

Joseph and the Famine

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This is a difficult passage to interpret. It is easy enough to understand what the text says. The difficult part is to figure out what the message is. Why did Moses include it? How does it fit with the rest of the book? What is the point? Most of the commentaries are less than helpful when it comes to this passage. I hate it when the writers of commentaries discuss the minutia of the passage and say nothing about its point. It's even less helpful when they say almost nothing about the passage at all. I did find a few hints, however, that will help us to understand why Moses included this story in his telling of the story of Joseph and from there see how it relates to us.

The first perspective comes from considering how this story relates to the promise that God made to Abram in Genesis 12. All of the book of Genesis after Genesis 12:1-3 is about how God begins to fulfill those promises in the face of all kinds of obstacles to their fulfillment. Let me remind you of Genesis 12:1-3, "¹Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"

The part of the promise that relates to this story in Genesis 47:13-26 is the first part of verse 3, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse...." In the part of the story that comes before our text, Pharaoh had been very kind and generous to Jacob and his family. He had invited them to come to Egypt. He had given them the land of Goshen to live in. Listen to what Pharaoh says to Joseph in chapter 47:5-6, "Your father and your brothers have come to you. The land of Egypt is before you. Settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land. Let them settle in the land of Goshen, and if you know any able men among them, put them in charge of my livestock." Then in

verses 7 and 10 of the same chapter, we are told that Jacob blessed Pharaoh. Twice we are told that Jacob blessed Pharaoh.

And now in the story of how Joseph manages the food supply during the terrible famine in Egypt, we see how God through Joseph blessed Pharaoh and Egypt. God had said to Abram, "I will bless those who bless you...." Pharaoh had blessed the offspring of Abram – Jacob and his family by inviting them to Egypt and giving them the best of the land. And here we see how God blesses Pharaoh and Egypt through Joseph's wisdom in dealing with the famine.

Let's briefly review the story. The famine is very severe. It had been going on for some years. It still had years to go. 7 years of famine is a very long famine. This was a natural disaster on a huge scale. Just imagine how many people would die in the ancient world if the crops did not grow for 7 years. This was a very bad situation. But Joseph had been given divine revelation about the 7 years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Joseph had been given wisdom by God to gather up and store vast quantities of food during the 7 years of plenty so that the people of Egypt would have food to eat during the 7 years of famine. These verses, 47:13-26, describe how Joseph managed the distribution of the food during the latter part of the famine.

First, people came to Joseph with their money to buy grain. The text says that "Joseph gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan.... And Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house." The next year all the money was gone, and so Joseph took their livestock in exchange for the grain. The next year the people had no money or livestock so they sold both their land and themselves as debt-slaves to Pharaoh. So, all the land became Pharaoh's and the people became debt-slaves to Pharaoh.

But then look what happened. Joseph gave seed to the people to sow in the land (presumably when the famine was over). And then he told them, Verse 24, "And at the harvests you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones." And then look at how the people responded. Verse 25, "And they said, 'You

have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh.”

Now some modern interpreters are negative about what Joseph did to the Egyptian people. In the end, they had lost everything to Pharaoh and were his debt-slaves. They feel that Joseph should have just given them the grain. But that is reading modern convictions about the role of government into a very different social situation. Notice that the people did not feel that Joseph had exploited them or oppressed them. They said to him, “You have saved our lives.” Joseph was a saviour figure to them. They were thankful that through Joseph’s wisdom the lives of the Egyptian people had been saved.

In the ancient world being a debt-slave was nothing like the slavery that was common in the American south before the civil war. Debt-slavery was a part of the way the ancient economy worked. When people got into debt that they could not pay back, they could sell their labour until the debt was paid. A debt-slave could work himself out of debt. No doubt it was better not to be a debt-slave, but there are people in our society who find themselves in similar situations when they accumulate a huge debt – sometimes through misfortune - sometimes through irresponsible use of debt. People do find themselves in financial straits and in the ancient world debt-slavery was a way of dealing with that kind of situation.

And then there is the arrangement that Joseph made with the people of Egypt. They were to give a fifth of their future crops to Pharaoh and they could keep four fifths of those crops. Apparently, that was a good deal. In rates of taxation were higher in other places.

Anyway, these people in Egypt did not feel they were being oppressed by Joseph. They called him their saviour. The text is showing Joseph in a good light and not in a bad light. By his God-given wisdom he saved the people of Egypt from a large-scale catastrophe. And by placing this story at this point in the larger narrative Moses seems to be demonstrating how God kept his promise to bless those who blessed Abraham and his offspring.

And in the light of this it is interesting to consider what happened to Egypt when a later Pharaoh stopped being a blessing to the offspring of Abram and took them into slavery some centuries later. The land was decimated by the plagues. The firstborn sons were all killed. And Pharaoh and his hosts perished in the Red Sea. "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse..." We see how that was fulfilled in the history of Egypt's treatment of the offspring of Abraham. When Egypt blessed the people of the promise, they were blessed. When Egypt dishonored the people of the promise, they were cursed.

Now this is a foreshadowing of how this part of the promise that God made to Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and in the gospel. Jesus Christ is the ultimate offspring of Abraham. Galatians 3:16 says "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ." So, Jesus is the offspring of Abraham to whom the promises were made and in him to his people.

So, the promise, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse" is ultimately fulfilled in Christ and what we see in our text is an initial partial fulfillment of this promise. And as such it foreshadowed the ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Now people today do not literally bless Christ in the way that Pharaoh blessed Israel, but nevertheless, the attitude that people have towards Jesus Christ determines whether they are blessed or cursed. There is a way of understanding the term "bless" that is appropriate when we speak of our attitude to Jesus Christ. For instance, in Psalm 34:1 we read, "I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be continually in my mouth."

We can bless the Lord in that way. On the other hand, we can dishonor the Lord by resisting his authority and his calls to follow him. The fact of that matter is that whether we are blessed or cursed in this life is ultimately determined by our attitude towards Jesus Christ. If we believe in him and bless him as our Lord and Saviour we will receive the blessings of salvation which apply both to this life and to the life to come. And if we dishonor Christ by not believing in him and by refusing to submit to him, we will receive the curse that the Bible everywhere

pronounces on those who refuse to submit to God and embrace his offer of salvation.

And what is true for Jesus is in some sense true concerning the followers of Jesus. The people of God represent Jesus in the world. The people of God are set apart to be a blessing to the world. The attitude that the world has towards the people of God will also result in either blessing or cursing. The people of God represent Jesus to the world. They have a message of good news for sinners that there is a way of salvation. They hold up the Bible as the word of life and the word of truth. Even thinking positively about the people of God and their message will be a source of blessing for the people of the world. One of the reasons that the civilization of the Western world has prospered as it has is because of the influence of Christian principles. One of the reasons that Western civilization is unraveling is because more and more people curse Christians and what they stand for. And of course, the ultimate blessing is to feel so positively about Jesus and his followers that one embraces Jesus as Saviour and Lord and joins one's self to the people of God.

In our text, we see how Pharaoh and Egypt were blessed because of their attitude towards the people of God. It is one early example of God fulfilling his promise to Abraham that those who bless his offspring will be blessed and those who dishonor the offspring of Abraham will be cursed. That promise is fulfilled in Christ and his people.

And one of the great insights that this gives us is that the most significance division of the human race is between those who love Christ and his people and those who do not.

Our time is a time of identity politics. That focuses on all different categories of people and how they are treated. Some of the underlying issues are legitimate concerns like racism. Many of the concerns are anti-biblical in nature – like the push to affirm homosexuals as homosexuals. But the promise that we are considering this evening highlights the most important distinction of all in the human race – the distinction between those who bless Christ and his people and those who dishonor Christ and his people. There is no more fundamental distinction than that. There is no more important distinction than that.

Our attitude to Jesus Christ and his people determines whether we are blessed or whether we are cursed. Those who believe in Jesus and honor him as Lord and join themselves to the people of God will be blessed. Those who reject Jesus and dishonor his people will be cursed. That is a fundamental part of the message of the Bible.

So that is how our text passage relates to Jesus Christ and the gospel. But we can also consider Joseph in this story as an example of godliness and wisdom.

Now it is important that we do not consider these OT characters only as examples. They are part of the history that leads to Jesus Christ. They are part of the good-news. But just as the Bible as a whole is concerned with how God's people live their lives, its characters are held up for us as positive and negative examples. In this passage Joseph is an example of godly wisdom and particularly as a godly leader.

Here is how one commentator expresses this idea. "One must seek to discover the 'meaning' which the ancient narrator himself wanted to convey, toward the end of the story; and there it is stated clearly enough: the nation is grateful; it praises Joseph as its savior. Joseph, therefore has accomplished the gigantic task of preserving the people throughout the period of distress. The narrative shows us Joseph's wisdom which is capable of mastering every new complication... The ancient narrator is honestly amazed and wants the reader also to be amazed at the way an expedient is found to save the people from a gigantic catastrophe." (von Rad, 410)

Some OT scholars have seen a connection between the Joseph stories and the wisdom literature of the OT. This idea is supported by the story in which Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams and is elevated to the second-in-command in Egypt. After Joseph had interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and given his advice on what to do with that information, Pharaoh had said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house and all my people shall order themselves as you command" (Genesis 41:39-40). The text itself makes the connection between Joseph and God-given wisdom. And the text that we are looking at this evening is a demonstration of that wisdom.

Now the book of Proverbs which is all about wisdom has quite a lot to say about wisdom for kings and rulers and we can see how Joseph is an example of the kind of wisdom that Proverbs describes for kings and rulers. One of the things that Proverbs stresses is that wise rulers are a blessing for their people rather than exploiting them and using their power to oppress them. So, for instance Proverbs 28:15-16 says, "Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a poor people. A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor, but he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days." Proverbs is saying that a wicked ruler is like a roaring lion or a charging bear. In imagery is that of harming the people over which they rule. Also, a foolish ruler is one who is a cruel oppressor and exploits the people for unjust gain.

Joseph is an example of a ruler who used his authority wisely for the betterment and wellbeing of the people. The text that we are considering is making that point. The people call Joseph their savior. Yes, they suffered loss because of the famine, but through Joseph's wisdom their lives were spared and they were able to get on with their lives with a very fair and manageable payment to Pharaoh of 1/5 of their crops. I saw an article online this week that said that we pay somewhere around 43% when you add up all the taxes that we pay. So, 20% was fair and just. If we look at the way that other landlords treated their tenants through history, these Egyptians were fortunate that they were not paying 50 percent or more of their crops to Pharaoh.

We see similar sentiments in a couple of proverbs that speaks of kings. Joseph was not exactly a king, but he was like a king in many ways because of the power and authority that Pharaoh had given him. Proverbs 29:4, "By justice a king builds up the land, but he who exacts gifts tears it down." Proverbs 29:14 "If a king faithfully judges the poor, his throne will be established forever." Joseph is an example of a ruler who is just in his dealings with his people and who was fair and generous to the poor.

Now there is a saying that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. There are many rulers in history that illustrate the truth of that saying. And not only rulers, but people with power generally. This summer I read a bunch of historical novels which among other things

dealt with the period in the late 1800s and early 1900s in America where economic power was concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of very wealthy men. The owners of factories and railroads and mines were powerful. The workers were powerless. And the pay and the working conditions in that situation were appalling. Workers and their families could barely survive on what they were paid and any attempts to organize and seek better pay and working conditions were dealt with brutal force. This is the nature of man in sin. People with power find it very, very difficult not to use that power for their own benefit at the expense of the powerless.

The book of Proverbs teaches that kings and rulers and by implication all people in positions of power are wise if they are fair and benevolent to the poor and powerless. And that is what Joseph illustrates in this story. He was in a position where he had been given tremendous authority, but he used that authority in a just and benevolent way so that the people looked upon him as a savior.

And the lesson for us is that if we are in positions where we have power and authority over other people, God calls us to use that power and authority fairly and benevolently. None of us are kings or rulers, but some of us have positions of authority. Some of us are employers. Some of us are foremen. Many of us are parents. Some of us are leaders in the church. In different ways, we can be in positions of authority. And where there is authority there is the temptation to use it in ways that benefit us at the expense of others. The history of the world shows in painful detail how difficult it is for sinful human beings to resist using positions of power to serve others rather than to serve and bless others by the use of their authority. Joseph is held up here as an example of someone who had power and who used that power wisely and benevolently for the wellbeing of the people over whom he ruled so that they were happy to call him their saviour.

There is also wisdom here in Joseph's example of saving up the grain in the 7 years of plenty so that it could be used to keep the people from starving in the 7 years of famine. Now Joseph had the advantage of the revelation from God about the next 14 years. We do not have such information about the future, but we can know that the future is

uncertain from the perspective of our knowledge of it and that we are vulnerable to trouble and loss. We can lose our health. We can lose our jobs. And if we live long enough we will come to the point where we can no longer work. So, Joseph can be an example for us of thinking ahead and preparing for the future and possible sickness or job loss.

Proverbs 21:20 says, “Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man’s dwelling but a foolish man devours it.” The fool devours his precious treasure and oil – that is, he uses up all his resources as soon as it gets them. The wise man saves some. He keeps some for the future.

No doubt you’ve heard about how many people in our society live in terms of spending and debt. I saw an article this week that said that household debt in Canada is as high as it has ever been. Large numbers of people live from paycheck to paycheck. Few are prepared for some kind of famine in their future. I know that there are different situations. For some people, it is all they can do to survive. But there are also many people who are living above their means – who spend their money faster than they get it – who could be prepared for hard times if they were willing to slow down their spending and increase their saving. Joseph in this story is a biblical example of wisdom in planning ahead so that when the famine came he was ready for it and in his case saved the people of Egypt from catastrophe.

Now we know that the Bible does not glorify any man. There are good examples for us in the Bible, but there are no instances of people who are held up for emulation who achieved what they did by their own strength and innate superiority. And in the story of Joseph, even though it is often not explicit, God is always at work behind the scenes and so it is with Joseph. Ultimately the story is not about how Joseph saved the people of Egypt but about how God saved the people of Egypt through Joseph. It is an instance of God blessing the people of the world through one of his people.

But that is exactly what can give us hope. The Bible does provide us with examples to emulate. But it also promises that God provides the ability for those who look to him for help and strength. Even Pharaoh had some inkling of that when he said of Joseph in Genesis 41:38, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?” And this becomes

much more prominent in the NT after the death and resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. On the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church. And so, Peter can write in 2 Peter 1:3 "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness...."

We see an example like Joseph in the Bible and we may be aware of failures in the areas in which he is an example. Perhaps we have exploited people over whom we have authority. Perhaps we have been like the fool who devours his money faster than it comes in. The message of the Bible is never – you can do it if you try hard enough. God never says to us, "You can do whatever you set your mind to." But he does say, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." And he does say "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness."

And with that encouragement we can seek to put the examples of the Bible into practice – including the example of Joseph in our text.