ever become the boss around here, I'll never do what's been done to us."

Those are dangerous words, "I'll never!" Be careful. You may be resisting something God intends for you. Learn from the lesson the brothers are learning. God has His way.

The brothers did bow before Joseph, in fact, four times so far (42:6; 43:26, 28; 44:14). Again, there they are, on the ground before their brother.

Joseph speaks in verse 15, “What is this you have done? Don’t you know that a man like me can find things out by divination?”

What kind of response did the brothers display? Judah is their spokesman. I see three responses displayed by Judah.

A. There was personal guilt (16). “‘What can we say to my lord?’ Judah replied. ‘What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants’ guilt. We are now my lord’s slaves—we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup.’”

Was Judah saying they were guilty of the crime of stealing the cup? I don’t think so. I think he has in mind another crime, a much greater one, the one he and his brothers committed 25 years earlier. They’ve been trying to cover it up for a quarter of a century.

But it didn’t work. They could fool their dad. They could fool themselves. But they couldn’t fool the All-knowing God who says, “Be sure your sins shall find you out.”

In essence, here’s what I think Judah is saying to Joseph. “‘What can I say? I’m in a real jam right now, but I’m not going to blame my predicament on somebody else, and I don’t think this is a case of bad luck. I think my problem is sin, specific sin, and I can hide it no longer. God has uncovered my guilt.’”

There’s the first response, personal guilt. That’s exactly where we must start in dealing with a stubborn sinful past. No more hiding. No more blameshifting. It starts right here, saying what Judah said, “‘We are guilty. We deserve the consequences.’” In this case the consequences were, “‘Make us all slaves.’”

At that point Joseph surprised Judah. Verse 17, “‘But Joseph said, ‘Far be it from me to do such a thing! Only the man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace.’”

In other words, “‘No. I’ll be just. The one who had the cup is the one who must become a slave. The rest of you may go home. You are not guilty.’”

Now the plot thickens. Had the brothers really changed? True, we’re just seen an admission of guilt (and again, I believe it’s about what they did to Joseph). But the response God desires goes further. And we see it in Judah.

First, there was personal guilt.

B. There was personal responsibility (32).

In what follows we see Judah bearing his soul. It’s time to put the past right out in the open, and he knows it. First he reflects back on the brothers initial meeting with the governor.

Verses 18-23, “‘Then Judah went up to him and said: ‘Please, my lord, let your servant speak a word to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself. ¹⁹ My lord asked his servants, ‘Do you have a father or a brother?’ ²⁰ And we answered, ‘We have an aged father, and there is a young son born to him in his old age. His brother is dead, and he is the only one of his mother’s sons left, and his father loves him.’ ²¹ ‘Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me so I can see him for myself.’ ²² And we said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father; if he leaves him, his father will die.’ ²³ But you told your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again.’”

My lord. My lord. My lord. Judah will use the title six times in this appeal. Next he shares their father's reaction.

Verses 24-29, “When we went back to your servant my father, we told him what my lord had said.²⁵ Then our father said, ‘Go back and buy a little more food.’²⁶ But we said, ‘We cannot go down. Only if our youngest brother is with us will we go. We cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’²⁷ “Your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons.²⁸ One of them went away from me, and I said, ‘He has surely been torn to pieces.’ And I have not seen him since.²⁹ If you take this one from me too and harm comes to him, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in misery.”

Now there’s a piece of information, it seems to me, that Joseph didn’t know, how his father responded that fateful day when he never came home. *Why didn’t my dad come looking for me? Here’s why. He believed an animal tore me to pieces. And why did he believe that? Now I know. That must have been the story my brothers put in his head to cover their tracks. He thinks I’ve been dead for 25 years.*

At this point, Judah brings his appeal to a climax. Verses 30-31, “So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy’s life,³¹ sees that the boy isn’t there, he will die. Your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow.”

Now stop for a moment and consider this. If you’ve been with us for the entire study of Joseph, the next words out of Judah’s mouth should shock you. It’s hard to imagine that what we’re about to hear came from the same man who devised the plot to sell his kid brother for twenty pieces of silver.

Twenty-five years ago we see a Judah who could think only of himself. He was so filled with hatred for his brother that he apparently didn’t bat an eye when he convinced his siblings to sell Joseph into slavery. And he didn’t seem to flinch when he broke his dad’s heart with his lie.

Indeed, the very next thing we read in the Bible, following this horrendous crime, is the sordid story of Judah visiting a prostitute who turned out to be his daughter in law. This is the man who said the following.

Verse 32, “Your servant guaranteed the boy’s safety to my father. I said, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life!’”

I think we’re seeing the point of Joseph’s reality test. Joseph must have wondered, “Will my brothers dump Benjamin like they dumped me into the hands of the slave traders? Have they learned how to love anyone besides themselves in the past 25 years?”

Now as he listens he can see that the Lord has changed Judah. He is different. He’s not the same man, and the offer is the evidence. “I made a promise,” he says. “I told my father I would bear the blame, and I can’t bear the thought of breaking his heart.”

But will it turn out to be just an empty promise? No. Listen to Judah’s incredible offer in verses 33-34, “Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers.³⁴ How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father.”

First there was personal guilt, then personal responsibility. Thirdly we see...

C. There was personal change (33-34). *I want to take the boy’s place. I will be your slave. I cannot stand the thought of the misery that would come on my father if Benjamin does not return home.*

And the unspoken words are...*I have seen that look before.*

When Joseph heard what Judah said, he was touched so deeply he lost his composure. Notice the very next verse (45:1), “Then Joseph could no longer control

himself before all his attendants, and he cried out..." And verse 2, "And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it."

What moved Joseph? Several things, perhaps, but a primary influence seems to be this. The Lord's purpose for this family is now one step closer to reality. *The ringleader of his brothers just passed the test.*

He *was* sorry. His repentance *was* sincere. He *was* learning to think of others. And why is that important?

Because God's plan for this family was to turn it into a nation, and through that nation to send the Savior into the world to rescue all self-centered people who will trust in Him. But if this family remains fragmented, the plan fails. Their reconciliation is vital.

Again, don't miss the parallel between the events of chapter 37 and chapter 44. In chapter 37 Judah thought only of himself, violated his brother, and tried to cover up his guilt.

But in chapter 44, Judah acknowledged his personal guilt, accepted personal responsibility for his actions, and gave evidence that he was truly a changed man. He didn't try to save his own neck. He offered to take Benjamin's place as a slave.

The God who rescues sinners from stubborn pasts was rescuing this sinner.

You say, "I need that. How does God do it?"

Here's how. We need to see something in Hebrews in the NT. I want us to see what one of Judah's descendants did. Hebrews 7:14 says, "For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah." The Messiah Jesus was in the lineage of the man we're seeing, Judah.

Now notice Hebrews 9:27-28 which reveals what this descendant of Judah did. "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

Verse 27 indicates that we have a *problem*. It's death and the certainty of coming judgment. Verse 28 shows us there is a *provision* for this problem. Christ was offered to bear the sins of many. And verse 28 concludes with a *promise*, that Christ is coming a second time to save those who are waiting for Him.

Now compare what Judah did with what his descendant did. Judah's offer was noble, yes, yet his offer was only a temporary remedy. He said to Joseph, "My life for Benjamin's." But eventually they would both die anyway.

Jesus' offer was matchless. As the song puts it, "He paid a debt He did not owe. I owed a debt I could not pay. I needed someone to wash my sins away. But now I sing a brand new song, amazing grace. Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay."

Jesus Christ provided the permanent remedy for rescuing sinners. And that brings us to our third point. In Genesis 44 we see the reality test devised by Joseph (1-13). We see the response displayed by the brothers (14-34).

III. We see vital ramifications regarding repentance.

How can you tell if someone is really dealing with their stubborn past? The answer is repentance. Jesus said you can't have salvation without repentance (Luke 15:7). He also said you can't have restoration without repentance (Luke 17:3).

But how can you tell if a person has really repented? I think Genesis 44, rather than telling us, *shows* us.

We need to give careful attention to what we've just seen. There's a common deficiency that's plaguing the church today. We don't understand and practice repentance.

What is biblical repentance? Let's talk first about what it's *not*.

A. Here's what biblical repentance is *not*. Three things. First...

1. *It's not just saying, "I'm sorry."* To say I'm sorry is merely expressing one's emotion. We ought to feel sorry when we have sinned, and appropriate, but repentance is more than an emotional response.

2. *It's not merely feeling badly about what you did.* Judas Iscariot felt badly, so badly, in fact, that he took his own life. But Judas did not repent.

3. *It's not doing penance.* In the 1500s the Council of Trent accepted penance as one of the seven sacraments. The Baltimore Catechism defines as follows, "Penance is the sacrament by which sins committed after baptism are forgiven through the absolution of the priest."⁴

In a Roman Catholic training book, *Instructions for Non-Catholics*, we read, "In the sacrament of penance, God gives the priest the power to bring sinners back into the state of grace and to prevent them from falling into the abyss of hell. Moreover, after confession some temporal punishment due to sin generally remains, and some of this punishment is taken away in the penance (prayers) the priest gives you to say. You should perform other acts of penance also so that you can make up for the temporal punishment due to sin and to avoid a long stay in purgatory. The Church suggests to us these forms of penance: prayer, fasting, giving alms in the name of Christ, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, the patient sufferings of the ills of life, and the gaining of indulgences."⁵

That is not biblical repentance and that is not how to deal with past sin. There is no biblical basis for this belief about penance. It comes from church tradition, not Scripture.

B. Here's what biblical repentance is. Biblical repentance is a gift from God, something that God enables a person to do.

Acts 5:31 (ESV) "God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

Acts 11:18 (ESV) "When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'"

Romans 2:4 "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"

2 Tim 2:25 "Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."

To express biblical repentance we must do the following.

1. *I must admit two things.*

a. Admit that what I did was *wrong* in God's eyes.

b. Admit that I have no intention of doing it again.

A key question is, given the opportunity, would I do it again? If I have truly repented, the answer by God's grace is *no*. It's not just the consequences of the sin I disdain. It's the act itself. It's the offense I have committed against God.

⁴ From *Roman Catholicism*, L. Boetner, p. 254.

⁵ P. 95. Quote taken from Boetner, pp. 254-5.

I saw a great example my junior year in college. I was going to be an RA in one of the men's dorms. I didn't have a roommate heading into the year, so the dean assigned me one. It ended up being someone I'd never met before. I found out he'd been expelled the previous year. I wondered what I was getting into.

Then I met him. Do you know what I discovered? He had repented. He had genuinely admitted he had done wrong. In fact, he wanted to grow.

I asked him if he'd like to read the Bible and pray with me before we went to bed at night. "Sure!" he responded, for yes, he had made some sinful choices the previous year, but the past was in the past. He had *repented*.

When I repent I must admit two things, one, that what I did was wrong in God's eyes and, two, I have no intention of doing it again. But not just admit.

2. I must accept two things.

a. Accept personal responsibility. Repentance isn't saying, "Well, I guess it was a dumb thing I did, but after what so-and-so did to me, I couldn't help it."

There's no blameshifting in repentance. To the contrary, there's an acceptance of personal responsibility.

Paul made this clear in 2 Corinthians 7:10-11, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."¹¹ See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter."

So when I repent, I accept personal responsibility. But just taking responsibility doesn't change the past. How can I break free from my stubborn past? I must accept something else.

b. Accept God's unmerited pardon through Christ. Right here is why the Joseph story is in the Bible, not primarily to give us an example, although Joseph does that in many ways, but to show us the amazing extent to which God went to save sinners like us from our stubborn past.

He worked through Joseph, to save his brothers, and thus save a family, and then a nation, through whom the Savior would come, who would save undeserving people from every nation, language, and tribe.

2 Corinthians 5:21 "God made Him who had no sin to be made sin for us."

Romans 3:23-26 "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us..."

E.g.—

The Bottom Line: Divine grace is more than sufficient for a stubborn past.

I urge you to take to heart the need for biblical repentance. Like Judah did.

By the way, what happened to Judah and the other brothers? Did Joseph accept Judah's offer to trade places with Benjamin? The Lord willing, we'll find out next time.