

Genesis 43:1-34, No. 68**“Reading the Signs”****September 24, 2017****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

This 43rd chapter continues the story begun in chapter 42. Here begins the account of the second journey of Jacob’s sons to Egypt, which account will not be concluded until 45:15. The chapter divisions, of course, are arbitrary – they were added long after the Bible was complete – and have nothing to do with the organization of the material by the narrator himself. Still, it would have to be a very long reading and a correspondingly long sermon, to take the entire narrative of the second journey to Egypt under our view this morning. I had a pastor in Aberdeen, William Still, who wouldn’t have minded reading the entire text and preaching every truth he found in it. The first evening sermon I heard him give lasted two hours! I fear he loved the Bible more than I do, but at least I love my reputation more than he did his!

Text Comment

The opening scene parallels the opening scene in chapter 42. Once again we hear the family discussion that preceded the trip to Egypt.

- v.2 “Buy us a little food,” as if it were a simple trip to the market. Jacob seems to have been hoping that something could be done without involving Benjamin. So he didn’t bring up the problem of Simeon’s imprisonment and the great Egyptian’s demand to see his youngest son.
- v.3 In a development that will prove more and more significant as the story unfolds, Judah had now assumed the leadership of the family. Why we are not told. He was not the next oldest son. Judah was Leah’s fourth son.
- v.6 So like us, grumbling about the past long after anything can be done about it. Jacob was just stalling.
- v.7 That was a self-serving account. They had, you remember, volunteered the information because they thought it was the only way of clearing themselves of the charge of espionage.
- v.8 Unlike Reuben’s rash promise of 42:37, Judah wisely appealed to Jacob’s paternal feelings and self-interest. Then he offered himself as a guarantee of Benjamin’s safety. Benjamin is described as a boy and throughout the section his youth will be remarked on, but his age is never reported.
- v.14 As in the case of his reunion with Esau years before, Jacob trusted the outcome to God but took clear steps to produce a favorable outcome. Remember Oliver Cromwell’s instruction to his soldiers: “Trust God and keep your powder dry.” And you will see how the divine plot has come full circle. They were now carrying back to Egypt much more

than the twenty shekels they got years before for Joseph. A caravan once took one brother *to* Egypt; now one returns to rescue another brother *from* Egypt.

- v.16 “When Joseph saw Benjamin...” implies that the arrangements that follow were prompted by Benjamin’s arrival. Remember, we said last week that Joseph’s actions were carefully planned to bring his brothers to spiritual renewal and reconciliation *and* that Benjamin was the key to those plans.
- v.18 For Joseph’s brothers, the invitation to dine at the Egyptian’s house was a worrying over-reaction. They just wanted their brother, their grain, and the highway home. Their consciences started working over-time as they waited for lunch, worried that they were being set up for some catastrophe. They were probably aware that high Egyptian officials had dungeons in their home. [Sarna, 300]
- v.23 The steward’s answer and the appearance of Simeon allayed the brothers’ fears. Clearly the steward was in on Joseph’s plan.
- v.26 As prophesied in the dream Joseph had years before, all his brothers were now bowing down to him. The fact that Jacob was not yet present to bow down to him, as in Joseph’s second dream, prompted the next question.
- v.32 In fact the Egyptians nursed such racial and religious feelings of superiority in regard to a number of different peoples. [Sarna, 302]
- v.34 As we said last week, Joseph was using Benjamin as his surrogate. He gave him preferential treatment, as Jacob had once given him preferential treatment, preferential treatment that had been the ruin of the family. It was a test. And we can very easily see the spiritual change that had overtaken the family. The brothers did not resent the preference Benjamin received but enjoyed the feast together with him, a brotherly scene the narrator wants us to notice, as indicated by the last phrase.

Several Lord’s days past we considered Joseph as a type of Christ, an enacted, embodied prophesy of the Coming One who would suffer on behalf of his brothers and reconcile his brethren to himself and save the world from death. It is a marvel how we have the Bible’s whole message, its great proclamation about salvation and a Savior, already woven into the fabric of the history recorded in this very first book. We began our studies in Genesis by noting how sophisticated the theology was that met us in the very first chapters of the Bible. And it has continued to be so.

And there is more here still. Joseph is not only type of Christ, a Christ-figure long before-hand. He is, in fact, a type of God himself, the God of providence, the God of an over-ruling control of the affairs of mankind and, in particular, of his people. We have already said that one of the great theological themes of the entire Joseph story is that of the providence of God. That thesis is going to be directly stated in 45:5-8 and again, still more famously, in 50:20. “You meant it for evil. God meant it for good.” All that transpired in the kidnapping of Joseph by his brothers, his being sold a slave into Egypt, and the strange and wonderful circumstances by which he rose to

power in Egypt, was God's doing first and more profoundly than it was the doing of the evil brothers, or Potiphar's wife, or Pharaoh, or Joseph himself. They may have acted sinfully or wisely, for this reason or that, but God overruled all of their intentions and actions to accomplish *his* purpose, the saving of the covenant people, both physically and spiritually.

Now, we could wait to make that point again until we got to the summary statement in chapter 45, but we would miss some of the most compelling evidence for and beautiful development of the doctrine of divine providence in this history itself, if we did so. For Joseph is a picture of God in this material, of God working behind the scenes, controlling and directing affairs to produce the intended result and fulfill his purpose. In Joseph's direction of affairs we are given to see something of what we are to understand and believe about the providence of God, his control over every detail of our lives *so as to accomplish in them what he intends*.

Proof that we are to see that doctrine in this history of Joseph's interaction with his brothers comes in two parts. *First*, we said last Lord's Day morning that Joseph took the tack he did, he dealt with his brothers as he did – in hiding his identity, in his abruptness and suspicion in dealing with them, in demanding Benjamin's presence, in holding Simeon a hostage, etc. – precisely to effect the spiritual renewal, repentance, and reconciliation of his family. He was, in other words, *orchestrating events* to bring holy results to pass, *exactly what God does by his providence*. The text itself, in other words, says that what Joseph did was the kind of thing that God did and does: in this same history and in all human history. Joseph himself will tell his brothers at the end that all of this was God's doing.

Second, in the midst of the material we read this morning, we were given an explicit confession of the working of divine providence, all the more impressive for being on the lips of a pagan. In v. 23, in answer to the brothers' worried protestations of innocence in the matter of the silver returned to their sacks, Joseph's servant replied,

“It's all right, don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks...”

Well it was Joseph who *ordered* the money put back in their sacks as they returned to Canaan from their first journey; it was Joseph's servant himself who actually *put* the silver in the grain sacks. But, it was God who did it. The narrator expects us to agree with that. He is going to tell us directly, in due time, that it was indeed God who did all of this. Joseph, then, was in God's place, is a God-figure in the narrative. He was, of course, the agent of God's providence, but, in an intermediate way, he acted the part of God in his direction of the affairs of his brothers. And, that being so, here in Joseph's behavior there are some important lessons in the providence of God and in our observing it and responding to it.

I. First, we are given here a picture of the mystery, the inscrutable nature of God's plan.

The reader understands throughout, of course, that Joseph was acting for the good of his family and that events were moving inexorably toward a most wonderful climax and resolution. *But as those events unfolded, the brothers did not know this; they did not dream of the happy ending that was to come!*

Quite the contrary! One of the really interesting and very human features of the narrative, is the mood swings through which the brothers pass: at one moment relieved, at another terrified, at another gaily unconcerned, though, all the while Joseph has exactly the same attitude toward them and is seeking exactly the same result with everything he does.

When they first arrived in Egypt, they were taken to Joseph's house, a development they had not anticipated and did not understand. They worked themselves into a real fright, thinking that they were being set up to be massacred or imprisoned. It was in that state of fear that they pled their innocence with Joseph's steward.

His comforting answer consoled them and put their fears to rest. But their uncertainty was peaked again when they discovered that somehow they had been seated in the exact order of their ages – and they were old enough for their relative ages no longer to be so obvious. They wondered what this could mean. But, they ate a fine dinner and drank lots of wine and at the end of the material we read, they were feeling fine again, at peace with the world.

Unbeknownst to them as they enjoyed the feast, the most terrifying and disheartening developments were just around the corner: Benjamin would be accused of theft, they would have to offer themselves to the Egyptian as slaves – imagining then that they would never see their father or homeland or families again.

We have before us a roller-coaster of emotions, but, and here is the point, *nothing changes at all in Joseph's plan or intention for his brothers!* His plan and purpose for them was the same when they were terrified as when they were enjoying the good food and drink at Joseph's dining table. They were as surely moving to the appointed end when they were trembling with fear as when they were gaily passing the food to one another across Joseph's enormous and sumptuously laden table.

He was always working toward their blessing but they could not see it. They saw only alternations of dark and light, of what they took to be good or bad. They saw such things as very different things, but they were all one providence of God moving according to one holy and happy purpose.

No one could put this better than Samuel Rutherford.

“The Providence of God hath two sides; one black and sad, another white and joyful.... Adam's first sin, was the devil and hell digging a hole through the comely and beautiful frame of the creation of God; and that is the dark side of Providence: but the flower of Jesse springing up, to take away sin, and to paint out to men and angels the glory of a heaven, and a new world of free grace – that is a lightsome side of Providence. Christ scourged; Christ in a case, that he cannot command a cup of water; Christ dying, shamed, forsaken, is black: but Christ, in that same work redeeming the captives of hell, opening to sinners forfeited paradise, that is fair and white. Joseph, weeping in the prison for no fault, is foul and sad; but Joseph brought out to reign as half a king, to keep alive the

church of God in great famine, is joyful and glorious.” [*The Trial and Triumph of Faith*, 26-27]

The same events, seemingly so terrible at the time, produced in due time such wonderful results. Joseph’s plan was unknown to his brothers; they had no idea of the significance of the events as he unfolded them one after another. They saw only a succession of unrelated events, some good, some bad. They could not read the meaning of the whole. Only Joseph saw that; and only God sees that single purpose and intention in the succession of events that makes up your life and mine.

But, to know they *are* meaningful, even if we cannot see the meaning; to know that our Father in heaven is *always* well disposed to us, always seeking our blessing, our happiness, our salvation, and our blessing, and is seeking them as much with the dark things as the light things, *is a large part of what it means to live by faith*.

In one of John Newton’s letters he tells his correspondent about a woman who, years before, had been hit by a carriage while crossing a London street. Her thigh was broken and she was taken to a nearby house. People gathered around her, expressing their concern, as people will, but she said, “I thank you for your pity; but all is very well, and I hope I have not one bone in my body but is willing to be broken, if such be the Lord’s will.” [*Works*, vi, 369] If God did not spare his only son for you, then surely you can be confident that he loves you and is after what is best for you. We tend to say, “The Lord is good” when something happy has happened to us; when the Lord has given us something we are glad to have. But God is no less good to you when you are suffering in some way than when you are riding on the heights of the land, just as Joseph was no less good to his brothers when, in fear, they first were brought to his house than later when they feasted at his table.

II. But, it is more than that. In his providence, God actually hides his true intentions behind a mask. He keeps his children from knowing his intentions. He intends to keep us in the dark; that too is his strategy.

It is not merely that the purposes of God are inscrutable to us because we are finite and he infinite, *he actually prevents us from knowing his will and purpose for us. He hides it.* In verse 30, we read that when Joseph saw his brother, Benjamin, there in his own house, he had to leave the room and weep. He couldn’t do it in front of his brothers because that would have given everything away. The fact that Joseph was careful to maintain the pretense he had so carefully established by going to the trouble of leaving the room to shed his tears and then wash his face before he came back, proved that there was a great difference between Joseph’s public face and his true feelings.

And so it is with God’s providence. “Behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face.” When he tells us, in Isaiah 63:9, that in all of our distresses, in all our sadness, in all our affliction, he suffers too, he is telling us that we cannot judge his feelings for us or his disposition toward us, by what is happening to us. Joseph seemed to be one thing in the dining room, but he was another in the back room where he had gone to weep for the love of his brothers.

And, why? Because, we must believe that nothing less than what God put Joseph through and what Joseph put his brothers through would have sufficed to accomplish the divine purpose in their lives! The point is to get to the end, to their spiritual renewal, their salvation, their reconciliation, all of them happy in heaven. *There could be no recognizing their brother until their hearts have been completely changed.* And there can be no knowledge on our part of what the Lord means by what he brings into our lives until those things – experienced by faith and without that knowledge of the future – have done their good work in us.

This is hard for us, but necessary. *For we do not know what we need.* You don't and I don't, much as we imagine that we do. We do not understand our true spiritual condition, any more than Joseph's brothers knew theirs. As C.S. Lewis wrote in a letter to a friend,

“Of course He *must* often seem to us to be playing fast and loose with us. The adult must seem to mislead the child, and the Master the dog. They misread the signs. Their ignorance and their wishes twist everything.” [A *Severe Mercy*, 191]

You know how it is. You know how you typically judge events in your life: not by what God is going to do in your life through them, but by how they seem to you at the time, how they make you feel. Think of yourself as a child, even a dog, and all becomes clearer as to why the Lord God will not explain himself to you or let you in on his plan, at least not until the weight of these pressures have reshaped your soul in the way God would have it. he has accomplished the changes he intends to make in you. To know that if our trials are heavy and remain heavy, if there seems to be no end in sight, it is because, *and it is only because*, they have not yet produced their perfect work in us, is the *only* truly encouraging thing that can be said to a suffering Christian.

III. Then, finally, there is this in the providence of God: while it normally operates in the most ordinary and unremarkable fashion, every now and then the divine hand surfaces, appears from behind the curtain, to force our attention upon the fact that God is at work.

The brothers had such a moment, as we read in v. 33. The men came into the dining room to be seated for the feast and found that they had been seated in the exact order of their ages, not something a stranger would be likely to be able to do simply by looking at eleven adult men. They were astonished naturally. We are told nothing more but the narrator invites us to imagine what they thought about that, how it made them wonder what hand had been at work, and what such a remarkable outcome might portend for them. Our lives are full of such things if only we will notice them.

I have had such intimations of God's hand at work in my life; many of you have as well. There is not a Christian life that has been thoroughly reported in which such moments of realization, of such contact with the otherwise unseen providence, have not occurred. The biography of a hero of mine, Charles Simeon, the great Cambridge preacher of the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, is dotted with such moments. At one point in his life, when he was 47, he promised the Lord that he would pursue a very active life and ministry until the age of 60; after that he planned what he called “a Sabbath evening.” Well for the next thirteen years he battled sickness and weakness, especially in his voice which often curtailed his preaching. But right after

his 60th birthday, he suddenly found himself well and strong again, as he put it, “almost as perceptibly renewed in strength as the woman was after she had touched the hem of our Lord’s garment.” It was remarkable how the healing had come to him and when it had come, at his 60th birthday, just when he had planned to retire. He took the striking providence to mean that the Lord did not approve of his plan to work until he was 60 and then enjoy a Sabbath rest. He said that he seemed to hear his Master saying to him,

“I laid you aside, because you entertained with satisfaction the thought of resting from your labour; but now you have arrived at the very period when you had promised yourself that satisfaction, and have determined instead to spend your strength for me to the latest hour of your life, I have doubled, trebled, and quadrupled your strength, that you may execute your desires on a more extended plan.” [Moule, 125]

And, just like Charles Simeon, we are to take note, whenever we are brought short by some providence, when we are made to recognize the divine hand in our affairs, to remember by means of these moments, *what is true at every moment*, viz., that God is at work in our lives, always and in every way; he is ruling and overruling our lives for the purposes of his grace and our holiness.

We may not be able to tell what specific purpose God may have in any event in our life, but it is essential to the life of faith that we remember that *every event in our life comes from Him and serves some purpose our heavenly Father has for our life*. It is to remind us of this and help us remember that that from time to time God astonishes us in some way, pulls back the curtain and forces us to realize that we didn’t find our place at the dining table by accident!

What a marvelous way Joseph took with his brothers. No other way would have led them to that holy outcome that we will read about next Lord’s Day. *But who of us would have known to make such a plan or carry it out?* God knows; he knows perfectly. And he told Joseph what to do when he gave him those dreams years before. This is why your life and mine fall out as they do with all the twists and the turns, the surprises, the disappointments, and the occasional elation. They are so mysterious to us precisely because *God* is at work and his ways are high above ours. To know that, to be sure of that, is one of the grandest privileges that belongs to any man or woman who knows himself or herself to be a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Here is Samuel Rutherford once more.

“There is a long chain [that links together] God’s ways, counsels, decrees, actions, events, judgments, mercies; and there is white and black, good and evil, crooked and straight, interwoven in this web; and the links of this chain, partly gold, partly brass, iron, and clay, and the threads of his dispensation, go along through the patriarchs’ days, Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and are spun through the ages of Moses, and the church in Egypt, and the wilderness, and come through the times of the kings of Israel and Judah, and the captivities of the church, and descend along through the generations of prophets, Christ, the apostles, persecuting emperors, and martyrdoms of the witnesses of Jesus, slain by the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, till the end of the thread and the last link of the chain be tied to the very day of the marriage of the Lamb. Now, in this long contexture of divine providence you see, not one thread broken.... Though this

web be woven of threads of [different] colors, black and white, comfortable and sad passages of God's providence, yet all [makes] a fair order in this long way... All is beauty and order to God." [*Trial and Triumph*, 110-111]

The man or woman who believes *that* thinks about his or her life – the good and the bad, the easy and the hard – in a very different way, in a very much more hopeful way, and in a decidedly grateful way. *Don't wait to the end to realize that, however mysteriously, your heavenly Father had been at work to accomplish great things in you and for you.* Joseph teaches us that we don't have to wait to know that! He shows us God at work from the beginning to the end.