

The Mercy of God Almighty (Gen. 43:1–34)

By Jacob Gerber

In Genesis 43, God orders the details of the events to force everyone to face the great sin of selling Joseph into slavery so many years ago. For Jacob, this means facing fear. For Jacob's sons, this means facing their sin. For Joseph, this means dealing graciously with his brothers who had hurt him. In this chapter, we see one of the clearer examples of how God's providence works. In his providence, not only does God order every detail of our lives, but his ordering is also good. He is not so unjust as to overlook evil in our pasts, whether the evil that we have perpetrated, or the evil that we have experienced as victims. Together, these two principles reflect God's great wisdom that he displays through his providence. He is working with a definite plan in mind, and that definite plan is slowly, patiently, and kindly untangling all the twisted evil of the world. That is, we see that *God is setting right all that has gone wrong with the world*.

Trusting through Fear (Gen. 43:1–15)

When Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, he foretold that the famine "will be very severe" (Gen. 41:31).¹ Now, as a fulfillment of this prophecy, v. 1 declares that "the famine was severe in the land" (cf. Gen. 41:57). This opening statement of Genesis 43 is identical to the description of the famine that Abram faced back in Genesis 12:10.² This statement is important because it explains the problem identified in the next verse: Jacob and his family had eaten all the grain that Jacob's sons had brought from Egypt (v. 2a). Recognizing this lack of food, Jacob again tells us his sons to go again to buy more food for the family (v. 2b). Now, Jacob knows full well that returning to Egypt would require him to send his beloved son Benjamin with his other sons, which he had protested so vehemently at the end of the previous chapter. It is interesting, then, that Jacob studiously ignores this concern, and casually asks his sons to buy more food "as though it were a matter of a trip to a nearby market."³ Jacob seems to be hoping that the problem has faded with time.

Jacob's sons, however, know all too well the stern command of the ruler they had personally met in Egypt. In the last chapter, Reuben, the firstborn, had tried to coax Jacob to send Benjamin with them back to Egypt (Gen. 42:37). Now, it is Judah who speaks, reminding Jacob that they must take Benjamin with them, or they should not go at all (v. 3–5). As we see Jacob confronted once again with the ominous prospect of sending Benjamin to Egypt, we are seeing how deep Jacob's fear and sense of protection runs in the difficulty he has before allowing Benjamin to go.⁴

¹ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:786.

² Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 420.

³ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 213.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:354–355.

Jacob, unsurprisingly, responds strongly to this suggestion, charging his sons with *evil*: “Why did you treat me so badly [lit., “do evil”; from the verb רָעַע, *ra’ā*] as to tell the man that you had another brother?” (v. 6). This statement is interesting, since Jacob is not the first person to charge his sons with evil. At the very beginning of the Joseph narrative, one of the very first things Joseph does is to bring an “evil” (רָעָה; *ra’ah*) report about his brothers to Jacob (Gen. 37:2). Now, it is Jacob himself who charges his sons with evil.

As a group, the brothers (“they”) respond to this accusation from their father by explaining that they were simply responding to the questions of the Egyptian ruler (v. 7). They could not have predicted that he would ask them to bring their brother down to him, could they? After the group speaks, Judah again speaks individually. He takes a similar approach that Reuben had in the previous chapter by offering to take personal responsibility for Benjamin’s life (v. 8–9; cf. Gen. 42:37). Where Reuben had offered the lives of his own sons as collateral for Benjamin’s life, Judah offers *personally* to bear the guilt of Benjamin’s life forever, if something should happen to him. Judah points out—as both Jacob (cf. Gen. 42:2) and Joseph (Gen. 42:18, 20) had done in the previous chapter—that this is a matter of life and death: “so that we may live and not die” (v. 8). Judah persuades Jacob by turning his father’s words back toward him. Just as Judah had proven more persuasive than Reuben toward his brothers in persuading them to sell Joseph into slavery (Gen. 37:22, 26–30), so Judah will prove more persuasive than Reuben toward their father, Jacob.⁵

There is one other detail we should note about Judah’s speech. Judah promises to be a “pledge” (עֶרְבֹן; *‘arab*; v. 9; cf. Gen. 44:32) for Benjamin. This is the verbal form of the noun “pledge” (עֶרְבֹן; *‘erabôn*; Gen. 38:17, 18, 20) that Judah gave by his signet, cords, and staff as a deposit for sex with his daughter-in-law Tamar until he could send her a goat from his flock. To offer oneself personally as the pledge for someone else was a serious, risky matter. Throughout the Proverbs, there are warnings against putting up a pledge for someone else (e.g., Prov. 6:1; 11:15).⁶ Where Jacob resurfaces the past charge against his sons that they have once again “done evil” (v. 6; cf. Gen. 37:2), Judah is demonstrating that he is not the man he was earlier in his life. This contrast is especially stark when we compare Judah’s motives in this work of persuasion to his efforts to persuade his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. As we will see in the next chapter, Judah understands the risks he is taking by this pledge, and he is willing to make good on his promise when harm is threatened against Benjamin.

In the face of such a severe famine, and such a warm promise by Judah, Jacob ultimately changes his mind to allow Benjamin go down to Egypt with his other sons (v. 11–14).⁷ From this, John Calvin observes that we should “learn patient endurance, should the Lord often compel us, by pressure of circumstances, to do many things contrary to the inclination of our own minds.”⁸ God uses painful situations to stretch us beyond our deep fears.

Jacob, though, will not send his sons (and especially his son Benjamin) empty-handed. Instead, he tells his sons to take a “present” down to Egypt (v. 11). Jacob had also sent a “present” to Esau to pacify his estranged brother, who came out to meet him when Jacob was returning to Canaan from

⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 219.

⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 421.

⁷ Kidner, *Genesis*, 215.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:355.

Paddan-aram (Gen. 32:14–22; 33:8–11).⁹ Specifically, Jacob tells his sons to carry the choice fruits “of the land”—the delicacies of Canaan, including “a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds” (v. 11). Once again, we get an echo of a previous scene, since the Ishmaelite caravan who took Joseph down to Egypt were also bringing down “gum, balm, and myrrh” to Egypt to trade (Gen. 37:25).¹⁰ By this gift, we see echoes of Jacob’s past, as well as the past of Jacob’s sons. Additionally, Jacob also instructs his sons to take double their money, to pay for the first grain they bought (v. 12).

Jacob gives voice to his deep concerns through a prayer: “May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin” (v. 14a). The title “God Almighty” was the title God used when establishing his covenant with Abraham (cf. Gen. 17:1), so Jacob is invoking a title that is directly tied to the promises that God had made to multiply his family (cf. Gen. 17:2).¹¹ Jacob’s prayer is significant, since the prayer for God’s “mercy” (רחם) is from the same word that appears later to describe the “compassion” that overwhelms Joseph toward his brothers (רחם; v. 30).¹² In the end, though, Jacob expresses resignation that he must relinquish control of the situation to God: “And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved” (v. 14b).

At this, Jacob’s brothers do exactly what their father has told them to do. They take the present, and double the money, and—listed last to underscore the “heart-wrenching agony” for Jacob—they also take Benjamin.¹³ Mern Sternberg observes how much this story has come around full-circle: “The plot movement that started with a brother leaving home in all innocence to join his brothers, only to find himself the property of a trading caravan bound for Egypt, now presses for closure once the brothers leave home in a caravan to rescue a brother in Egypt.”¹⁴ God is providentially working in this story to set right the things that had gone wrong.

Treasure in Uncertainty (Gen. 43:16–25)

Upon arrival, Joseph immediately sees that his brothers have obeyed his demand to bring Benjamin with them (v. 16a). In response, Joseph tells the steward of his house to bring his brothers into his house to dine with him at noon in a feast featuring a slaughtered animal (v. 16b). Whatever stern appearance Joseph may have given outwardly at their last meeting, it is clearly that Joseph deeply loves his brothers, and that he is not acting vindictively toward them.¹⁵ Nevertheless, this kindness provokes fear from the brothers, and they try to make their case to anyone who will listen to them that they discovered the money replaced in their sacks, and that they did not know who put it there (v. 18–22).¹⁶ No one, however, takes them seriously. We should see here, though, that this

⁹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 544.

¹⁰ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:788.

¹¹ Kidner, *Genesis*, 215.

¹² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 219.

¹³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 548.

¹⁴ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 300–301.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:357.

¹⁶ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 220.

protestation demonstrates another subtle change from earlier in their lives. Where they hid from their father the “profit” (Gen. 37:26) that they made from selling Joseph into slavery, now they are doing their best to acknowledge openly their financial status, and to make amends in whatever way they can.¹⁷

The steward dismisses their protests kindly. He tells them, “Peace to you.” This word *peace* again echoes an important word from the beginning of the Joseph narrative. While Joseph’s steward speaks “peace” to the brothers, we should remember that Joseph’s brothers could *not* speak “peace” to Joseph (Gen. 37:4).¹⁸ Even so, Joseph himself is acting consistently, since he ended up at their mercy when he obediently went on his father’s errand to seek the “peace” of his brothers (Gen. 37:14). To this significant word “peace,” the servant tells the brothers not to be afraid, and to identify “your God and the God of your father” as the one who put “treasure” in their sacks.

The word “fear” and the reference to their God may be significant, since Joseph explained the deal he would make with the brothers (requiring only one of them to stay behind) with these words: “Do this and you will live, *for I fear God*” (Gen. 37:18; my emphasis). The peace they are experiencing has everything to do with Joseph’s fear of God, and on the basis of that fear, they have nothing to fear. This peace extends even to washing the brothers’ feet and giving their donkeys fodder (v. 24), as Joseph’s brothers prepared to eat a meal with the man whom they still do not recognize as their brothers (v. 25).

Testing for Sin (Gen. 43:26–34)

When Joseph arrives, we read twice that the brothers bow down to him (v. 26, 28). This is yet another fulfillment of Joseph’s dream that had caused his brothers to hate him (cf. Gen. 37:7–8).¹⁹ Joseph does not abuse his authority in this situation, but we instead read that he inquires about their “peace” (v. 27), especially about their father. Joseph had been sold into slavery because his father had sent him to see to the peace of his brothers (Gen. 37:14), and now Joseph asks his brothers about the peace of his father. Joseph’s brothers report that Jacob, their father, is doing well, and still alive.

While Joseph can maintain his composure while speaking to his brothers—and even while speaking about his father—Joseph is overwhelmed when he sees his brother. The text draws attention to the importance of this moment by the doubled descriptions of his sight: he “lifted his eyes” and he “saw” his brother Benjamin.²⁰ After Joseph asks whether this is indeed his youngest brother, he exclaims, “God be gracious to you, my son!” (v. 29). Then, we read that “his compassion grew warm” (v. 30), where the word for “compassion” echoes the same word that Jacob had used when he prayed that the brothers would find “mercy” before the man (v. 14). God Almighty has answered Jacob’s prayer. After Joseph weeps, washes his face, and regains control over his emotions, he returns and asks his servants to serve the food (v. 31).

There is an interesting note in v. 32 telling us that the brothers ate by themselves, apart from the

¹⁷ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 662.

¹⁸ Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 679.

¹⁹ Kidner, *Genesis*, 215.

²⁰ “‘He raised his eyes’ often indicates that what is about to be seen is most important (13:10; 18:2; 22:4, 13; 33:1, 5; 37:25.)” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 423.)

Egyptians, since the Egyptians found eating with the Hebrews to be an “abomination.” In part, this is the first hint we get that the Egyptians “utterly detested” the Hebrews, so that this note sets up the later story of the Exodus.²¹ Additionally, we should see yet another reversal. As Victor Hamilton writes, “This is the second time that Joseph has been separated from his brothers at a meal (cf. 37:25). Last time, he was the helpless victim; here he is the ‘victor.’ He does not, however, deprive his brothers of food, as they had done to him.”²² Again, we see God bringing this story full-circle.

Not only does Joseph refrain from depriving his brothers, but he serves them a feast with much food and drink.²³ Even so, we can see here that Joseph is beginning a final test for his brothers. Joseph seated the brothers in order, from oldest to youngest, to the brothers’ amazement (v. 33). Then, Joseph serves Benjamin five times as much as any of the other brothers (v. 33). The table is set, then, precisely to test whether Joseph’s brothers would be as vindictive toward Benjamin for the larger portion he received.²⁴ The brothers pass this part of the test by avoiding envy, and instead drinking and being merry with Joseph (v. 34). Still, the chapter breaks here in the middle of the story. Joseph has a more difficult test in the next chapter for the brothers than whether or not they will enjoy themselves at a feast. Will the brothers fall back into their old ways by cruelty toward Benjamin, or will Judah follow through with his promise to be a pledge for Benjamin?

Discussion Questions

- 1) What does Jacob fear, and why? How does Jacob attempt to deal with his fear, both in the previous chapter, and here in Genesis 43? How do the circumstances of the famine and the Egyptian ruler’s demands force Jacob to face his fear? What do we learn from Jacob’s faith when he finally permits Benjamin to go down to Egypt? What are your fears today? How does God Almighty order your own circumstances to stretch your faith in him? What can you apply from Jacob’s response?
- 2) In how many ways does God force Jacob’s sons to face their former sin in this chapter? How do we see transformation in the brothers as a group? How do we see specific transformation in the life of Judah? What has God ordered the details and circumstances of your own life to force you to face your sin, to confess it, and to repent from it? In the midst of the pain of working back through the pain of your sin, how have you also seen God extend to you the treasure of his mercy and peace?
- 3) How does this narrative portray Joseph, as he interacts with his brothers who had betrayed him and sold him into slavery? How do you think Joseph is capable of mercifully speaking peace to his brothers, and giving them a feast? What painful situations from your past are the hardest for you to forgive and forget? Where might God be calling you to extend peace to someone who has hurt you? How does the gospel of Jesus give us strength to forgive our debtors?
- 4) How does Joseph work his interactions with his brothers to test their response to favoritism shown

²¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:360.

²² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 555.

²³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 556.

²⁴ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 656, 661.

to Benjamin? How had the brothers sinned against Joseph because of the favoritism that God and that Jacob had shown to Joseph in the past? How might they be tempted to treat Benjamin the same way that they had treated Joseph? What factors do you think will lead the brothers to act in a different, transformed way in the next chapter?