

LUNCH MEET

GENESIS 43:1-34 JANUARY 4, 2023

The term “power lunch” was born in 1979. At restaurants like *The Four Seasons*, VIPs and CEOs would sit at tables spaced far apart, taking long, boozy lunches, while less powerful workers hurried to scarf a sandwich from a street vendor. In the time-is-money rat race of New York City, being able to sit down for a meal midday became a status symbol.¹

There’s a boozy, power lunch in Genesis 43. After debate and delay, Joseph’s brothers return to Egypt hoping to get some life-saving grain and retrieve their imprisoned brother at the same time. The problem is, no one in the family really wants to make the trip. The brothers are afraid they might be jailed as spies and thieves. Jacob is afraid Benjamin won’t come home. Meanwhile, as readers we know what’s really going on - we see that God’s incredible providence has unfolded to give this family salvation and safety and shelter and harmony. As the family of faith hesitates, we want to shout into the pages, “JUST GO!”

But the drama of these years wasn’t really about grain, it was about hearts. This was the family through which God was going to bring the Deliverer. This was the family God had called out from all the others on the earth to know Him and follow Him and represent Him. But they were off track. Compared to Noah in his ark or Abraham on Mount Moriah, their faith looks pretty shriveled. But the Lord was drawing them back. He put Joseph in position to show them Who the God of their Fathers really was, what He was really capable of, and how He was still in love with this family.

Genesis 43:1-2 - Now the famine in the land was severe. ²When they had used up the grain they had brought back from Egypt, their father said to them, “Go back and buy us a little food.”

Things were very bad not only in Egypt but also Canaan and the surrounding regions. Nine of Jacob’s sons had made it back from their first trip with the grain they needed to survive, but the problem wasn’t going away, in fact it was only getting worse.

Jacob is pretty old at this point - around 130 years. He seems to be slipping or at least become less effective as the leader of this family. In the last chapter, *he* had been the one who lit the fire under his sons about going to get food. He saw the danger of the famine. Now, because he’s so hesitant to do what must be done, he’s become out of touch with their situation. “Buy a little food.” Notice he doesn’t say, “Go and rescue your brother Simeon.” Simeon had been written off by his dad.

John Goldingay suggests that maybe Jacob thinks they could just sneak down to Egypt, grab a little grain without being noticed, that way they wouldn’t have to deal with the whole Benjamin/Simeon situation.² This is not great leadership and would not solve their problem.

¹ <https://www.marketplace.org/2012/07/09/made-ny-how-power-lunch-was-spawned>

² John Goldingay *Genesis*

Genesis 43:3-5 - ³But Judah said to him, “The man specifically warned us, ‘You will not see me again unless your brother is with you.’ ⁴If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy food for you. ⁵But if you will not send him, we will not go, for the man said to us, ‘You will not see me again unless your brother is with you.’ ”

Judah emerges as the next leader of this family. He’s the fourth-born, but Reuben, Simeon, and Levi didn’t make the cut. There might be the smallest whisper of Christ foreshadowed here. When we think of Israel, there are three great men that stand out above all others: Abraham, Moses, and David. But all of them leaders are eclipsed by Christ Jesus.

When Judah spoke to Jacob, he was very straightforward. He doesn’t allow Jacob to spin the situation or sidestep the problem. And Judah has grown quite a bit compared to who he used to be. He’s willing to obey what the Prince of Egypt had said, despite what the consequences might be. Going back to Egypt could mean imprisonment, enslavement, or even execution for them.

Genesis 43:6 - ⁶“Why have you caused me so much trouble?” Israel asked. “Why did you tell the man that you had another brother?”

Jacob’s selfishness is stopping him from doing what is right. In his heart he knows what needs to be done, but he keeps stalling³ as lives hang in the balance. His big worry is how *he’ll* feel if Benjamin doesn’t come back from Egypt, meanwhile, *Simeon* hasn’t come back from Egypt, and *all* the people of his family are nearing starvation unless they return and do what Joseph commanded.

Genesis 43:7-10 - ⁷They answered, “The man kept asking about us and our family: ‘Is your father still alive? Do you have another brother?’ And we answered him accordingly. How could we know that he would say, ‘Bring your brother here?’” ⁸Then Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the boy with me. We will be on our way so that we may live and not die—neither we, nor you, nor our dependents. ⁹I will be responsible for him. You can hold me personally accountable! If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, I will be guilty before you forever. ¹⁰If we had not delayed, we could have come back twice by now.”

Every day they waited made their situation more dangerous. Jacob is the clan boss, but Judah steps into leadership. He even used the same phrase that Jacob had in the last chapter, “*so that we may live and not die.*” Judah speaks respectfully, responsibly, and resolutely. He shows that he is concerned for the *whole* family and puts himself on the line for all of them. His remarks constitute a legally binding vow.⁴ Unlike Reuben, who cowardly used his sons as a human shield for himself, in the last passage, Judah literally says, “I will become surety for Benjamin.”⁵

We see a spiritual spark as the brothers rally behind Judah there in verse 7. Their hearts were softening as the Lord drew them on with His grace and kindness. It’s demonstrated most

³ Gordon Wenham *Genesis 16-50*

⁴ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

⁵ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

powerfully in Judah himself. We remember the scandal of Genesis 38, but also we remember that it was *Judah* who had concocted the scheme to sell Joseph into slavery 20 years earlier. Now, he had become a rescuer and redeemer. This is what the Lord can do in a life. Think of John Newton - who worked in the slave trade until he was born again and joined Wilberforce's abolitionist movement and then penned history's most famous song: *Amazing Grace*. God's grace and truth can *convert* men like Newton and Judah and Saul of Tarsus and you and me.

Genesis 43:11-14 - ¹¹Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: Put some of the best products of the land in your packs and take them down to the man as a gift –a little balsam and a little honey, aromatic gum and resin, pistachios and almonds. ¹²Take twice as much silver with you. Return the silver that was returned to you in the top of your bags. Perhaps it was a mistake. ¹³Take your brother also, and go back at once to the man. ¹⁴May God Almighty cause the man to be merciful to you so that he will release your other brother and Benjamin to you. As for me, if I am deprived of my sons, then I am deprived."

Jacob relies on his wealth, but then finally brings the Lord into the plan. It's been a long time since Jacob invoked his God. And here he reminds himself and his sons that their God is El Shaddai, a God of covenant power and provision. He appeals to God's mercy and His ability to intervene, even in the highest towers of human government. Still, we miss the spiritual confidence that we hope for in our Bible heroes. Jacob is more resigned than full of faith. And his words still betray the imbalance in his heart: He calls Benjamin by name, but only calls Simeon "your other brother," not even "my other son." But, still, we see a step in the right direction. He does call on the Lord. He does appeal to His mercy. He does believe that God is in charge of the situation.

As readers, we know just how much God's power and mercy have *already* accomplished on their behalf. While they hesitate and delay and debate and wring their hands, the Lord had turned the trajectory of the world's greatest empire on a *dime* so that *this* family could be saved. The tension in the story is not over whether God will save - He's already done all that needs doing. The tension is whether Jacob and his sons will *miss* it because of hard-heartedness and bad choices.

Genesis 43:15-17 - ¹⁵The men took this gift, double the amount of silver, and Benjamin. They immediately went down to Egypt and stood before Joseph. ¹⁶When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to his steward, "Take the men to my house. Slaughter an animal and prepare it, for they will eat with me at noon." ¹⁷The man did as Joseph had said and brought them to Joseph's house.

I don't think we can underestimate what a strange day this would have been. There among *thousands* of refugees seeking relief,⁶ one of the Egyptian officials suddenly stops everything and says, "You ten guys...you're going to lunch at the Prime Minister's house."

There's a whole devotional here about this *other* guy - the steward over Joseph's house. If Joseph can represent Jesus, the Back-From-The-Dead-Redeemer, then *this* guy can represent us. There he

⁶ R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing*

is, serving in Joseph's house. Bringing others in to feast there. Speaking to strangers with kindness and grace. Representing his master and doing whatever he's told. Of course, Joseph was the greatest steward of all time. Imagine being hired to be the steward of *that guy's* house. How could you ever live up to the job? You *can't*, but you get the job anyway. This guy is a *great* little devotion for us serving the Lord with joy and obedience and generosity.

Genesis 43:18-22 - ¹⁸ **But the men were afraid because they were taken to Joseph's house. They said, "We have been brought here because of the silver that was returned in our bags the first time. They intend to overpower us, seize us, make us slaves, and take our donkeys."** ¹⁹ **So they approached Joseph's steward and spoke to him at the doorway of the house.** ²⁰ **They said, "My lord, we really did come down here the first time only to buy food. ²¹ When we came to the place where we lodged for the night and opened our bags of grain, each one's silver was at the top of his bag! It was the full amount of our silver, and we have brought it back with us. ²² We have brought additional silver with us to buy food. We don't know who put our silver in the bags."**

There was an ancient tradition that is called "the dangerous banquet" where enemies would be brought to dine and then the trap would spring.⁷ We see it a few times in the Old Testament and it's found in literature outside the Bible, including ancient Egyptian writings. It was also "*common knowledge that ranking officials [in Egypt] maintained private dungeons in their homes.*"⁸ The sons of Jacob are shaking in their sandals. They didn't even want to cross the threshold of the house.

In their fright they have that silly line, "and take our donkeys!" Egypt doesn't need your donkeys. But we see how the Lord is stripping away the things they think they need. He's neutralizing their wealth. He's dismantling their defenses and schemes because He's bringing them to a heart confrontation where they will have to choose to surrender to grace.

Genesis 43:23-24 - ²³ **Then the steward said, "May you be well. Don't be afraid. Your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your bags. I received your silver." Then he brought Simeon out to them. ²⁴ The steward brought the men into Joseph's house, gave them water to wash their feet, and got feed for their donkeys.**

The steward's response to the frantic Hebrews is: Shalom! Mercy to you!⁹ Don't be afraid! He tells them, "I received your payment." I was thinking about this: Joseph was in charge of everything, but I doubt it would've been ok even for him if he just sent out their grain with no silver coming in on the books. I wonder if Joseph himself paid for the grain he gave his brothers in chapter 42.

The steward must have blown their minds, not only by relieving their fears of imprisonment, but by giving them the traditional Hebrew greeting,¹⁰ and then by speaking to them not of Ra or Osiris,

⁷ Eugene Roop *Genesis*

⁸ Hughes

⁹ Susan Brayford *Genesis*

¹⁰ Hughes

but of *their* God and the God of their fathers. That meant something to them.¹¹ "...How do you know about the God of our father...?"

The feed for the donkeys is a tender touch. Maybe the steward, who undoubtedly heard them freaking out earlier, pulled Joseph aside and said, "They're pretty worried about their donkeys" and then made sure to give special attention in that area. That's the kind of affectionate care God has for you and the kind of tenderness He call *us* to as His stewards sent out to minister to others.

We don't know how much time passed between chapters 42 and 43, some think it was less than a year, some think it was upwards of two years.¹² Whatever it was, it was *longer* than it needed to be. After all this time, here comes Simeon. I wonder if he said, "Thanks for hurrying back, guys."

Genesis 43:25-26 - ²⁵ Since the men had heard that they were going to eat a meal there, they prepared their gift for Joseph's arrival at noon. ²⁶ When Joseph came home, they brought him the gift they had carried into the house, and they bowed to the ground before him.

Jacob hoped this gift would bring them deliverance. Throughout the whole story, their wealth is neutralized. This gift is totally ignored, even out of place. Joseph's servants have already prepared a great feast. The sacks of dried goods was unnecessary. It reminds me of that scene in *The Office* when Michael Scott brings a Tupperware of sun-spoiled potato salad to a fancy, catered dinner.

Genesis 43:27-31 - ²⁷ He asked if they were well, and he said, "How is your elderly father that you told me about? Is he still alive?" ²⁸ They answered, "Your servant our father is well. He is still alive." And they knelt low and paid homage to him. ²⁹ When he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, he asked, "Is this your youngest brother that you told me about?" Then he said, "May God be gracious to you, my son."³⁰ Joseph hurried out because he was overcome with emotion for his brother, and he was about to weep. He went into an inner room and wept there. ³¹ Then he washed his face and came out. Regaining his composure, he said, "Serve the meal."

Now is a good time to remind us that Benjamin isn't a little boy. He's at least in his mid or late twenties. He's probably older because he has *ten* sons at this point.¹³

This would've been a really weird moment - to have a head of state come in, suddenly run out, no one knows what's going on, then he comes back a while later acting strange.

What was going on with Joseph? Is he just a crybaby or what? The words are modernized in an unhelpful way. The original says something like, "His mercy grew warm."¹⁴

¹¹ Andrew Steinmann *Genesis: An Introduction & Commentary*

¹² See Hughes, Goldingay, Steinmann

¹³ Genesis 46:22

¹⁴ Hughes

A lot was coming together in Joseph's heart, too. Remember: he had only known these brothers of his as hateful, violent, and cruel. For his first 17 years, they were the *worst* of men. The last time they had a meal around him was when he lay crying and bleeding, naked in a cistern.¹⁵ But now he's seeing something different. Could it be that a happy ending really might happen for this family?

Genesis 43:32 - ³²They served him by himself, his brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who were eating with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, since that is detestable to them.

Another strange moment. The brothers might have whispered to each other, "Wait...we get why we're not eating with the Egyptians...but is this Prime Minister dude *also* not an Egyptian?"

This detesting separation reminds us that the unbelieving world will never truly accept God's people. Think about it: Joseph had *saved their entire nation*. But *this* was the best they could do. "Yes, you're our savior. Yes, you're in charge of almost everything, but our culture says you're gross." It's exactly that kind of prejudicial barrier that is demolished in the family of faith, particularly in the Church, where God breaks down every wall of separation and brings us together to feast in unity.

This separation also gives insight into *why* God may have wanted the family in Egypt. In Egypt they would be isolated and sequestered. In Canaan, they would be assimilated. In fact, several of the sons were already assimilating with Canaanite wives - exactly what God could not allow.

Genesis 43:33-34 - ³³They were seated before him in order by age, from the firstborn to the youngest. The men looked at each other in astonishment. ³⁴Portions were served to them from Joseph's table, and Benjamin's portion was five times larger than any of theirs. They drank and became drunk with Joseph.

Now that the brothers showed they were more honest and humble, why didn't Joseph just reveal himself? There was still another test he wanted to give them. What would they do when their little brother got a bunch of favoritism? Twenty years ago they failed in a big way. Would they have the same flare of jealousy against Benjamin?¹⁶

For the moment, they were all smiles. In fact, they started getting hammered. Your version may say they "made merry" with Joseph, but the word used means drunk or intoxication.¹⁷ Probably not the best choice. In fact, it was a really stupid thing to do. Solomon would later warn us:

Proverbs 23:1-2 - When you sit down to dine with a ruler, consider carefully what is before you, ²and put a knife to your throat if you have a big appetite;

¹⁵ Nahum Sarna *Genesis*

¹⁶ Steinmann, Wenham

¹⁷ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

But this was part of Joseph's plan to reveal what sort of men they were. Meanwhile, this was literally the first happy meal they had had together as brothers *ever*. The brothers certainly weren't perfect, but they *were* growing on the spiritual level.

Allen Ross points out that, through this scene, they demonstrate responsibility, honesty, unity, humility, gratitude, and make restitution.¹⁸ God's work wasn't done, but they were making progress as He drew them on in mercy and grace. Let's make some progress, too, by watching for what the Lord is doing and getting our fears, our shortcomings, and our bad ideas out of the way.

¹⁸ Allen P. Ross *Creation & Blessing*