

Genesis 41:41-57, No. 66
“God’s Faithfulness and Ours”
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Text Comment

- v.42 So many things in this particular narrative – for example, the details of life and government service in Egypt in those days -- have been confirmed by archeological research. The title “Royal Seal-Bearer” was well known in the Egyptian bureaucracy. Similarly linen is known to have been the dress of the court in the Egypt of those days and many paintings show the Pharaoh placing a gold chain around the necks of servants he was rewarding. There is even one painting that shows this gold chain as a detail in the investiture of a vizier.
- v.43 This is the first mention of “chariot” in the Bible, here used not as an instrument of war-making but as a status symbol. [Sarna, 287] “Bow down” or “Bend the knee!” is a guess. The word is not found anywhere else. But clearly Joseph’s high status was being declared in some fashion.
- v.45 Giving Egyptian names to Syro-Palestinians is also a custom well-attested in the archaeological record. The new name served to “Egyptianize” Joseph. [Sarna, 287] Such marriages were not forbidden in the law of Israel, if you remember. And, in this case, it was a political marriage, setting a seal on Joseph’s promotion. She was to be his only wife and they would have two sons. We may hope it became a loving marriage as well. On is seven miles north of modern Cairo and was then the center of Egyptian sun worship. The high priest of On was an exalted figure, so Joseph married into Egyptian nobility. [Sarna, 288]
- v.46 Joseph, you remember, was 17 when he was sold into slavery by his brothers. He had been a slave or prisoner for 13 years.
- v.49 When the Lord had said seven years of plenty; he meant seven years of *plenty!*
- v.51 Manasseh sounds like “forgetting hardship.” That strange phrase “hardship and all my father’s house” is an instance of a common figure of speech known as *hendiadys*, in which a single idea is expressed by two terms connected by an “and.” We say, for example, that it is “nice and warm,” meaning “nicely warm.” In other words, Joseph was thinking of his suffering as a young man years before in his family home in Canaan.
- v. 52 Ephraim sounds like “making fruitful.”
- v.54 Seven year famines were a familiar feature of life in the ANE. Indeed, it appears from the frequent use of “seven years” in reference to famine that “seven year famine” was a conventional way of referring to very severe famines, as we might speak of a “hundred year” flood or hurricane today. Lower or northern Egypt is virtually rainless. In those

days Egypt depended entirely upon the flooding of the Nile during the three summer months. A famine would result not from inadequate rain in Egypt but from inadequate rains in the southern Sudan a thousand miles further up the Nile which, in turn, would prevent the Nile from flooding in northern Egypt. Without that flooding, Egyptian agriculture was doomed. The failure of rains in Syria and Palestine would also lead to poor harvests there. What was unusual was that there should be a failure of rains in Palestine and the upper Nile at the same time. How severe famines in Egypt could be – Egypt remember is a thin fertile strip between two deserts – is indicated by two separate records of its inhabitants resorting to cannibalism. The description of the famine emphasizes the severity of it. Just as the plenty had been remarkable, so now the famine.

v.57 “The whole world” a typical hyperbole, exaggeration for effect. But, in this case, it hints at and sets the stage for the next scene in the unfolding drama of Joseph’s reconciliation with his family.

In his beautiful book on the life of Joseph, George Lawson, the 19th century Scot, drew attention to the remarkable changes that overtook Joseph over the course of his life.

“The life of different men presents not greater varieties to our observation than the life of the same men has sometimes done. How different is a king’s grandson, a shepherd, a lawgiver, from one another! and yet Moses sustained all these characters in different periods of the same life. Joseph was in early days the favourite son of a venerable father. He was, in the next period of his life, a slave, and then a prisoner, held in long confinement under the imputation of one of the worst...of crimes; but in the best and longest period of his eventful life, he was the lord of all the land of Egypt, trusted with all the power of the king, and honoured by the people as their saviour from destruction. Let us not be greatly dejected by adversity, let us not trust in prosperity. It is a storm and tempest to-day; it may be sunshine tomorrow. If it should, storms may again disturb our tranquility. Nothing is permanent in this world of changes. Nothing is more foolish than the presumption that to-morrow shall be as [today].” [*The History of Joseph*, 109]

Well, so with Joseph. The path of his life, under God’s merciful hand and by the strangest of turns, had led him, at last, to the highest pinnacle of the greatest court of the world of that day. He wasn’t simply the second most powerful man in Egypt, he was the second most powerful man in the world!

This completes the four-act drama in which the narrator tells us the story of Joseph’s rise from slave to ruler: the scene in Potiphar’s house; the scene in the prison with the cup-bearer and the baker; the scene in which Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dreams; and, now, the conclusion, Joseph in charge in Egypt as events unfold precisely as he had said they would.

With the entire story before us, now, we are able to perceive its lesson, as a whole. Obviously, as we have said many times now, the greatest demonstration of this history is of the providence and faithfulness of God. In this most amazing way, a way designed to leave the greatest impression on our minds, the Lord inexorably led Joseph into a position from which he might save the covenant family from death and extinction and, in the process, be the instrument of the spiritual

renewal of that family and, especially, of Judah, as well as be a blessing from God to the whole world. At no point was it clear how this would be accomplished; at no point could Joseph see how he would be rescued and exalted, but that is what happened. *At every step the eventual outcome was utterly unlikely, humanly speaking.* That sermon on the providence of God can be preached from any one of these texts – and we have already preached it several times – as it can be preached from the entire text. We have noted from the very beginning of our studies in Genesis what sophisticated theology meets us in this very first book of the Bible, and especially what a sophisticated, developed theology of divine grace to undeserving sinners.

But, we would miss one of the narrator's major points if we did not also take note of Joseph's own faithfulness and the reward that came to him for it. Joseph, you remember, as we first met him, was a bratty youth seriously lacking in good sense, a young man who made matters worse in his family rather than better. But, by the grace of God and through the trials and afflictions that God appointed for him, he matured and became the Lord's faithful covenant partner.

One of the arguments that used to be offered as proof that Joseph was a type of Christ, that his life was an enacted prophecy of Jesus Christ, was that there was no record of a sin anywhere in the narrative of Joseph's life. It was not denied that he was a sinner, but it was pointed out that the history *doesn't record* any of his sins. Well, I don't think that view can be maintained any longer. It seems clear to me now, with a new and deeper appreciation of the narrative art on display in the book of Genesis – how much is said with how little, how subtle the indications of the narrator are – that we are intended to see Joseph's early behavior for what it was: brash and foolish and proud. He was not without sin in the narrative of his life. We expect some defects of character, spoiled as he had been by his ineffective father as Jacob was.

Nevertheless, there is also no doubt that the narrator expects his readers to see in Joseph a man who through suffering matured into a faithful man of the covenant, a man noteworthy for his faithfulness. He was so trustworthy, able, and conscientious that, though a slave, and a foreign slave at that, he very soon was managing his master's business and so completely that his master stopped paying attention to his own affairs. That is how trustworthy Joseph was! This was true both in Potiphar's house and later in the prison. He was scrupulously faithful to the demands of God's holiness in the matter of Potiphar's wife, even though that faithfulness cost him dearly. He was patient in the face of unjust suffering, as is obvious from the trust invested in him both at Potiphar's house and in the prison. *He was not spending his days and nights complaining in annoying fashion about all the injustice that had been done against him as we might expect him to have done! Nobody who is an annoyance to everyone around him gets invested with that kind of confidence and that kind of responsibility. He was not spending his days and nights moping!* He was up and doing! He was forthright in his confession of the Lord his God, even in his very first meeting with Pharaoh and even though it was the first time he had been out of prison in some years. When most men would have nodded their heads at whatever the king said for fear of giving offense, the first thing out of Joseph's mouth was a correction of Pharaoh's theology. Why? Because the king had given him credit that belonged to God alone. Here was a man who had been imprisoned unjustly, had been thirteen years a slave or prisoner, but still remained steadfastly loyal to the Lord God! Wonderful!

And, now, we find Joseph, in luxury and with great power, the same man spiritually he was when a slave and a prisoner. The names of his two sons are beautiful indications of that in this narrative. *Both of the names he gave to his sons are confessions of his faith in God. Both are demonstrations of his gratitude to God.* “God has made me forget all my trouble” and “God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.” Joseph and his wife Asenath were rich. They lived in a big house. No doubt they had dinner parties – they did that kind of thing in the ancient world, you know – and guests would come to the Joseph home. And Joseph, of course, before the boys went up to bed would introduce his sons to his guests – this is “Causing to forget” and this is “Wonderfully fruitful.” And they would say, “Those are interesting names, never heard them before.” And he or Asenath would say, “Come on into the living room; we’ll have our hors d’oeuvres in there and I’ll tell you the story of how these boys got those names.” Both are means, the sort of means godly men and women always use, to fix forever in mind and memory the faithfulness of God, how true the Lord has been to his word. The Lord had promised Joseph, “I will be with you...” *and so he had been!* And both Joseph and his sons would remember that!

And now we find Joseph being faithful still. Just as he was faithful over Potiphar’s house and then over the prison, he was faithful over Egypt. Joseph’s advice and his faithful and wise leadership were as important to Egypt’s salvation as was his prediction of the future in the first place. See how the narrator emphasizes Joseph’s activity. “He went through the land” (in v. 46) suggests that Joseph wasted no time familiarizing himself with Egypt, with figuring out exactly what had to be done, how it was going to be done, who was going to do it. Together with what follows it suggests the frenetic pace of Joseph’s activity during the years of plenty, the energy of his administration, as we might say today. He was going to make the very most of the opportunity that God had given him. He was going to fulfill his calling to the maximum extent!

And there is more, I think, the narrator intends us to notice. There is no hint whatsoever that Joseph sought or ever would have sought revenge against those who had mistreated him. Think of what he could have done to Potiphar and his lying wife from his position as the second man in the Kingdom of Egypt. She had lied about him and, out of sheer spite, got him put in prison. He was a young man, perhaps barely in his twenties, when he was sent to prison. She would have been content for him to rot there for the rest of his life! How satisfying to imagine Joseph summoning her to the court. “Ah, Mrs. Potiphar, we meet again!” But he did nothing of the kind. Nor did he repay the cup-bearer for his inexcusable neglect of Joseph after Joseph had done him such a good turn. He exacted no vengeance against those who had done him terrible wrongs. Instead, entering his new situation, he sought to serve the Lord in it as faithfully as he had served him in slavery and imprisonment.

We have been observing the grace of God throughout this entire narrative and, indeed, throughout the entire book of Genesis. This first book of the Bible, this most ancient book, has from its very beginning a profoundly sophisticated theology, and the lynchpin of that theology is the grace and mercy of God to helpless and guilty sinners. And we have seen that doctrine of divine grace, of *sola gratia*, most clearly in the Joseph material. It is God who protected him through it all, God who brought him indeed into those punishing trials, precisely that he might save Joseph from his brothers and then use Joseph to save his brothers. Those trials were going to be the means of something extraordinary in the history of the world. And, as we’re going to see in the chapter that follows, something still more extraordinary in the history of the covenant

family. Joseph was grateful to Pharaoh, no doubt, but he also knew where his blessings came from. Joseph himself confessed that his life has been ordered by the Lord and that it had been the story of God's kindness to him.

But, alongside of that and running through that is the very real emphasis of the entire book and the narrator here on the importance, the necessity of our faithfulness to God and of God's rewarding that faithfulness. Genesis is also the story of active men and women trusting God and serving him, *leaving a mark on the world around them for the Lord's sake*. No doubt, Joseph would have been the first to say, that it was the Lord who enabled him to resist the temptation of Potiphar's wife and that it was the Lord who granted him the endurance of faith in prison, and he does say explicitly that it was the Lord who interpreted the dreams. But Joseph's faithfulness is a major emphasis of this history, as has been the faithfulness of others before him. Noah, Abraham, even, for all his faults and failures, Jacob. The Bible is not chary to say that God honors those who honor him, even as it teaches us that without God and God's grace, we can do nothing.

In David's great celebration of the grace of God in 2 Samuel 22, where we read such sentiments as "The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God...in whom I take refuge...my refuge and my savior; I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise; ...he rescued me from...my foes who were too strong for me," we also read, "To the faithful, you show yourself faithful...you save the humble..." [22:27-28]

We will not be true to the mind of the Holy Spirit speaking in Holy Scripture if we do not pay attention and take to heart the emphasis that is placed on Joseph's faithfulness and God's reward of that faithfulness. We've had this point made explicitly many times already in Genesis. On Mt. Moriah, after Abraham proved his faithfulness and his trust in God by his readiness to sacrifice Isaac, the Lord said to him, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that *because you have done this* and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, *because you have obeyed me*." [22:16-18] And, later, the Lord said the same thing to Isaac. "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky...*because Abraham obeyed me* and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws." [26:4-5]

Joseph is quick to say himself, as he does here in the naming of his sons, that his deliverance was all of God and all of grace. But the narrative has celebrated Joseph's covenantal integrity and does not hesitate to connect his deliverance and his great reward – now second man in Egypt! – with his faithfulness to God even in great trial. It is true, absolutely, that Joseph became the vizier of Egypt because God was with him. No one knew that better or was more eager to say it than Joseph himself. But, it is also true that Joseph received that great honor and power because he had been faithful to God. Those facts are not contradictions of one another. However hard it may be for us to understand precisely how to reconcile the Bible's emphases on sovereign grace and human responsibility, what is unquestionable is that both emphases may be found in the Bible from its beginning to its very last page, and together on every one of those pages. Fact is, we are given no reason to think that Joseph would have risen to power as he did were it not for

his faithfulness to God in Potiphar's house, in the prison, and in his first encounter with Pharaoh. *God saved him by means of his faithfulness, not in spite of it or without regard to it, or in indifference to it.*

And so it continues. "By the grace of God I am what I am," says Paul. But the same apostle and Christian man says, "I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith," and – for that reason, he clearly means – "there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness."

How many times have we spoken of this, brothers and sisters? And how many more times will we speak of it, if we are to be faithful to the teaching of God's holy Word? God's grace is at every turn our only hope. His promise, his presence, his love, his faithfulness, his power is our salvation and our entire salvation. I believe that and I know you do as well. I want us to be people of the grace of God to the backbone, who love to give glory to God for his grace, for his goodness, for his provision, for his control, his oversight, and his direction in every circumstance of our lives, who, from the bottom of our hearts, are always giving glory to God for every good thing, including our own faith and obedience.

But, I also want us to be *up and doing*, proving ourselves faithful to God, serving the Lord and his kingdom. I want us to live in integrity as those who have been brought by his grace into covenant with himself. I want us to live in the confidence that the Lord will honor, as he has always honored, those who honor him.

These things are not in conflict with one another – though Christian history and developments in our own day continue to demonstrate Christians' almost uncanny knack for setting them over against one another and pitting them against one another. The Bible never seeks to reconcile divine grace and our responsibility because reconciliation is for enemies not for friends, and in the Bible God's grace and a Christian's obedience and service are friends, not enemies.

You know how often the Bible speaks as if it were all God's doing: salvation and every part of it, including the faith, repentance, and obedience of Christians. And the Bible speaks that way because these things *are* all God's doing. But you also know, if you read the Bible, how often the Bible speaks of a Christian's faithfulness, obedience, and loyalty to God as the reason why God has blessed and rewarded him. This narrative is entirely typical. We have a man God has delivered and exalted in defiance of all appearances. And we have a man who trusted the Lord and served him through it all. If Joseph's life is a lesson in the providence, the faithfulness, and the mercy of God, it is also a lesson in the blessing that God bestows on those who trust and serve him and the remarkable blessing he bestows on those who trust and serve him to a remarkable degree.

Much as this narrative contains a striking lesson in the providence of a gracious and merciful God, so it contains this lesson: "...the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless." [Psalm 84:11] or "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun." [37:4-6]

Joseph did that, and look what God did for him! Brothers and sisters, take heart. We have not only the promise of God's care and provision and grace, we have the promise of his reward as we trust and obey our covenant God, our heavenly Father, and our merciful savior. Joseph is one of many men and women in the Bible whose lives are recorded for us precisely to demonstrate both of those facts!

Absolutely, we must be careful here. We must never forget the grace and working of God that lies beneath everything in our lives – the hard times and the happy, the trials and the triumphs. Joseph did not forget, even as he was being so conspicuously faithful to God. His sons weren't named "I have been faithful to God" but, "God has been faithful to me"!

But, I say once more, you cannot read the Bible and deny that God expects his children to be faithful to him and that he delights to reward those of his children who are noteworthy in their faithfulness to him as Joseph surely was. The story of Joseph inspires us not only because it is the demonstration of how perfect and certain is the providence of God, but also how lavishly he rewards those who love and him serve him in the thick and thin of life.

Joseph, like Elijah centuries later, was a man like us. He had his stumbles, his doubts, his fears. He was not sinless, the little brat! But he was faithful and became more and more faithful through the course of his life, and, in particular, was faithful when tested and tried. And look what God did for him! And look what God did *through* him! *His faith made Joseph a doer of great things!*

We should aspire to be like Joseph, a man of covenantal integrity, of faithfulness and steadfast loyalty to the Lord God, a man of responsible *action*. And we should do so, supremely, because we serve a God whose ways, however far above our ways, are always holy, just, and good, and supremely gracious toward us. A life of reverence for God for *that reason* will be a life upon which God lavishes his reward. When and how only he knows. That he will who can deny who watches Joseph in his chariot, *Joseph* the former slave, the former convict, with the runners calling all to attention as the great man passes by. In keeping the commandments of God there is a *great reward!*