

LESSON 6

Testing the Brothers

I will be responsible for him. You can hold me personally accountable!

— Genesis 43:9

Genesis 43 tests the brothers with kindness, and the hardest part of the test is a plate of food set in front of someone else.

Introduction

THE GRAIN FINALLY RAN OUT. Genesis doesn't say how long it lasted. A family the size of Jacob's couldn't stretch it forever, and when Genesis 43 opens, the sacks are empty. Simeon was still sitting in an Egyptian cell. Benjamin was still at home. The question the brothers had asked at the lodging place, *What is this that God has done to us?*, still hung over the family.

The trip to Egypt was hard on them. They were spoken to roughly, accused of spying, locked up for three days, and forced to watch Simeon bound in front of them. What we read here feels nothing like that. No one is accused in this chapter, and no one goes to prison. The steward greets them with peace, and Simeon is released. The brothers are invited to a noon meal in the governor's own house, and the wine is plentiful.

It's still a test, though. *It may be the harder one.*

More than twenty years earlier, these brothers watched their father give one son more than the rest, and they couldn't stand it. They couldn't even speak a peaceful word to him (37:4). So they stripped the robe from his back and sold him. *Can guilty men change?* Watching them under accusation won't tell you. Fear keeps almost anyone on their best behavior. What will they do when the pressure's off, the wine is flowing, and Benjamin gets a plate from the head table five times fuller than theirs (43:34)?

Genesis 43 sets that plate on the table and lets us watch what happens.

Before it does, Judah, who once put a price on his brother, stands before his father and offers his own life instead.

Go Back and Buy a Little Food (43:1–10)

Jacob began as though nothing were wrong. *Go back and buy us a little food.*

He made it sound as if Egypt were just down the road, and as if the person in charge hadn't told them not to come back without their brother. Jacob knew the terms. He just didn't mention them. He waited for one of his sons to say it for him.

Judah said it. Twice in three verses he repeated the man's words exactly: *You will not see me again unless your brother is with you* (43:3, 5). The Hebrew is even more direct: *You will not see my face*. There's no way around it. No Benjamin, no trip.

Jacob responded with a complaint: *Why have you caused me so much trouble? Why did you tell the man that you had another brother?* Kidner sees the scolding as Jacob's way of avoiding a decision he dreaded. Notice whose trouble Jacob talks about. Simeon's been sitting in a cell all this time. The trouble Jacob mentions is his own.⁹¹

Then Judah stood up and spoke.

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. I 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.

Compare that with what Reuben offered back in chapter 42. Reuben put two lives on the line, and neither of them was his own: *You can kill my two sons* (42:37). Judah offered the only life he had any right to give. The CSB footnote gives the literal sense of his words: *you can seek him from my hand*. If Benjamin didn't come home, Judah would bear the blame for the rest of his life.

Judah also knew what it was to lose sons. He had buried two of them in chapter 38 (38:7–10). Genesis doesn't connect those graves to this speech, but it doesn't need to.

There's a word here the English can't show us. *I will be responsible for him* translates one Hebrew verb, *ʿārab*, which means to stand as surety, to put yourself up as the guarantee. The last time Genesis used this root, it was a noun, and it also belonged to Judah. On the road to Timnah, he left his signet ring, cord, and staff with a woman he thought was a prostitute. The Hebrew calls those items an *ʿērābôn*, a pledge held until he could send payment (38:17–18). He was never able to redeem it (38:20–23), and the next time he saw those items, they were used as evidence against him (38:25).

Years earlier, Judah handed over his seal as a pledge he couldn't make good. Now he offered himself.⁹²

So, what do we see when we watch Judah? The same Judah who asked, *What do we gain if we kill our brother?* (37:26) is the one who steps forward when a brother has to be put at risk. Kidner points out that two things were needed to break Jacob's resistance: the pressure of the famine and Judah's warm, personal offer. Either one alone wouldn't have done it.⁹³

Judah had one more thing to say, and it wasn't gentle. *If we had not delayed, we could have come back twice by now.*

While the family argued, Simeon was the one left waiting.⁹⁴

A Little Balsam and a Little Honey (43:11–15)

Jacob finally gave in. *If it must be so, then do this.*

Then Jacob did what Jacob always did. He put together a gift. *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.*

Jacob had done this before. Years earlier, when he was returning home to face the brother he had cheated, he sent one group of animals after another ahead of him as a gift for Esau. He hoped the gift would soften Esau before they met face to face (32:13–20). The Hebrew word for *gift* is the same in both places, *minhā*. Whenever Jacob was afraid of someone, he sent a present first.⁹⁵

Look at what was in those packs. The aromatic gum, balsam, and resin are the same three Hebrew words used to describe the cargo on the Ishmaelites' camels the day Joseph was taken down to Egypt (37:25). The brothers were carrying the same goods down the same road, and this time they were the ones paying.

Jacob also sent double the silver, enough to return what they had found in their sacks and buy more grain. *Perhaps it was a mistake*, he said. He didn't really believe that, and neither did his sons.⁹⁶

Then, at the very end, Jacob prayed. *May God Almighty cause the man to be merciful to you so that he will release your other brother and Benjamin to you.*

God Almighty is *El Shaddai*, the name God used when He made His covenant with Abraham (17:1). It's the name of the God who keeps His promises to this family, and that's the name Jacob reached for. The word he used for *merciful* is *raḥāmim*. Remember that word. We'll see it again in verse 30.⁹⁷

Jacob's last words were the most honest thing he said in the chapter: *As for me, if I am deprived of my sons, then I am deprived.*

It isn't much of a statement of faith. It sounded like a tired old man who'd run out of arguments. But he let Benjamin go, and *they immediately went down to Egypt* (43:15). There's that word *down* again. Jacob first used it over a bloody robe in 37:35, and his family had been going down ever since.

Afraid in the House (43:16–25)

Benjamin was the first one Joseph noticed. Verse 16 doesn't say Joseph saw his brothers. It says *Joseph saw Benjamin with them*. He sent them to his house and ordered an animal slaughtered so they could eat with him at noon.

When the brothers heard they were being taken to Joseph's house, they assumed the worst.

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.

Kidner hears something a little naïve in that last worry. The second most powerful man in Egypt was not after their donkeys.⁹⁸ But fear doesn't think clearly, and the brothers had good reason to fear becoming slaves. They knew exactly how a brother ends up as one.

So, they didn't wait to be accused. They stopped the steward at the door and started explaining before anyone asked. They told him they had come the first time only to buy food. They told him they had

found their silver at the lodging place, that they had brought it back, and that they had brought more silver to buy grain. *We don't know who put our silver in the bags.*

The steward answered, *May you be well. Don't be afraid.*

In Hebrew, the first part of his answer is two words, *shalom lakem*, “peace to you.”

Then the steward said something stranger. *Your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your bags. I received your silver.* Kidner is careful here. The steward wasn't confessing to anything. He was telling them their payment had been received and that the silver in their sacks must have come from God. It was truer than the brothers could have guessed.⁹⁹

Then he brought Simeon out to them.

That's all Genesis tells us. No embrace. No word about his time in custody. Simeon didn't say a thing. He just walked out and rejoined his brothers.

Then the steward gave them water to wash their feet and feed for their donkeys, the same kind of hospitality Abraham once showed to strangers under a tree (18:4). As far as Genesis lets us see, no one in that house relaxed. The brothers spent the time getting Jacob's gift ready for noon.

That's what makes this part of the test so strange. Kindness kept coming to them, and they couldn't receive it as kindness. Their guilt had taught them to see every open door as a trap.

Eleven Bow (43:26–31)

When Joseph came home, the brothers presented their gift and bowed to the ground before him. He asked about their father, and they bowed again (43:26, 28). This time there were eleven of them.

In the previous chapter only ten brothers bowed before Joseph, and the dream wasn't finished. Now Benjamin was bowing with them. In Joseph's second dream eleven stars bowed to him (37:9), and now eleven brothers had done the same. The sun and the moon hadn't come yet. Joseph noticed. We should too.¹⁰⁰

Listen to Joseph's questions. *He asked if they were well.* Literally, he asked about their *shalom*. Then he asked, *How is your elderly father?* In Hebrew, that is *shalom* again, asking whether their father was at peace. They answered, *Your servant our father is well*, and that is *shalom* a third time. Counting the steward's greeting at the door, the word appears four times in this chapter.

Go back to the beginning of Joseph's story. *They hated him and could not speak peacefully to him* (37:4). His brothers couldn't speak *shalom* to him. Then Jacob sent Joseph to Shechem to see about the *shalom* of his brothers (37:14), and that's when Joseph learned what they really thought of him.¹⁰¹

Now the brother they couldn't speak peace to was asking about their peace, and they had no idea who he was.

Then Joseph looked up and saw Benjamin, *his mother's son*. Rachel's other son. Joseph's only full brother. The last time they were together, Benjamin had been a small child. Joseph managed one

question: *Is this your youngest brother that you told me about?* Then he gave a blessing: *May God be gracious to you, my son.*

That's as far as he got.

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.

The CSB hides something here. *Overcome with emotion* is a fair translation, but the Hebrew says his *rahāmîm*, his compassion, grew warm toward his brother. It is the same word Jacob used in his prayer in verse 14. Jacob had asked God to make the man merciful, and now that man's compassion was so strong that he had to leave the room.¹⁰²

That was the second time Joseph wept. There would be seven before the story was over. In 42:24, he turned aside and wept where his brothers could almost see him. This time he had to find a room with a door.

Then he washed his face and came out. Joseph regained control of himself and gave an order no one in Egypt would have thought twice about: *Serve the meal.*

Five Times as Much (43:32–34)

Three separate tables were set for the meal.

Joseph ate by himself. The Egyptians ate at their own table, *because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, since that is detestable to them.* The brothers ate at a third table. Kidner, following Vergote, believes the barrier was more religious than social. To an Egyptian, eating with a foreigner made the food unclean.¹⁰³

Joseph sat alone between an Egyptian table and a Hebrew one. He belonged to both, and he couldn't sit at either.

Then the brothers noticed how they had been seated. *They were seated before him in order by age, from the firstborn to the youngest. The men looked at each other in astonishment.*

Eleven grown men, several of them born within a few years of each other, had been arranged from oldest to youngest by an Egyptian who had never met their mothers. Grigoni and his coauthors point out that a stranger would have had a hard time guessing that order. Kidner thinks Joseph wanted exactly the reaction he got. It gave the brothers one more thing they couldn't explain and one more reason to feel that Someone could see right through them.¹⁰⁴

Then the food was served. *Portions were served to them from Joseph's table, and Benjamin's portion was five times larger than any of theirs.*

You marked that verse this week and watched for the brothers' response. Here's the whole of it: *They drank and became drunk with Joseph.*

Nobody compared plates, and nobody said a word.

Remember who they were. They had watched their father give one son a better robe, and it made them want him dead. Now the father's other favorite, Rachel's last son, was being singled out in front of all of

them by the governor of Egypt, and he was given five times as much. This time they ate and drank and let it go.

Genesis doesn't tell us what they felt. Maybe it stung. They may have been too relieved to care, or the wine may have helped. The text doesn't open their hearts at this table, and we shouldn't pretend it does. It records what they did: they sat at the table with the favored brother and stayed there.¹⁰⁵

There was another meal more than twenty years earlier. **Then they sat down to eat.** Their brother was in a dry cistern a few feet away, and they ate in front of him (37:25). Now they were eating in front of him again. This time he was the one feeding them, and they still didn't know it.

Genesis ends the chapter right there, with a table full of brothers who thought their troubles were behind them. Their silver had been accepted, Simeon had been released, and Benjamin was safe. In the morning, they would start home with full sacks.

They had no idea what would be found in one of them.

Looking to Christ

The New Testament never quotes Genesis 43. No apostle points to Judah's pledge and says it is a picture of Jesus, so we'll hold this one loosely.

Still, there's a line in Hebrews worth setting beside this chapter. When the writer discusses Jesus as our high priest, he pauses to note something everyone already knew: *it is evident that our Lord came from Judah* (Hebrews 7:14). A few verses later, he tells us what that Lord has become: *Because of this oath, Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant* (Hebrews 7:22).

A guarantee is exactly what Judah offered his father. It's a person who stands behind a promise with his own life, so if the promise fails, he pays. *You can seek him from my hand.*

The pattern is there: a son of Judah who offers himself as surety for a brother who can't protect himself. We shouldn't press it any further than that. Judah made his pledge without knowing what it would cost him, and next week we'll find out. Jesus knew exactly what His pledge would cost before He made it. That difference matters more than the similarity.

Applying the Text

Offer what is yours to give. Reuben offered his sons, and Judah offered himself. It's easy to make big promises when it's someone else's time, money, or reputation on the line. When something needs to be guaranteed, the honest pledge is the one that will cost you personally if it fails.

Kindness can be harder to receive than accusation. The brothers were met with peace, clean water, a hot meal, and a brother set free, and they were afraid the entire time. Guilt does that to us. Live with it long enough, and grace starts to look like a setup. If God's been good to you and you're still waiting for the catch, ask yourself whether the problem is in the gift or in you.

Stop putting it off. Judah said, *If we had not delayed, we could have come back twice by now.* While Jacob hesitated, Simeon waited in custody. Our delays usually cost someone else first. If there's a hard thing you've been putting off, someone's probably waiting on you.

Watch your heart when someone else is honored. Benjamin received five times as much, and the brothers let it go. Envy is the sin that started this whole story. You'll find out whether God has been working on your envy the next time a brother, a coworker, or someone in your own congregation is honored in front of you.

Let go when you have to, even before you fully trust. Jacob's words, *if I am deprived of my sons, then I am deprived*, aren't brave words. Still, he said them, prayed for mercy, and sent Benjamin. Sometimes obedience comes first, and trust catches up later.

For Discussion

1. Compare Reuben's offer in 42:37 with Judah's in 43:8–10. What does each man put at risk? Why do you think Jacob refuses one offer and accepts the other?
2. Read everything the steward says and does in 43:23–24. What should that have told the brothers? Why were they still afraid?
3. In 37:4 the brothers couldn't speak *shalom* to Joseph. In 43:27–28 he asks about theirs. What has changed in them since chapter 37, and what hasn't changed yet?
4. Why do you think Joseph gave Benjamin five times as much as the others? What was he watching for at that table?

5. When someone else receives more than you, whether it's attention, credit, or a better seat, what really goes on inside you? Would the people who know you best agree with your answer?

6. Judah said they could have made the trip twice if they hadn't delayed. Is someone waiting on a decision you've been putting off? What would it take for you to make it this week?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 7: Judah's Plea (Genesis 44)

The brothers leave at first light with full sacks, Simeon, and Benjamin, but they don't get far. A silver cup turns up where it doesn't belong, and Joseph offers them a way out that will cost them nothing except Benjamin. Then Judah steps forward and gives one of the longest speeches in Genesis.

Before you come, read Genesis 44. In Judah's speech (44:18–34), count how many times he says *father*. Then find the verse where he repeats the promise he made in 43:9.

⁹¹ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:1–14 he calls Israel's attitude querulously negative and very true to life: the scolding was an escape from a decision he dreaded and a comfort to his self-esteem, and it betrays his self-absorption that he still saw the threat to Benjamin chiefly in terms of himself (43:6; cf. 42:36). Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 43:6 they note that Jacob shifts the blame for the predicament onto Judah and the other brothers.

⁹² The CSB margin on 43:9 gives the literal sense of Judah's second clause, *you can seek him from my hand*. The verb behind *I will be responsible for him* is 'ārab. The noun from the same root, 'ērābôn, names the items Judah left with Tamar in 38:17, 18, and 20, where the CSB smooths it to *something* and *the items*. Judah uses the verb again in 44:32 (CSB *became accountable*). Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 43:1–14 he describes Judah's offer as becoming surety for his younger brother and bearing the blame forever.

⁹³ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:1–14 he argues that breaking the deadlock took both the cruel pressure of the famine (cf. Hosea 5:15) and Judah's warm and personal initiative, each reinforcing the other, so that Judah succeeded where Reuben had failed (42:37–38). On 37:26–27 he had already looked ahead to the finer qualities Judah would develop (43:9; 44:33).

⁹⁴ Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 43:10 they hear a growing irritation in Judah's words to his father. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:23 he reckons that Simeon's detention, drawn out by the wrangling over Benjamin, lasted less than two years (cf. 45:6). Hughes, *Genesis*. On 43:23 he puts it at two years.

⁹⁵ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:11 he notes that a present (*minḥā*) was an almost indispensable courtesy in approaching a person of rank (cf. 1 Samuel 16:20; 17:18). The same word names Jacob's gift to Esau in 32:13, 18, 20, and 21, where Jacob hopes to appease Esau with the gift before he sees his face.

⁹⁶ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 43:11–13 he observes the irony that Jacob's gift is made up of the same produce the caravan was carrying when it took Joseph down to Egypt. The Hebrew of 37:25 and 43:11 shares three terms, *nēkō 't*, *šōrī*, and *lōṭ*, which the CSB renders in 43:11 as *aromatic gum*, *balsam*, and *resin*. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 43:12 they explain the double silver as Jacob's way of keeping his sons from being held responsible for the silver returned in their sacks.

⁹⁷ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:14 he notes that *God Almighty* (*'ēl šadday*) was a title especially evocative of the covenant with Abraham (17:1), and so of God's settled purpose for this family. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 43:14 he hears deep resignation in Jacob's last words, an old man reconciling himself to the will of God.

⁹⁸ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:15–34 he finds a hint of naivety in the brothers' fear (43:18) that Egypt, like some petty clan, had designs on their donkeys, and says it highlights the contrast between tent-dwellers and their new surroundings. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 43:16–18 they point out that of all the travelers who came to Egypt to buy food, these men alone were brought into the governor's house.

⁹⁹ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:23 he argues that the steward is not confessing to planting the money, only assuring them that it was received and suggesting that what they found came from heaven, which the reader knows to be true in a sense still hidden from them. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 43:23 he identifies *shalom lakem* as the customary Hebrew greeting for receiving guests. Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 43:15–25 he summarizes the steward as telling them to regard the silver as a blessing from God.

¹⁰⁰ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:26, 28 he calls the repeated bowing another moment of fulfillment (cf. 42:6, 9). Hughes, *Genesis*. On 44:14 he traces how the description of the bowing changes with each occasion (42:6; 43:28; 44:14).

¹⁰¹ The Hebrew word *šālôm* appears four times in the chapter: in the steward's greeting (43:23), twice in Joseph's questions (43:27), and in the brothers' answer (43:28). The CSB renders three of them with *well* and the fourth with *How is*. It is the word the brothers could not speak to Joseph in 37:4, and the word Jacob used twice when he sent Joseph to see how his brothers were (37:14). Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. In a note on 43:27 they observe that *šālôm* can mean wholeness and well-being as well as peace, and connect Joseph's question to Jacob's errand in 37:14. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 43:27–28 he calls *shalom* the theme of Joseph's greeting.

¹⁰² Hughes, *Genesis*. On 43:29–30 he notes that Joseph's blessing on Benjamin uses the verb of the priestly benediction, *be gracious to you* (Numbers 6:25), and that the word behind *overcome with emotion* in 43:30 (literally, his compassion grew warm) is the word rendered *merciful* in Jacob's prayer in 43:14, so that mercy frames the episode. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 43:29–30 they note that this is the first time in more than twenty years that Joseph has seen his only full brother.

¹⁰³ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:32 he follows J. Vergote in judging the Egyptian scruple cultic rather than social, since foreigners would technically defile the food, and compares the later Jewish refusal to eat with Gentiles. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 43:32–33 they explain that Joseph ate alone because of his rank and the Egyptians separately because they regarded the visitors as inferior. Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 43:26–34 he notes that Hebrews were detestable to the Egyptians.

¹⁰⁴ Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 43:32–33 they observe that grown men would be hard for an impartial observer to arrange by birth order. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:33 he suggests that the mysterious accuracy of the seating served Joseph's plan by deepening the brothers' uneasy sense of exposure to divine intervention. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 43:31–33 he pictures the brothers concluding that the governor had been supernaturally informed about their family.

¹⁰⁵ The Hebrew of 43:34 gives Benjamin's portion as *five hands*, and says the brothers drank and became drunk *with him*. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 43:34 he compares the honor of a special portion with 1 Samuel 9:24 and, paradoxically, with John 13:26–27. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 43:34 he reads the fivefold portion as Joseph's test of whether the old envy would resurface, and on 43:31–33 he notes the irony of Joseph hosting a meal for the brothers who once ate while he pleaded with them (37:25). Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 43:34 they likewise judge the extra portion more likely a test than simple affection.