



M E A L S F R O M M A R S
A P A R A B L E O F P R E J U D I C E & P R O V I D E N C E
B E N S C I A C C A



Change always begins with conversation. *Meals from Mars* is a conversation starter for those willing to dialogue. Ben Sciacca is a trusted voice filled with the compassion necessary to see gospel-centered change become reality in our social frameworks.

D. A. HORTON

Author of *Bound to Be Free*

Most Americans today are aware of the national divide that is pulling us apart at the seams. However, few are aware of how deep and complex this divide really is. Many choose to attribute it to race, class, or culture, but the issue defies all one-dimensional explanations. *Meals from Mars* brilliantly explores the many facets of this issue as it unfolds the compelling story of how two men and their families navigate these stormy waters. This novel is a useful and necessary tool to help the church begin to rediscover what keeps us from fully functioning as the Body of Christ.

CARL ELLIS JR.

Author of *Free at Last: The Gospel in the African American Experience*

Ben Sciacca has invited us into an important metropolitan tale full of juke and intrigue. He cleverly weaves the relevant issues of our day with a fast urban plot, which forces thought-provoking self-examination regardless of how you view the matter of lives or lives that matter.

JOHN WELLS

Rap artist The Tonic from The Cross Movement; president/CEO of Cross Movement Records and Issachar Media

Meals from Mars is truly a story America needs to hear. In an entertaining and powerfully engaging way, Ben Sciacca leads us to better understand the challenges of many of the racial tensions facing our nation. Even better, he shows us a glimpse of transformation that can happen in the context of unlikely relationships. I can't wait to give this book to all my friends.

DANNY WUERFFEL

1996 Heisman Trophy winner and executive director of Desire Street Ministries (Atlanta, Georgia)

Meals from Mars is a masterfully compelling narrative that proves helpful in illustrating the difficult nuances of race in America. Sciacca humanizes the struggles of the urban poor and challenges the reader to charitably consider alternative worldviews. *Meals from Mars* invites you to join an American journey, involving the usual suspects, that promises to spark unusually beneficial dialogue.

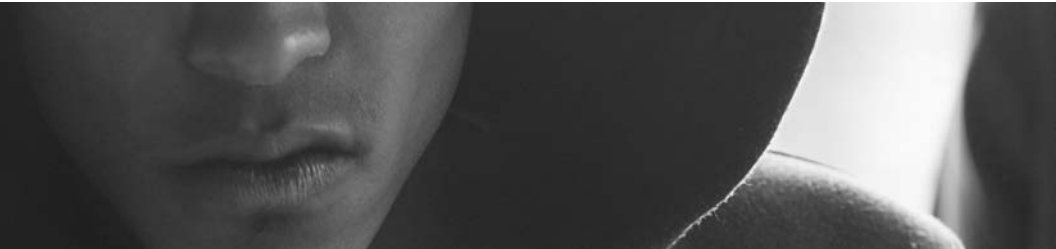
JASON COOK

Associate pastor of preaching, Fellowship Memphis

Conversations about racial tension are often tough for a number of reasons. It becomes easy to talk past one another when the conversation is reduced to arguments about abstract principles divorced from actual names and faces. *Meals from Mars* doesn't allow that to happen. An eagerness to speak is replaced with silence as you find empathy and sympathy rising up out of nowhere. I couldn't put it down. Such an amazing read. A great primer for getting anyone engaged in this conversation.

JOHN ONWUCHEKWA

Lead pastor, Cornerstone Church, Atlanta



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Meals from Mars: A Parable of Prejudice and Providence

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*For my beloved wife, Sara. I'm so grateful for you and
your fierce love for me, our family, and our city.*

(Jeremiah 29:7)

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THE END

1:12 p.m., Tuesday before Thanksgiving

“STEP OUT OF THE VEHICLE WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!”

Clouds of steam billowed from under the crumpled hood of the Lexus. Glass from the driver-side rear window lay strewn along the road, sparkling like diamonds on the glistening blacktop. Two police SUVs encircled the wreckage, their lights ricocheting around the snow-laden trees that hugged the edges of the road.

Jim slowly lifted his aching head and squinted through the window at the scene outside the car. Through the iced front windshield he could see the shadowy silhouettes of three officers with drawn pistols. They shielded themselves behind their open car doors. A thick hot strand of blood meandered slowly down Jim’s face from a ragged cut above his left eye. His head throbbed.

One of the police officers was bellowing something, but Jim couldn't make out the words. He slowly rolled his eyes over to the driver seat to see if Malik was okay.

Malik was alert, wide-eyed, as the red and blue lights refracted onto his face like a kaleidoscope. His hair was littered with broken glass. Clouds of breath emerged from his open mouth in the frozen air. An abrasion on the side of his face was spotted with blood. Probably the airbag. He glanced for a moment at Jim out of the corner of his eye before leaning forward and fumbling around the brake pedal.

"Come on, Malik," Jim said with a hoarse whisper. "It's all over now, son."

Malik ignored Jim. His eyes flashed as his hand found what he was looking for. As he pulled the black handgun from the floorboards, he groaned.

Jim looked at the gun, now resting in the young man's lap, and then at Malik. "Think, son," Jim said, placing his hand on the young man's shoulder. "This is not a good idea. It's over."

Malik frowned as he stared out the window.

"Get out of the vehicle with your hands in the air. Now!" the officer hollered again.

"You're right, Jim," Malik said in a near whisper. "It *is* all over—for me at least."

Jim swallowed and shot a nervous look at the police cars. Malik continued to stare out the front window with a grim face.

“Just give me the gun, Malik,” Jim said. He placed his open hand in front of Malik’s chest. “Those men outside will kill you if you step out with that.”

Malik exhaled a deep sigh but said nothing.

“Give me the gun, Malik, and we both walk out of here alive today.”

Malik took a long look at the gun in his hand. He shook his head. “Man, too much has happened. Too much. I’m dead no matter what.” A slight smile emerged at the corner of his lips as a lone tear fell from his eye. He stuffed the gun into the front waistband of his pants. The handle was barely visible. He pressed the button to unlock his door.

Jim grasped frantically for Malik’s shirt, but the young man opened the door and stepped out of the car into the frigid air before he could catch him.

A F T E R W O R D

ON JULY 12, 2013, in the middle of a segregated city, our church seemed a model multicultural gathering. Our small-group meetings were diverse. Our pastoral staff was diverse. The music performed on Sunday morning had no allegiance to a specific genre. It was the utopia of diversity that so many pastors desire today.

However, July 13, 2013, created a pivotal change at my church. That day, six Florida jurors acquitted George Zimmerman in the killing of teenager Trayvon Martin. Social media was ablaze with both adulation and condemnation.

July 14 was not a regular Sunday for many. Drove of Americans entered their churches with a heavy burden: the knowledge that they lived in a country that condoned injustice. Many sat waiting for the pastor to reconcile their concerns to a good and faithful God. However, many church services went on as though the world outside wasn't experiencing a traumatic event. There was no mention of the case. There was no attempt to touch the tension.

I have to admit that I was livid. I did not expect my pastors to approach the stage wearing hoodies in veneration of Trayvon. However, I did expect them to pause from their regularly scheduled agenda to address a pronounced tension in our congregation. Many of the minority members of the church felt there was an elephant that needed to be addressed, a national issue that carried heavy implications regarding their identity. Many of the white members wondered why this was such a big deal to people who had no relational connection to Trayvon. The division was obvious—and yet disregarded. For months there was only silent hope that this agitation would go away. It never did.

What did we need in that moment? We needed reconciliation. We needed to talk!

I would reason that my church is a microcosm of America. Brothers and sisters, we need to talk! Furthermore, when we talk we need to not assume the worst in each other but affirm the image of God in one another. This is precisely what *Meals from Mars* is attempting to do.

Conversations around race can be toxic, difficult, and subversive. However, one of the most destructive ways to enter into a conversation about race is to ignore that we have different opinions and experiences. What I learned about our church community is that we shared in proximity but lacked in authenticity. We sacrificed crucial conversations for the sake of apparent harmony. That is not love, nor does it produce true community.

To live as if we are all the same is to be foolish and irresponsible. We acknowledge variety in the animal kingdom. A zebra is beautiful because of its design. It's admired because it's different from the stallion. We appreciate the variations of the seasons in a year. We don't ignore the snow when it falls. Many in the faith community are well-meaning people who desire unity across racial and cultural lines. Therefore they declare they are "colorblind." However, the declaration of colorblindness doesn't remove the tension. It perpetuates a dangerous narrative that how God created me isn't fascinating enough to acknowledge. The simplest indication of ethnic importance is the fact that God made us this way. All his creation was good!

When we *do* decide to talk, we cannot sweep the truth of history under the rug of reconciliation. We must deal with truth in order to get to reconciliation. We must approach the table with our feelings and agendas submitted to the glorious Lord, speaking candidly from our personal experience.

We must also be allowed to mess up without the threat of being labeled racists or race baiters. We must approach these conversations with reckless compassion—the kind of compassion that may be misunderstood and mistreated but that still extends a hand of grace.

I ask that we stop ignoring racial differences and love each other *in light of* our differences. We should desire to know and understand our brothers and sisters so we can love them and God better. Our color matters because our identities matter. We are creations of the Most High—a motley

demonstration of his creativity. He desires that we find every aspect of our differences in the intentional design of creation.

Outside the gospel, there is every reason to hoard power and privilege. But in the house of God we are called to consider others before ourselves. Outside the gospel, there is legitimacy in feeling bitter when offended. But in the house of God, it brings dignity to turn the other cheek.

I would commission us all to be slow to speak and quick to listen, to surrender our presuppositions so that true dialogue can take place. We must throw away bitterness and entitlement because we are indebted to the Maker of all creation, and we must be ready to forgive as Christ forgave us. I believe *Meals from Mars* can push us in the direction that creates authentic dialogue.

In August 2014, an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Once again we had a traumatic event in our country. However, there was a different response from my church. Our pastors tackled the issue head-on. We had church-led discussions around race and culture. People were able to vent, cry, and argue about the state of America. Once emotions were released, we felt one step closer to real community and reconciliation. I praise God for the courage and wisdom displayed in our leaders. It's time for that same courage and wisdom to be displayed throughout America.

Now let's talk!!

SHO BARAKA