

Leaders of Reconciliation

Genesis 43:1-34

When wounds slice deep and cut family members off from one another, the work of reconciliation becomes extremely difficult. Last week 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. God had faithfully set the stage through a famine to bring this family together, but one brother was missing: the youngest, Benjamin. Joseph had told his brothers if they wanted to see their brother Simeon again, they all had to return with Benjamin. But when the brothers returned home, their father, Jacob, was so consumed by self-pity, he had no eyes of faith to see what God was doing and brought the process to an abrupt halt.

The question that emerges is, who in this family can step up and break the impasse? Who will be the human instrument to fulfill Joseph's dreams and reunite this torn family? And how will he do it? When the head of the home refuses to lead spiritually, what can children do? Do they resort to deception, or are there any cards of "truth" left to play? Our story is full of surprises, both in the instrument and the methods God uses. The text is a masterpiece of God's grace in the process of reconciliation and models how to be a leader for reconciliation, even when you haven't been given the "authoritative" role.

I. Family Negotiations to Return to Egypt (43:1-14)

A. Jacob directs his sons to get food

43:1-2

1 Now the famine was severe in the land. 2 And when they had eaten the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go again, buy us a little food." (Gen 43:1-2 ESV)

For months no one was able break the impasse after Jacob refused to let Benjamin return to Egypt. But as time passed, all the grain was consumed, forcing Jacob to break the silence by suggesting the brothers return to Egypt to "*buy us a little food.*" It was one of those reluctant requests voiced out of sheer necessity of survival and couched in a whisper, hoping to achieve success without confronting the family issues. Jacob refuses to face the facts, but fortunately for this family, there is one son who will not allow his father to live in denial. It is Judah.

B. Judah's first approach: Addressing the facts (43:3-5)

3 But Judah said to him, "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' 4 If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. 5 But if you will 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, puts all the facts back on the table. He does so brilliantly, forcefully, yet respectfully without violating Jacob's role as head of the home. Though Jacob's word may have weight in Canaan, he explains that in Egypt it is a different story. There is the anonymous "*man*" who has all the authority. And he reminds his father that this man "*warned*" them in no uncertain terms that, without Benjamin, they would not see his face, which certainly means buying more food is out of the question.

Judah refuses to obey his father unless his father complies with the conditions set by the Egyptian. How can the sons obey their father when his plan is doomed to failure because he refuses to accept the facts? In some situations it can be a loving act for children to force their parents to face the facts, even though the process can be painful. To blindly obey would have helped no one in this situation.

C. Israel indulges his self-pity (43:6-7)

6 Israel said, "Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?" 7 They replied, "The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Do you have another brother?' What we told him was in answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down'?" (43:6-7)

Jacob still appears consumed by his personal pity party. Rather than trying to lead his family through prayer and dependence on God, he clings to 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.

The brothers plead their innocence, explaining that they truthfully answered Joseph's pointed questions, but unfortunately merely "replaying the tapes" doesn't help their father break out of his melancholy to spiritually lead his family. The tension

mounts as we wonder if this family will survive. At this point Judah courageously steps up to the plate and, in an unprecedented move of raw courage, breaks the deadlock.

D. Judah's second approach: Addressing his pain (43:8-10)

8 And Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. 9 I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. 10 If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice." (43:8-10)

Since Judah was unable to get his father to act by addressing the facts, he tries addressing his pain. The affectionate language he chooses ("*the lad...our little ones*") shows empathy for his father's heart and strikes a chord with his purpose ("*that we may live and not die*"). Once he has established that his **concerns** are identical with his father's, he **guarantees** the results and places his family fortune on the line. Judah is assuming total responsibility for Benjamin's safe return and will take all the blame if he fails. How different this is from Reuben's earlier rash vow (42:37). And how different from the time he 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, he prods his reluctant father into action by stressing the urgency of the situation: Had they not delayed, they could have gone to Egypt and returned twice by now. This sows the seed of success into his father's imagination.

E. Permission granted (43:11-14)

11 Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds. 12 Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks. Perhaps it was an oversight. 13 Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man. 14 May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back 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 and he is able to break the reluctant Jacob out of his spiritual paralysis, to think outside the narrow walls of "self" and back into the horizons of "faith." Perhaps, he now thinks, the money was just a "mistake," perhaps God really is in control and can protect sons born in the covenant by moving the hearts of men. In this new state of mind, Jacob can now think creatively and suggests they give the "man" a "present" of the best of the land to show appreciation. Ironically, three of these goods (*balm, aromatic gum and myrrh*) 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."¹ Thus behind Jacob's inspired thinking, we can see the hand of God orchestrating restitution and healing.

Once Jacob grants 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). And though he isn't thoroughly optimistic of the outcome, he is at least resigned to God's will if the worst happens ("*If I am bereaved...I am bereaved*"). Melancholy individuals seldom want to admit they are fully optimistic, even when they have faith, lest they remove themselves from the center of concern.

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

II. Introductions to the Feast (43:15-23)

A. To parties meet...each with gifts (43:15-17)

15 So the men took this present ("*minhah*"), and they took double the money with them, and Benjamin. They arose and went down to Egypt and stood before Joseph. 16 When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon." 17 The man did as Joseph told him and brought the men to Joseph's house. (43:15-17)

The brothers are once again off to Egypt with the youngest and most adored son, Benjamin, in tow. As both groups converge each one brings a gift in anticipation of honoring the other party. Joseph's brothers bring a generous collection from the best products of the land of Canaan,² plus 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. Both parties are attempting to build trust, by demonstrating that they are eager to contribute to each other's well-being.

This suggests that the real work of reconciliation happens long before the actual meeting takes place. God has been long at work in both parties. For Joseph it was twelve years in prison that softened him with humility; for the brothers, three days in prison illuminated twelve years of buried guilt. If reconciliation is coerced before God has had a chance to work in both parties, it can result in disaster.

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

B. The brothers confess their fears (43:18)

18 And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph's house, and they said, "It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may assault us and fall upon us to make us servants and seize our donkeys." (43:18)

As the brothers are brought to Joseph's house they are seized by **fear**. They surmise that they have 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 and they suspect it may be a trap to enslave them and seize their precious donkeys!

C. The brothers prove their honesty (43:19-22)

19 So they went up to the steward of Joseph's house and spoke with him at the door of the house, 20 and said,

"Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food. 21 And when we came to the lodging place we opened our sacks, and there was each man's money in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight. So we have brought it again with us, 22 and we have brought other money down with us 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 come clean concerning the money with Joseph's steward. Twenty years earlier they didn't have the courage to tell their father the truth about what they did to their brother. Now their words ring as true as a church bell.

D. Joseph's steward alleviates their fears (43:23)

23 He replied,

**"Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God, the God of your father
has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money."**

Then he brought Simeon out to them. (43:23)

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

III. A Family Feast (43:24-34)

A. Preparations for the feast (43:24-25)

24 And when the man had brought the men into Joseph's house and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and when he had given their donkeys fodder, 25 they prepared the present for Joseph's coming at noon, for they heard that they should eat bread there. (43:24-25)

Once Joseph's brothers are relieved, the steward shows genuine hospitality by inviting them to wash and feed their donkeys. Then they prepared and arranged their gift for Joseph, a gift that was surprisingly no longer needed to secure his favor, but will now express their honor and appreciation. After twenty years, the stage is set for Joseph's dream to be fulfilled.

B. Joseph inquiries about his father (43:26-28)

26 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.

27 And he inquired about their welfare and said,

"Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke?

Is he still alive?"

28 They said,

"Your servant our father is well; he is still alive."

And they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. (43:26-28)

When Joseph arrived, he received their gifts and their submission (they "*bowed to the ground*"). After twenty years Joseph is now in the presence of all his brothers,

including Benjamin, his dreams fulfilled. Yet what intrigues me is that Joseph seems most captivated, not by the fulfillment of his dream, or their gift, but news of his father. Thus he probes his brothers for more information concerning their father's "well being" (lit. "*shalom*," used three times in the dialogue). They respond that their father is alive and well. We can only imagine them wondering why a foreign "*king*" is so interested in their personal family history? Joseph probes further.

C. Joseph sees Benjamin (43:29)

29 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!" (43:29)

The last time Joseph laid eyes on Benjamin he was but an infant. Now he is a young adult, probably in his late twenties, bowing before him. With 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 Joseph to bear.

D. Joseph gives place to his emotions (43:30-31)

30 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. 31 Then he washed his face and came out. And controlling himself he said, "Serve the food." (43:30-31)

Wearing two different hats at one party is getting 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 orchestrated by God. Until now Joseph has maintained his control, but the sight of Benjamin pushes his emotions over the edge and he rushes out to weep.

Waltke comments that, "Underneath the cloak of Egyptian appearance, his love for his family throbs,"³ which shows us that for all his exaltation in Egypt, Joseph never forgot his true identity. Once Joseph releases his tears, he washes his face, "takes control"⁴ of his emotions and 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. A family united (43:32-34)

32 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. 33 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. 34 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. (43:32-34)

The protocol for the meal begins as expected with strict segregation by class and race. The king eats by himself, his Egyptian servants eat by themselves, and the ten Hebrews eat 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 have been arranged according to their birth order. To add to their amazement, Joseph breaks protocol and serves them from his own table. And when he comes to Benjamin he gives him five times the portion of his brothers, a startling reminder of the preferential treatment shown to Joseph by his father. Now Joseph will see if his brothers can enjoy this feast in the atmosphere of favoritism.

That they did feast 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,"⁵ which better fits the context. The scene ends on a note of joyous celebration. Everyone's guard is down (at least almost everyone), tensions are gone, and a rare joy fills the air with a consummate bliss. And yet for Joseph, still hidden behind his Egyptian mask, 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 on the verge of complete restoration. As we conclude this marvelous journey we need to reflect on the two brothers who made it possible and become 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. The family needed a leader to confront the father without violating his role as head of the family. To our surprise it is Judah who rises to the occasion.

Judah's life is a remarkable testimony to the grace of God. God chooses a man who once sold his brother for profit and turned a deaf ear to his pleas in 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 from a young woman he thought was a "cult" prostitute. It would be hard to think of a lower state of human depravity than this fornicating murderer. Yet, from that low estate, God was able to turn him around and transform him into one who has wisdom to break the deadlock in this family.

If we ask what 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 and exposing his sin, she broke his downward spiral and elicited the first public confession of sin by a patriarch ("*She is righteous, I'm not!*" 38:26).⁶ Though we may fault her deceptive tactics, her motive was loyalty to covenant and God rewards her by giving her twins and placing her in the Messianic line (Matt 1:3). Perhaps her example of confronting male leadership gave Judah courage to confront his self-pitying father. But Judah advances beyond her methods and rather than using deception, he confronts his father with the naked truth. When that fails to move the patriarch, Judah further urges him with self-sacrifice coupled with empathy. Where did these traits come from? I suspect his encounter with his daughter-in-law played a major role.

Judah is therefore an example of the grace of God that can transform even the worst sinner into an effective leader, if they are willing to openly confront their sin (as opposed to Reuben, who never deals with his sexual sin and remains ineffective all his days). 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 leader of courage who breaks the human deadlock, Joseph has the even more difficult task of playing dual roles simultaneously. On the one hand, he plays the lead role of a dispassionate foreign king who possesses sovereign power and uncanny knowledge to test the brothers; but on the other, he is a son and a brother with tender emotions. If Judah models God's grace that transforms human leaders, Joseph is a type of Christ modeling God's heart in the process of reconciliation.

In the gospels we find the Joseph story retold in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the one everyone goes to find real "bread" (John 6:32). He is one who holds banquets on hillsides (Mark 6:41) and gives crumbs to widows (Mark 7:28). The banquet is a lavish feast with no entrance fee apart from the confession of sin. He himself requires no "present" (*minhah*), for he himself provides the "*minhah*." His invitation goes out to all, yet no one is coerced, and 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 like Joseph, his feasts are also filled with controversy. He breaks cultural and religious norms by eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16). He places the Gentile beside the Jew, the privileged rich next to the bankrupt homeless, the refugee next to the CEO, the Palestinian next to the Jew, the Republican next to the Democrat. But, most amazingly to me, is that for all his sovereign power it is difficult for him to remain distant from us. When he sees a young son or daughter returning home it is difficult for him to play the royal role; he must dismiss himself and weep (Luke 15:7) like a priest. That is how much he loves you. You are priceless and the joy of your safe return means far more to him than the pain and agony you have caused him. So Jesus now invites you to eat and drink freely with him. Amen.

Benediction

"Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice!
Strive for full restoration, encourage one another,
be of one mind, live in peace.
And the God of love and peace will be with you."
2 Cor 13:11 NIV

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

² Waltke 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.” Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 554.

³ Waltke, *Genesis*, 556.

⁴ “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 streambed to confine waters.

⁵ This is Walter Brown’s translation in his chapter “Noah: Sot or Saint” in J. I. Packer & Sven K. Soderlund eds., *The Way of Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 37.

⁶ Most translations read, “She is **more** righteous **than** I,” but as Waltke and Fokkelman suggest it is better translated, “**She is righteous, I’m not!**” In Hebrew grammar this is called “a *comparison of exclusion*, [where] the subject alone possesses the quality connoted by the adjective or stative verb, to the exclusion of the thing compared.” *IBHS*, §14.4e