

# EULOGY VIRTUES

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 43

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Genesis 43

## Judah reminds Jacob

Genesis 43:1-5:

*New York Times* columnist David Brooks writes of two sets of virtues: “résumé virtues” and “eulogy virtues”:

*The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral—whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?*

*We all know that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé ones. But our culture and our educational systems spend more time teaching the skills and strategies you need for career success than the qualities you need to radiate that sort of inner light. Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career than on how to build inner character.*

*But if you live for external achievement, years pass and the deepest parts you go unexplored and unstructured. You lack a moral vocabulary. It is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You figure as long as you are not obviously hurting anybody and people seem to like you, you must be O.K. But you live with an unconscious boredom separated from the deepest meaning of life and the highest moral joys. Gradually, a humiliating gap opens between your actual self and your desired self, between you and those incandescent souls you sometimes meet.<sup>1</sup>*

We in the church are interested in cultivating the kind of eulogy virtues that are rooted in, and emanate from, relationship with God. In Genesis 43, we catch up with a fractured family whose members, somehow, are cultivating eulogy virtues. How do they do it?

Genesis 42 ended in a stalemate. In Egypt, Joseph, who concealed his identity from his brothers, was holding Simeon captive and refused to release him or sell his brothers more grain unless they returned with Benjamin. In Canaan, Jacob, the father of the brothers, refused to part with Benjamin. Can anyone break the stalemate?

**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.” 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.’”**

Genesis 43 begins much the way Genesis 42 began, with Jacob insisting that his sons go to Egypt to buy grain because of the famine. However, Jacob seems to have forgotten what happened in Genesis 42. His sons, having left Benjamin behind in Canaan because Jacob was afraid of losing him, went to Egypt and returned with grain, but they had to leave Simeon behind in Egypt as ransom. In order to free Simeon, and even be given an audience with the Egyptian leader who gave them the grain, they had to return with Benjamin. And, by the way, the self-consumed Jacob once again refused to let them leave for Egypt with Benjamin, the son he favors.

Judah reminds his father of these matters—and in case he’s not getting it, he reminds him again. If you want some food, Judah tells his father, you’re not getting it unless you let Benjamin go.

## Jacob pitches a fit

Genesis 43:6-7:

**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?’”**

Jacob, also called Israel, pitches a fit, complaining that his sons never should have told “the man in Egypt,” who is Joseph, of course, about Benjamin. The sons reply that the man in Egypt wormed it out of them.

Of course, the sons were at the mercy of the man, who had the grain they needed. They couldn’t very well refuse to answer the man’s questions or answer falsely and risk being turned away. And besides all that, how could they have known that a man in Egypt would have any interest in one of their brothers in Canaan?

## **Judah breaks out of the pack**

**Genesis 43:8-10:**

**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.”**

When the brothers came back from Egypt, Reuben recklessly offered to have his two sons killed if he failed to return to Canaan with Simeon, somehow not realizing that Jacob, presumably having lost two sons, has no interest in losing two grandsons. Now, Judah breaks out of the pack in an attempt to break the stalemate. Judah offers to return to Egypt with Benjamin and makes a much more persuasive case for his proposal than Reuben made for his proposal.

First, Judah uses Jacob’s own words from Genesis 42:2 as the reason for going to Egypt with Benjamin: “that we may live and not die.” Second, he expresses concern not only for Jacob but also for the family’s “little ones,” two of whom Reuben offered to have killed if necessary. Third, in contrast to Reuben, he puts himself up as a “pledge” for Benjamin’s safety, putting his family fortune on the line and offering to accept the blame forever if something happens to Benjamin. And, by the way, Judah says, if we hadn’t been cooling our heels here in Canaan, we could have made two trips to Egypt by now.

In Genesis 38, Judah shamefully gave a “pledge” to secure sexual favors from a woman he thought to be a prostitute. The “prostitute,” of course, was his daughter-in-law, Tamar, who awakened him to his responsibilities in the family of Abraham. Judah, who was a moral failure in multiple ways, has come a long way since Genesis 38. Moreover, this would not be the last time he would offer himself as a “pledge” for the sake of the family.

Furthermore, Judah, having lost two sons in Genesis 38, wants to save one brother, Simeon, and protect another brother, Benjamin.

If Joseph, back in Egypt, is testing his brothers’ character, Judah at this point is passing the test with flying colors.

## **Hope for sexual failures**

Judah was a moral failure in multiple ways, and he hit bottom when he abandoned the family covenant with God and paid for sex. He debased himself in self-satisfaction. Now, however, he’s devoting himself to self-sacrifice. Judah’s transformation began with public confession, back in Genesis 38.

Judah’s story offers hope for all of us who have made a wreck of our lives and especially for those of us who have failed sexually. The journey up from the bottom begins with confession, not only to God but also to at least one other person.

How will Jacob respond to Judah’s proposal?

## **Jacob parts with Benjamin**

**Genesis 43:11-14:**

**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.”**

Judah's offer, in contrast to Reuben's, wins Jacob over and even inspires Jacob.

Jacob suggests sweetening the pot. Three of the "choice fruits of the land," gum, balm, and myrrh, were also carried by the Ishmaelite traders to whom the brothers sold Joseph (Genesis 37:25). Jacob unwittingly reminds his sons of their crime and draws them in to making restitution for it.

Before the brothers returned from Egypt with the grain they purchased, Joseph had ordered that their money secretly be returned to their sacks. When the money was discovered, Jacob seemed to suspect his sons of foul play. Now, he grants that it may have been an "oversight."

Finally, and most significantly, Jacob agrees to part with Benjamin and commits his sons to God. Jacob, just like his sons, begins to involve God in his thinking: "May God Almighty grant you mercy . . ."

Jacob earlier imagined that if something happened to Benjamin, his sons "would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol" (Genesis 42:38). Now, he says, "And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."

Jacob now realizes what must be done and is willing to take the necessary risk. Judah has broken the stalemate between Joseph and Jacob. Judah's faith inspires his father's faith.

## Hope for the fearful

Jacob was paralyzed by fear of loss, but eventually, he was able to let go of his son and trust God. Judah's faith inspired Jacob to do so.

Jacob's story offers hope for those of us who are paralyzed by fear of loss. The more you live, the more you lose, so you have to learn how to let go. When you're obsessing about what you've lost and afraid of what you might lose, start hanging around people of faith. Faith inspires faith. Seeing faith in other people can help us let go and trust God.

How will Joseph respond when he sees Benjamin?

## A feast fit for kings

**Genesis 43:15-18:**

**So the men took this present, 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. 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."**

Twenty years ago, the brothers slaughtered an animal and dipped Joseph's coat in its blood in order to convince their father that Joseph was dead (Genesis 37:31). Now, Joseph slaughters an animal, ostensibly to dine with his brothers. Joseph prepares for his brothers a lavish banquet fit for royalty, which would be unprecedented for foreigners.

The brothers are justifiably fearful that the banquet is a trap, especially because they look like thieves because the money they used to buy grain with somehow ended up back in their sacks. They're worried that Joseph will "assault" them and make them "servants."

Well, that's what they did to Joseph, isn't it? They assaulted him and sold him into slavery. It looks as if God, through Joseph, is reminding the brothers of their sins and showing them what they deserve.

Whereas Joseph was at the mercy of his brothers in Genesis 37, the brothers are at the mercy of Joseph in Genesis 43.

## The steward assures the brothers

**Genesis 43:19-25:**

**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." 23 He replied, "Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money." Then he brought Simeon out to them. 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.

The brothers tell their unlikely story to Joseph's steward, who, shockingly, tells them not to worry about it. Whereas twenty years earlier the brothers "hated" Joseph and could not speak to him literally "in peace," Joseph's steward replies to them, "Peace to you" (Genesis 37:4). Whereas the brothers were "afraid" when they were brought to Joseph's house, the steward tells them "do not be afraid."

We know, of course, that Joseph gave orders to replace the brothers' money (Genesis 42:25). Whereas the brothers thought that God was punishing them, the steward, regardless of what he knows, concludes that God "has put treasure in your sacks for you" (Genesis 42:28). The brothers, Joseph, and Jacob have all, eventually, appealed to the God of Abraham in the narrative. Now even the steward, an Egyptian, sees God's hand at work.

## Joseph can't keep it together

Genesis 43:26-30:

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. 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!" 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.

When the brothers first came to Egypt, they bowed before Joseph, in partial fulfillment of Joseph's two dreams, which had his eleven brothers bowing down to him (Genesis 42:6). Back then, though, only ten brothers bowed to him, because Benjamin was back in the land of Canaan. Now, all eleven of Joseph's brothers, including Benjamin, bow before him.

However, God has a bigger purpose for Joseph's dreams than simply fulfilling them. He uses Joseph's dreams to test all the brothers, reconcile them to each other, and advance his purposes for the world through this family.

Joseph's schemes have succeeded in reuniting him with Benjamin, his only full brother. Again, Joseph invokes God, this time in his address to his long-lost brother: "God be gracious to you, my son!" Hiding behind the words "my son" are the words "my brother."

When Joseph first saw his brothers and then overheard them confessing their guilt to one another, he turned away from them and wept (Genesis 42:24). Once again, he can't keep it together. Speaking to Benjamin for the first time in twenty years—and speaking kind words—pushes Joseph over the edge.

Literally, Joseph's "heart yearned for his brother." He wanted desperately to be with his brother—and he *was* with his brother, but not as he wanted to be, because he was pretending to be someone else. Joseph isn't ready to reveal himself, so he excuses himself. It's not easy wearing two hats—that of an unfamiliar host and that of a long-lost brother—at the same party.

## Hope for victims

Joseph was a victim, but instead of holding a grudge against his brothers, he blesses them. Joseph had to work through a few things, recognizing that though his brothers wronged him, God had blessed him, first through Potiphar and second through Pharaoh. Seeing that God had blessed him, Joseph was able not only to forgive his brothers but also to bless them.

Joseph's story offers hope for those of us who have been victims of wrongdoing. If you've been wronged,

work it through with God and especially look for how he has blessed you despite, or even as a result of, what was done to you. Then, when you're able to forgive those who have wronged you, you might even consider how you might also bless them.

Can Joseph pull himself together?

## Joseph favors Benjamin

**Genesis 43:31-34:**

**Then he washed his face and came out. And controlling himself he said, "Serve the food." 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.**

Of course, the last time the brothers ate in Joseph's presence, Joseph was crying out from a pit into which they had thrown him. Now, the brothers fear that the man before them would make them servants, and if they only knew the identity of their host, they could justifiably fear something worse. But instead of making them servants, Joseph serves them—and treats them like royalty.

The seating arrangements heighten the tension. Joseph can't sit with the Egyptians, and he can't sit with his brothers. Where does he belong? Right now, he's a nowhere man.

At the beginning of Genesis 42, when Jacob first urged his sons to travel to Egypt to buy grain, he said to them, "Why do you look at one another?" (Genesis 42:1) Back then, Jacob was trying to light a fire under them. The narrator tells us the brothers once again "looked at one another," but now they don't need to go anywhere or do anything. They have gone where they needed to go and done what they needed to do. So they simply look at one another in amazement. They must be asking themselves all sorts of questions, chief among them, "Why is this man treating us this way?"

Joseph favors Benjamin, giving him way more food than his brothers, echoing the way their father favored him. The brothers, of course, responded to their father's favoritism by dispatching with Joseph. But is Joseph simply showing favoritism or is he testing his brothers to see how they respond to favoritism? Will they respond in jealousy the way they responded twenty years ago?

No, "they drank and were merry." No one says, "Hey, he got more than I did!" Twenty years—and Joseph's tests and graciousness—seem to have changed them. Everyone's guard is down, even if Joseph's mask is still on. What will it take for him to take it off?

Genesis 42 began with a famine. Genesis 43 ends with a feast. However, the brothers' amazement is only beginning.

## Hope for the jealous

The brothers had burned with jealousy envy because their father favored Joseph, but years later, when Joseph favored Benjamin, they celebrated. They were able to appreciate what they had, recognizing that what they had was unexpected and undeserved, and not resent what they didn't have.

The brothers' story offers hope to those of us who burn with jealousy and envy. Focus not on what others have, so that you become jealous and envious, but appreciate what you do have. Each of us has undeserved and uniquely designed gifts from God.

## Involve yourself with people

In Genesis 43, God is at work. Jacob invokes the name of God. Joseph invokes the name of God. Most intriguingly, even the Egyptian steward invokes the name of God.

God is at work not least to help the members of this fractured family cultivate what David Brooks calls eulogy virtues. How does he do it? In this narrative, God does it through other people. In Judah's life, he uses Tamar. In Jacob's life, he uses Judah. In Joseph's life, he uses Potiphar and Pharaoh. In the brothers' lives, he uses Joseph. God used other people to create openings for Judah, Jacob, Joseph, and the brothers to think and act differently.

God uses other people to create openings for us to think and act differently, sort of like a football coach designs blocking schemes for the offensive line

to create openings for the running back. Therefore, involve yourself with people and watch for the openings that God creates for you to think and act differently. Sometimes, those openings will be obvious. Other times, those openings will be subtle.

You will sometimes hear broadcasters call an opening that an offensive line creates “wide enough to drive a truck through.” Other times, you will hear them marvel that the running back even managed to see and slither through what seemed like only a crack of daylight.

## **Small group**

First, involve yourself with a small group of people who meet together regularly to share together, encourage one another, and inspire one another to think and act differently. “Iron sharpens iron, / and one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). I’m involved in leading three such groups at the church, and though it’s been a challenge, we’ve continued to meet one way or another during the pandemic. If you’re not part of such a group, seek out one of our pastors or elders or go to our website to explore the different opportunities.

M. Craig Barnes, who has been a pastor and a professor and is now president of Princeton Theological Seminary, extolls the virtues of such groups: “After years and years of directing flashy church programs and speaking at more conferences than I can remember, I am convinced that sustained transformation of human lives occurs best through these small circles of Bible study that meet in living rooms, dorms, conference rooms, and coffee shops all over the world.”<sup>2</sup>

## **One on one**

Second, find at least one person who you can meet one on one with at least from time to time.

Years ago, when I was training for ministry, I met every week with a pastor named Wayne Yamamoto. We talked about everything, and he didn’t shy away from asking probing questions. In fact, he was the first one to encourage me to look into my heart and discover some of my hidden motivations—which were preventing me from thinking and acting differently, by the way.

## **Bag of cookies**

Third, be aware of people around you, including people you’ve never met. You never know when God

will send someone your way to create an opening for you to think and act differently.

I heard this story years ago from a man named Sam Ericson:

A man dressed in a business suit bought a bag of cookies at Chicago O’Hare International Airport and sat down next to a young man who, well, wasn’t dressed in a business suit. The young man decided to help himself to one of the cookies. The businessman was upset but said nothing. Instead, he began to eat the cookies himself, hoping the young man would get the hint. However, the young man didn’t stop at one cookie. Instead, he continued helping himself to the bag of cookies as the businessman continued to fume.

Finally, when there was one cookie left, the young man grabbed it, smiled at the businessman, broke it in half, took with him one half, and walked away. Then the businessman picked up his coat to leave and noticed the bag of cookies that he had purchased.

Turns out both the businessman and the young man had each purchased a bag of cookies. The young man wasn’t helping himself to the businessman’s cookies. On the contrary, the businessman was helping himself to the young man’s cookies, albeit unwittingly. Whereas the businessman was fuming, the young man was nothing but generous.

Needless to say, the young man created an opening for the businessman to think and act differently.

In order to cultivate eulogy virtues, involve yourself with people and watch for the openings God creates for you to think and act differently.

## **Marriage supper of the Lamb**

Like the brothers who feared what Joseph would do to them, perhaps we fear what God would do to us. The brothers deserved to be assaulted and enslaved because of their treatment of Joseph. We deserve to be assaulted and enslaved because of our treatment of God and people. We deserve worse.

Shockingly, Joseph invited his brothers to a banquet. Shockingly, Jesus invites us to a banquet: “I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven . . .” (Matthew 8:11) Indeed, as the angel says to John in the

book of Revelation, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9).

On that day, we will look at one another with amazement, and we will drink and be merry with Jesus.

“He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love” (Song of Solomon 2:4).

## Endnotes

1 David Brooks, “*The Moral Bucket List*, New York Times (April 11, 2015).

2 M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 63.