



# LEADERS OF RECONCILIATION

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 43:1-34

39th Message

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In our last study in the lives of the patriarchs we left our story of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers, deadlocked in a stalemate between a son in Egypt and a father in Canaan. By means of a famine, God had faithfully set the stage to bring this family together. But one was missing; it was Benjamin, the youngest. Joseph had told his brothers that if they wanted to see their brother Simeon again, they all had to return, together with their youngest brother, Benjamin. But when they returned home, their father Jacob became consumed by self-pity. He lacked the eyes of faith to see what God was doing, and so brought the process to an abrupt halt, refusing to allow Benjamin to return to Egypt with them. Who in this family will step forward to break the impasse? Who will be the human instrument to fulfill Joseph's dreams and reunite his shattered family? And how will he do it? When the head of the home refuses to lead spiritually, what can the children do? Do they resort to deception, or are there any cards of "truth" left to play to complete the process of reconciliation? Our story is full of surprises, both in the instrument that God uses, and his methods. The text is a masterpiece of God's grace in the process of reconciliation. It serves as a model for how to be a leader for reconciliation, even when we haven't been given the "authoritative" role.

## I. Judah "wrestles" with His Father Jacob (43:1-14)

### A. Jacob directs his sons to get food (43:1-2)

**Now the famine was severe in the land. So it came about when they had finished eating the grain which they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, "Go back, buy us a little food." (43:1-2, NASB)**

For months, no one was able to break the impasse after Jacob's refusal to allow Benjamin to return to Egypt at Joseph's request. But eventually, all the grain was consumed. Jacob was forced to break the silence by suggesting to the brothers that they go back to Egypt to "buy us a little food." Jacob's suggestion was a reluctant request, voiced out of the sheer necessity for survival. He couched it in a whisper, hoping to achieve success without confronting any of the family issues at hand. This father refuses to face the facts. But fortunately for the clan, one son, Judah, will not allow his father to live in denial.

### B. Judah's first approach (43:3-5)

**Judah spoke to him, however, saying, "The man solemnly warned us, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' If you send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. But if you do not send him, we will not go down; for the man said to us, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.'" (43:3-5)**

Judah, the realist, lays out the unvarnished facts. He does so brilliantly and forcefully, yet respectfully, without violating Jacob's role as head of the home. Though Jacob's word may hold weight in Canaan, Judah explains that in Egypt it is a different story. In that place it is the anonymous "man" who

has all the authority. Judah reminds his father that this man had "solemnly warned" (with legal severity) that without Benjamin they would not see his face. The man's words could certainly be taken to imply that buying more food was out of the question. Judah refuses to obey his father unless Jacob complies with the conditions set by the Egyptian. How can sons obey their father when his plan is doomed to failure by his refusal to look at the facts? This may suggest that in some situations it can be a loving act for children to force their parents to face reality, even though the process can be painful. In this situation, blind obedience would have helped no one.

### C. Israel indulges his self-pity (43:6)

**Then Israel said, "Why did you treat me so badly by telling the man whether you still had another brother?" (43:6)**

Instead of facing the facts, Jacob still is self-consumed in his personal pity party. Rather than trying to lead his family forward through prayer and dependence on God, he holds onto his pain and nurses it through blame. He chides his sons for placing "him" in this terrible predicament (as if the whole predicament centered around him) by mentioning the fact that they had a brother.

### D. Judah's second approach (43:7-10)

**But they said, "The man questioned particularly about us and our relatives, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' So we answered his questions. Could we possibly know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down?'" (43:7)**

The brothers collectively plead their innocence, explaining that they had answered truthfully Joseph's pointed questions (the Hebrew doubles the verb *sha'al*, "to ask," for emphasis). But unfortunately, merely "replaying the tapes" doesn't help Jacob break out of his melancholy and act to lead his family spiritually. Will this family survive? At this point, the brave Judah, in an unprecedented move of raw courage, breaks the deadlock.

**Judah said to his father Israel, "Send the lad with me and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, we as well as you and our little ones. I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame before you forever. For if we had not delayed, surely by now we could have returned twice." (43:8-10)**

Unable to get his father to act by addressing the facts, Judah takes another tack, by addressing his pain. The affectionate language that he chooses ("the lad," "our little ones") shows empathy for his father's heart and strikes a resonate chord with his purpose ("that we may live and not die"). Once Judah has established that his concerns are identical with his father's, he then guarantees the results, using a legally binding vow, and places his family fortune on the line. Judah is assuming total responsibility for Benjamin's safe re-

turn. He will take all the blame if he fails. How different this is from Reuben's earlier rash vow (42:37)! An how different from the time Judah sold his brother for money, and later threw his identity away as a "pledge" to a prostitute (38:17-18)! Now he "pledges" his family fortune and reputation for the life of his brother.

Finally, Judah prods his reluctant father into action by stressing the urgency of the situation. Had they not delayed they could have been to Egypt and returned twice by now. This word sows the seed of success in his father's imagination.

#### E. Israel grants permission (43:11-14)

**Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: take some of the best products of the land in your bags, and carry down to the man as a present, a little balm and a little honey, aromatic gum and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds. Take double the money in your hand, and take back in your hand the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks; perhaps it was a mistake. Take your brother also, and arise, return to the man; and may God Almighty grant you compassion in the sight of the man, so that he may release to you your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved." (43:11-14)**

Judah's leadership pays off as he breaks the reluctant Jacob out of his spiritual paralysis. But notice, not only does Jacob grant permission ("if so then do this"), but it also seems that he is in a healthier mental state, in which he is able to engage his imagination once again. Judah's courageous example has enabled Jacob to think outside the narrow walls of "self" back to the horizons of "faith." Judah now thinks that perhaps the money was just a "mistake." Perhaps God really is in control. Perhaps he can protect sons born in the covenant by moving the hearts of men. In this new state of mind, Jacob begins to think creatively. He suggests giving the "man" a "present" (*minhah* is a gift, at times used as tribute to a king) of the very best of the land to show their appreciation. Ironically, three of these terms (balm, aromatic gum, and myrrh) that he lists are identical to "the export goods carried by the Ishmaelite traders (37:25) who bought Joseph from the brothers and sold him as a slave in Egypt."<sup>1</sup> Behind Jacob's inspired thinking, the hand of God is orchestrating restitution and healing.

Once Jacob has granted permission he sends his sons to Egypt, with God's blessing as the all-powerful One who keeps his promises (*El Shaddai*, Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11). Although Jacob isn't thoroughly optimistic with regard to the outcome, at least he is resigned to God's will should the worst happen ("If I am bereaved...I am bereaved"). Melancholic individuals rarely admit they are fully optimistic, even when they have faith, lest they completely remove themselves from the center of concern.

This breakthrough by Judah is absolutely remarkable. It should serve as an example to all those "under" authority (children, wives, young men, employees, etc.) of the powerful influence that their faith and leadership can exert on those who are "over" them. With the family's survival at stake, Judah could not wait for his father to act.

## II. A Feast with Joseph in Egypt (43:15-34)

### A. Joseph makes preparations for the feast (43:15-17)

**So the men took this present [*minhah*], and they took double the money in their hand, and Benjamin; then they arose and went down to Egypt and stood before Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to his**

**house steward, "Bring the men into the house, and slay an animal and make ready; for the men are to dine with me at noon." So the man did as Joseph said, and brought the men to Joseph's house. (43:15-17)**

The brothers set off to Egypt again, this time taking along the youngest and most adored son, Benjamin. As both groups converge, each one brings a gift(s) in anticipation of honoring the other party. Joseph's brothers bring a generous collection from the best produce of the land of Canaan<sup>2</sup> and double the money that Joseph had secretly returned to them; while Joseph has his servant prepare the king's quarters for a lavish banquet fit for royalty. This suggests that the real work of reconciliation occurred long before the actual meeting. God has been at work in both parties. Twelve years in prison had softened Joseph with humility; three days in prison had brought to light twelve years of buried guilt for the brothers. If reconciliation is coerced before its time, and God has not had a chance to work in both parties, it can result in disaster. Once again we find that patience is required in the process of reconciliation.

For Joseph and his family, this long-awaited reunion will occur at noon, when the light of the sun is brightest.

### B. The brothers initiate the truth about the money (43:18-23)

**Now the men were afraid, because they were brought to Joseph's house; and they said, "It is because of the money that was returned in our sacks the first time that we are being brought in, that he may seek occasion against us and fall upon us, and take us for slaves with our donkeys." (43:18)**

As the brothers are brought to Joseph's house they are seized by fear. They surmise that they have been summoned before the king because of the money that was secretly returned. On their first visit they were met with hostility; now things appear all too friendly. Alter suggests, "For the ten Hebrew men to go into Joseph's house is a momentous thing, politically and thematically. Since they are aware that it is not customary for foreigners who have come to buy grain to be introduced into the residence of the viceroy, they are afraid it may be a trap. Their last encounter with Joseph in Canaan, more than two decades earlier, was in an open field, where he was entirely in their power. Now, crossing the threshold of his house, they will be entirely in his power."<sup>3</sup> They speculate that this summons is for their sentencing as slaves, as they are about to lose everything, including their donkeys! I wonder if this mention of the donkeys is a little comic relief by the narrator to break the tension.

**So they came near to Joseph's house steward, and spoke to him at the entrance of the house, and said, "Oh, my lord, we indeed came down the first time to buy food, and it came about when we came to the lodging place, that we opened our sacks, and behold, each man's money was in the mouth of his sack, our money in full. So we have brought it back in our hand. We have also brought down other money in our hand to buy food; we do not know who put our money in our sacks." (43:19-22)**

Unable to bear the stress any longer, the brothers take the initiative to speak the truth with Joseph's steward concerning the money. What a change! Twenty years earlier, they didn't even have the courage to speak to their father about the facts (37:31-32). Now instead of deception, their words ring true regarding both their deeds and their motives. The steward quickly reassures them that all is well (lit. "shalom").

**He said, "Be at ease, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money." Then he brought Simeon out to them.**

(43:23)

The steward sets them at ease with the words, "Shalom, do not fear," and follows this by bringing Simeon to them. Couched between his word of peace and the sight of their brother is the man's surprising explanation that it was the God of Israel who had been orchestrating these events. What strange words to come from the mouth of an Egyptian! But stranger things still are to follow.

### C. Mutual hospitality (43:24-25)

**Then the man brought the men into Joseph's house and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their donkeys fodder. So they prepared the present for Joseph's coming at noon; for they had heard that they were to eat a meal there. (43:24-25)**

Once Joseph's brothers are relieved by both word and deed, the steward treats them hospitably, inviting them to wash, and to feed their donkeys. They then prepare and arrange their gift to Joseph. Surprisingly, the gift is no longer needed to secure his favor, but will now be used to express their honor and appreciation. After twenty-two years the stage is set for Joseph's dreams to be fulfilled.

### D. Joseph seeks more truth concerning his family (43:26-31)

**When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present which was in their hand and bowed to the ground before him. Then he asked them about their welfare [lit. "shalom"], and said, "Is your old father well [lit. "shalom"], of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" They said, "Your servant our father is well [lit. "shalom"]; he is still alive." They bowed down in homage. (43:26-28)**

Upon entering, Joseph is greeted by their gifts and their submission (they "bowed to the ground"). He is now in the presence of all his brothers, including Benjamin, his dreams fulfilled at last. Yet it is intriguing that he seems most captivated, not by the fulfillment of his dream, or their gift, but by news of his father. Thus he probes his brothers for more information concerning the "well being" (lit. "shalom," used three times in the dialogue) of their father. They respond that he is well and "still alive." Why is a foreign "king" so interested in their personal family history? Joseph probes further.

**As he lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, he said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me?" And he said, "May God be gracious to you, my son." (43:29)**

The last time Joseph beheld Benjamin, his brother was but a little boy. Now he is a young adult, probably in his mid- to late-twenties. With carefully measured words, Joseph gives Benjamin the most intimate greeting possible, with deep familial and spiritual overtones, "May God be gracious to you, my son." The sight of his brother is too much for him to bear.

**Joseph hurried out for he was deeply stirred over 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 he controlled himself and said, "Serve the meal." (43:30-31)**

Joseph's balancing act, having to wear two different hats at one party, is becoming extremely difficult. On the one hand he is playing the role of the Egyptian "lord" who holds all the power over these ten "unknown" Hebrew brothers. On the other hand he is a brother and guest of honor at a feast of reconciliation that God is orchestrating on his behalf. It is a difficult thing to play the one role and not enter into the other. Up until now, Joseph has maintained his control, but the sight of Benjamin pushed his emotions over the edge. He rushed out

and "sought a place to weep." Waltke comments, "Underneath the cloak of Egyptian appearance, his love for his family throbs."<sup>4</sup> This tells us that for all his exaltation in Egypt, Joseph never forgot his true identity.

Have you ever needed to find a place to weep in private because you were overwhelmed by the grace of God at work, and yet found it difficult to enter fully enter in, as you were presiding in a leadership role? Often I have been overwhelmed as I watched the grace of God at work in others, and yet I had to suppress my emotions in order to play the role of "host." I had to process those emotions in another "place," rather than burying them in "holy" activity.

Once Joseph had given full vent to his tears, he washed his face and "took control"<sup>5</sup> of his emotions once again. He reenters the chamber for the historic noon meal. The last time they ate together as brothers, Joseph was pleading to them from a pit; now he will serve them like royalty.

### E. The feast: segregation to integration (43:32-34)

**So they served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is loathsome to the Egyptians. Now they were seated before him, the first-born according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, and the men looked at one another in astonishment. He took portions to them from his own table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they feasted and drank freely with him. (43:32-34)**

The protocol for the meal begins normally. The Egyptians, unlike the Canaanites, felt culturally superior to both the Hebrews' occupation ("shepherds") and their religion, and thus observed strict segregation.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, at this banquet no one eats together. The king eats by himself; his Egyptian servants by themselves; and the ten Hebrews by themselves. But the normality doesn't last long. Just as the brothers take their places according to Joseph's direction, they are awestruck by the fact that their seating assignments had been arranged according to their birth order. Then, adding to their amazement, Joseph breaks protocol and serves them from his own table. He serves Benjamin five times the portions of his brothers, in a startling reminder of the preferential treatment shown to Joseph by his father. Joseph will now see if his brothers will be able to enjoy this feast in the atmosphere of favoritism.

That they feasted freely is clear, for the Hebrew reads literally, "they drank and got drunk with him." This expression, rather than being negative ("being drunk") can also mean, "they drank and became fully content,"<sup>7</sup> which better fits the context. So the narrator ends this scene on a note of joyous celebration. Everyone's guard is down—at least almost everyone. Tensions are removed, and a rare joy is released that fills the air with a consummate bliss. The celebration fills both parties with a renewed vitality verging on elation. And yet for Joseph, still hidden behind his Egyptian mask, it signaled the anticipation of even more to follow, for the feast of reconciliation was not complete without his father.

This concludes the second journey of Joseph's brothers to Egypt, and with it we have uncovered more layers of the process of the reconciliation. The brothers have come a long way and risked a lot in their venture into Egypt. A story that began with a famine ends with a feast, and not just any feast but a family reunion that verges on complete restoration. As we reflect on this marvelous journey we can't help but think of the two brothers who made it all possible by becoming leaders of reconciliation. Their lives are to be models for us: one of God's grace, the other of Christ himself.

### III. Leaders of Reconciliation

#### A. Judah, an example of the grace of God

Our text began in a stalemate because of a father who refused to look beyond his personal sorrow and confront reality by faith. In that situation a leader is needed to confront the father, without violating his role as head of the family. Surprisingly, Judah is the one who rises to the occasion.

Judah's life is a remarkable testimony to the grace of God. God chose a man who once sold his brother for profit, turning a deaf ear to his pleas from the pit; a man who was willing to use deception as a cover for his guilty past; a man who abandoned his family of faith for Canaanite fellowship, and forsook his God by intermarrying with the Canaanites. And at the lowest point in his life he threw away his identity and "name" for a brief burst of sexual pleasure with a young woman he thought was a "cult" prostitute. It would be hard to think of a lower example of human depravity than this fornicating murderer. Yet from that low estate God was able to turn him around and transform him into a man with wisdom to break the deadlock in this family.

If we ask what it was that turned Judah around, the answer is, the courage of his Canaanite daughter-in-law, Tamar. Perhaps she is the real heroine behind the re-making of this leader. By courageously risking her life for family fidelity (when no one else in this family would), and then exposing his sin, she broke his downward spiral of sin. This issued in the first public confession of sin by a patriarch ("She is righteous, not I," 38:26).<sup>8</sup> Though we may fault Tamar's deceptive tactics, her motive was loyalty to covenant. God rewarded her by giving her twins and placing her in the Messianic line (Matt 1:3). Perhaps it was her example of confronting male leadership that gave Judah the courage to confront his father, who was paralyzed by self-pity. But Judah advances beyond her methods. Rather than resorting to deception, he confronts his father with the naked truth. When that failed to move the patriarch, he further urged him with self-sacrifice, coupled with empathy. Where did these traits come from? I wonder if his encounter with his daughter-in-law played a major role in this.

Judah therefore is an example of the grace of God that can transform even the worst of sinners into effective leaders if they are willing to openly confront their sin (as opposed to Reuben, who never dealt with his sexual sin and remained ineffective all his days). Both Judah and Tamar should be an encouragement to those who are not in positions of leadership and yet can play vital roles in this holy work.

#### B. Joseph, a type of Christ and the heart of God

If Judah is the courageous leader who breaks the human deadlock, it is Joseph who has the even more difficult task of playing dual roles simultaneously. He plays the lead role of a dispassionate foreign king who possesses sovereign power and uncanny knowledge to test the brothers; but he is also a son and a brother with tender emotions. If Judah models the grace of God that transforms human leaders, Joseph is a type of Christ modeling the heart of God in the process of reconciliation.

In the gospels we find the Joseph story retold in the person of Christ. Christ is the one to whom everyone goes to find real

"bread" (John 6:32). He is one who holds banquets on hill-sides (Mark 6:41), and gives crumbs to widows (Mark 7:28). The banquet is lavish, with no entrance fee save the confession of sin. He himself requires no "present" (*minhah*), for he himself provides the *minhah*. His invitation goes out to all, yet he coerces no one, so for many he must wait with endless patience. And if one from the family flock is missing, like Joseph, he postpones the feast and leaves the ninety-nine in search of the one (Matt 18:12).

And his feasts are filled with controversy, too. He breaks cultural and religious norms by eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16). He places the gentile right beside the Jew, the rich next to the poor. But, most amazingly, for all his sovereign power he finds it difficult to remain distant from us, and, like Joseph, he weeps (Hos 11:8).<sup>9</sup> When he sees a young son or daughter returning home, so difficult is it for him to play the role of host, he must dismiss himself and weep (Luke 15:7). That is how much he loves you. You are priceless to him. The joy of your safe return means far more to him than the pain and agony of his slavery on the tree. So he invites you to eat and drink freely with him.

*"But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate."* (Luke 15:22-24)

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1. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 253.

2. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 554, notes that the gift of honey would be an especially honoring gift: "An Egyptian would have prized it as a delightful sweet during a famine."

3. Alter, *Genesis*, 255.

4. Waltke, *Genesis*, 556.

5. "Took control" – this term comes from the verbal root *'apaq*, meaning, "to pull oneself together, gain composure, regain self-control." The noun derived from this root, *'apiyq*, is used of a channel cut out of the rock or a stream bed to confine waters.

6. Waltke, *Genesis*, 556, suggests that this may be why the "iron furnace" of Egypt was necessary: "Herein lies a clue to the rationale for the Egyptian sojourn. Whereas the Canaanites are willing to integrate and absorb the sons of Israel, the Egyptians hold them in contempt. Judah's intermarriage with the Canaanites in Genesis 38 shows the danger that syncretistic Canaanites present to the embryonic family. The Egyptian segregated culture guarantees that the embryonic nation can develop into a great nation within their borders."

7. This is Walter Brown's translation, "Noah: Sot or Saint," in J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund, eds., *The Way of Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 37.

8. Most translations render Judah's confession as a comparison, "She is more righteous than I," but, as both Fokkelman and Waltke point out, it is better translated as a comparison of exclusion, "She is righteous, not I." Waltke, *Genesis*, 513.

9. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 340, notes that the term used for Joseph's affections being "warm" is the same term used for "Yahweh's passion for Israel."