

Cindy Cottone

The Bible Corner



Judah's promise, Part I

It was still dark as Judah made his way out to feed the livestock. He had risen much earlier than necessary, but last night he hadn't slept at all. The sadness and guilt of his past foolishness had weighed heavily on his mind. Many years had passed since he and his brothers had sold Joseph to the Ishmaelite traders. To this day, he had never been able to tell his elderly father, Jacob. It might kill him if he knew that his son had been lost because of his own brothers. And today, he must somehow convince Jacob to risk losing another son.

Judah reached for the grain. There was barely enough for this day's feeding. He performed his simple task with a great deal of care. Then, just before leaving, he turned to the animals and said, "Eat hearty, my friends. This will be your last meal for a long time."

Judah found Jacob sitting quietly by himself. "Good morning, father," he said as he entered the house.

"Good morning, son," Jacob replied. "You're up early this morning."

The two of them talked about unimportant things for awhile. Then Judah suddenly asked, "Father, do you love me?"

"What kind of question is that?" Jacob replied. "Of course I love you."

"Do you love some of your sons more than the others?" Judah persisted.

"Judah, such questions so early in the morning! Where is all this coming from?"

"Father, it's just that I know how you always felt about Joseph," answered Judah. "Benjamin is so like Joseph."

"Why do you bring this all up now?" "Because our grain is gone," Judah began. "Our food supply will last only a few more days."

"So, go buy more grain," Jacob advised. "If you need money, I'll give that to you."

"Father, you know that we cannot go back to Egypt without Benjamin. The prime minister ordered us to bring our younger brother back with us."

Jacob's face remained firmly set against such a plan, and he offered no reply.

"Even now, Simeon waits for us in an Egyptian prison," Judah pleaded. "Have you forgotten about this son?"

"I have forgotten nothing!" shouted Jacob, his face flushed with color. "Joseph is dead. Simeon is in a foreigner's prison, and now you want me to risk losing Benjamin?"

"Father, Judah is right," said Benjamin, who had stood by the door listening all this time. "You must allow me to go with my brothers, or we will all die of starvation soon."

No one said anything for a few moments. Then Judah drew near to his father and said, "I pledge to you, Father, my own life in this matter. I promise that Benjamin will return to you. If something happens, let me bear this blame forever."

So at last Jacob relented and gave permission. The next day, he instructed his sons, "Take double money and gifts to the prime minister. Pay for the grain from last time when the mistake was made. Perhaps

the prime minister will look kindly on our family and allow you to return quickly." Then he hugged each of his 11 sons and said, "May God go with you all."

In a few days, all 11 brothers were gathered before the prime minister. Joseph told his household manager to take them to his own home and prepare a feast for them. None of his brothers understood what was happening. "This man intends to make us all his slaves," one of them concluded. "We are going to be punished because of the money that was placed in our grain sacks last time."

But to everyone's surprise, a short time later, Simeon was brought in, and they were all told to sit down at a table. Joseph told his staff to serve them a very fine meal.

It was Judah who first noticed something strange. "Don't you think it is rather odd that we have been seated here in the order of our ages, from the oldest to the youngest?" he remarked. "How could anyone have known that?" His brothers all told Judah not to worry, because they were having such a good time. But Judah remained nervous and ate little of the meal.

It wasn't until they were safely on the road back to Canaan that Judah started to feel better. "Simeon, it is good to see you," Judah said. "Were you treated badly in prison?"

"No, not at all," Simeon admitted. "The prime minister appointed someone from his own staff to wait on me. I was served very fine food."

"This whole matter is certainly hard to understand," Judah said. "But at least we will have good news for Father." Then he turned to Benjamin and smiled, "It looks as though I've kept my promise to Father."

But a short time later, Judah saw someone coming after them in the distance. A feeling of dread rose deep inside him when he recognized the man as Joseph's household manager.

"Stop, you scoundrels!" he yelled as he came upon them. "How dare you steal from my master after he was so good to you!"

"What do you mean?" Judah asked. "We are honest men. We have stolen nothing."

"One of you has stolen my master's finest silver drinking cup," he insisted. "Now who is it?"

"Search all of us, and I assure you, you'll find nothing," Judah replied. Then as if to emphasize the point, he added, "If you find a thief among us, let that man die. The rest of us can be punished, too, by becoming slaves for your master."

"There is no need for anyone to die," Joseph's manager said, softening a bit. "But the guilty man will surely pay for his wickedness and come back with me to be my master's slave."

Judah was so certain of their innocence that one by one, from the oldest brother on down, he helped unload each grain sack so that it could be searched. When they brought down Benjamin's sack, there on the very top, was the silver cup.

"No," Judah cried, "there has been some mistake! Benjamin would never steal! Please," he begged, "allow us all to return to your master and speak to him."

So for a third time, Jacob's sons returned to Egypt and fell down before Joseph, the prime minister, and waited.

For discussion:

- 1) Why did Judah feel so guilty and sad about his past?
- 2) What did Judah promise to his father?
- 3) Why did Joseph have his silver drinking placed in Benjamin's grain sack?

For further reading:

The story of Judah's promise to Jacob is found in Genesis, Chapter 43 - 44:14.

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