

**“LORD OF ALL NATIONS”**

This passage marks the turning point in Joseph’s story. It relates the set of events that resulted in Joseph’s being brought from prison to a position of great power. And once again, dreams play an important role in the events of Joseph’s life. There are three sets of dream-pairs in the Joseph story, and these dreams are closely related to one another. The first pair of dreams, the ones in which Joseph saw his whole family bowing down to him through the symbolism of the sheaves and stars, resulted in his enslavement in Egypt. When Joseph reported his dreams to his brothers, they hated him all the more and ended up selling him as a slave and telling their father that he was devoured by a wild animal. The second pair of dreams in Joseph’s story, the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker, eventually led to Joseph being summoned to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams, as we see in our passage today. And the third pair of dreams, the dreams that so troubled Pharaoh, resulted in the fulfillment of Joseph’s first set of dreams. When Joseph interpreted his dreams, Pharaoh saw that God was with Joseph. He took notice of Joseph’s wisdom and discernment. And he placed him in a position of prominence in the land of Egypt. And as a result, in the chapters that follow we will see Joseph’s brothers doing exactly what he dreamed they would do: bowing down before him.

Seeing the connections between the three dream-pairs in the Joseph story helps us to understand Joseph’s life from a big picture perspective. But what about the message that is being conveyed to us in this particular passage? What are we meant to learn from this text? There are a number of important themes here that would be worthy of our

reflection. We could point out the way in which Joseph serves as a type of Christ. Typology, as you may know, is a kind of biblical prophecy in which the Lord foretells his redemptive purposes by using persons and events instead of words. Because God is in perfect control over all the events of history, he is able to use historical figures and events to demonstrate what he is going to bring about in later history. For example, Israel's exodus from Egypt served as a type of the deliverance that Christ would come to secure for his people. Likewise, the Passover lamb served as a type of the sacrifice that Christ would offer up on the cross. In a similar manner, we can see how Joseph typologically prefigures Christ when we look at the trajectory of his life: Joseph had to be brought low before he could be raised up and made into the instrument by which God would provide salvation for his people. This is the same trajectory that we see in the life and work of Christ: Jesus could only be our redeemer by enduring an estate of humiliation before entering into an estate of exaltation.

Another theme in this text is the Lord's faithfulness to Joseph. God did not abandon Joseph when he allowed his brothers to sell him as a slave. God heard his cries for help. He lifted him up and vindicated him. And he worked through Joseph to bring about his good purposes for his covenant people and for the people of Egypt as well, as both groups were saved from the famine through Joseph's wise administration of the Egyptian economy.

Another theme that we could emphasize would be Joseph's continued faithfulness to the Lord. When Pharaoh flattered him by telling him of how he had heard of Joseph's

ability to interpret dreams, Joseph responded by giving all of the credit to the Lord. And after Joseph was made into Pharaoh's prime minister, got married and had children, he gave his two sons names that bore witness to the fact that he was still bound to the Lord. Manasseh and Ephraim were Hebrew names, not Egyptian ones, and they served as a testimony to Joseph's continued faith in the Lord. Their names professed Joseph's faith that God had made him forget his many years of trouble and had made him fruitful in the land of his affliction.

All of these themes are present in this text, and they are very important. But the theme that I want us to focus on tonight has to do with how the Lord works through the nations of this world to ensure that his purposes for his covenant people are perfectly carried out. The Lord truly does rule over the nations. We see this in how the Lord raised Joseph to the height of power during this time of famine in Egypt. In the words of one commentator, this passage shows us how "God sovereignly controls the destinies of nations to protect and provide for his covenant people." [Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 645] God rules the nations for the sake of his people. This theme will be our focus in the remainder of tonight's sermon.

The central elements in Pharaoh's dreams were two sets of seven cows in the Nile River and two sets of ears of grain. Egypt was widely known in the ancient world for its agricultural bounty, and the Nile River was central to this fruitfulness. It was because of its reliance upon the seasonal flooding of the Nile for the irrigation and fertilization of its crops that Egypt was less susceptible to famine than the surrounding nations. You will

recall that Abraham went to Egypt during a time of famine, and that God had to tell Isaac not to do so during another time of famine. This is not to say that Egypt never experienced famines. In fact, there are records that tell us of two instances when Egyptian famines were so severe that the people there resorted to cannibalism. Still, there was a reason why the people who lived in Palestine would often come to Egypt during times of famine. The Nile, as you may know, flows from the south to the north, so that its flooding depends upon rainfall to its south, in the area of Sudan. Palestine, on the other hand, depends upon the rainfall to its north, in the land of Syria. It is rare for both Egypt and Palestine to experience severe famines at the same time. But that is what was about to happen. There would first be seven years of abundance, but those years would be followed by seven years of famine so severe that it would wipe out all of the signs of that former abundance.

I want to call your attention to verse 28, where Joseph says to Pharaoh: “God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do.” God is the one who is about to do these things. God is the one who brought the seven years of abundance and the seven years of famine. God was going to grant seven years in which the land experienced a bumper crop like they had never seen before, and after that he was going to bring upon the land a famine that would erase all signs of its previous plenty. God is the one who did it. And why did he do it? He did it for the sake of his covenant people. God shapes the course of world events in order to effect the building up of his church. He revealed the future to Pharaoh, he provided him with a wise man to make preparations for the coming famine,

he gave the seven good years, he brought the seven years of famine, and then he caused Joseph's brothers to come to Egypt to purchase grain. And his purpose in all of this was to preserve the covenant family and to bring about repentance and reconciliation among them. The Lord raised up the nation of Egypt for the sake of his covenant people.

It is important for us to see that what the Lord did here with Egypt is something that is true of his dealings with every nation. The Lord is in sovereign control over the fortunes of all the nations of the earth. He works through the individual histories of those nations to carry out his plan of redemption. God rules the world for the good of his people. He works through nations like Egypt, nations steeped in idolatrous practices and the worship of false gods. He works through nations that have been significantly influenced by Christianity. He works through nations that have largely turned away from the gospel. As the psalmist says of the Lord, "you...guide the nations upon earth." [Ps. 67:4] The nations truly are in God's hands. He rules over them and he works through them to ensure that his kingdom continues to advance.

Of course, this does not mean that we can understand precisely what God is doing through a given nation at a given point of time. This is a point that is brought out in George Marsden's recent biography of Jonathan Edwards, which I am currently reading. It is a book that is destined to become a classic, both in terms of its treatment of Edwards and in terms of the insight that it provides into American history. One of the things that you probably know about Edwards is that he was the key figure at a time of revival that is now referred to as the Great Awakening. It was during that revival that he preached his

famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” But one of the things that you may not know about Edwards is that he was fascinated by the book of Revelation and sought to understand how the prophecies contained in Revelation were being fulfilled in the events of his day. Edwards understood Revelation 20 through a postmillennial set of lenses, that is, he believed that the world was moving towards a day when the church would gain more and more influence until a golden era of history, the millennium, was ushered in. At one point, Edwards believed that the revivals that were taking place in colonial New England were at least the beginnings of what would eventually turn into that golden age. He believed that America would be one of God’s key instruments in ushering in the millennium.

Now from our point of view, knowing what we know about the current spiritual climate in our nation, we might be tempted to think that it was a bit naive of Edwards to have such grand thoughts about America. Even Edwards himself, after the revival fires faded, admitted that he had in some ways misinterpreted what was taking place. He did not, after all, hit the nail on the head in his prognosis of the dawning of the millennial reign of Christ. Now as you probably know, I do not agree with Edwards when it comes to matters of eschatology. I am not waiting for a golden era of church history to be ushered in. I am an amillennialist. I believe that the millennium of Revelation 20 is a symbolic representation of the entire period between Christ’s incarnation and his Second Coming. I believe that Christ is currently reigning over all the earth as his gospel goes forth and bears fruit in every land. But the thing that I admire about Edwards is that he

tried to understand the events of his time through the lenses of divine providence. This is a way of thinking that we do not see when we open our newspapers or turn on the evening news. Edwards really believed that God was working through the events that were taking place in his world to bring about his kingdom purposes. And he was not wrong about that. It is true that America today is a far cry from what Edwards once thought it might be, but it is also true that the gospel has in many ways flourished in this nation. And even if that time of flourishing is on the decline, as it seems to be, this too is a part of God's plan. Just as God worked through Egypt's seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, so also he is working through America's years of greatness and its years of decline. And this is not only true of America. Our God is Lord over all the nations, not just one. And whether a nation is great or small, upright or wicked, rich or poor, God is working through each one to ensure that his purpose for his church is being carried out.

The Lord worked out his kingdom purposes through the ups and downs of the fourteen years depicted in Pharaoh's dreams and through the ups and downs in Joseph's own life. And this should remind us that we must not think of any situation in this life, whether it be on a personal or national level, as something that is permanent. Consider these words from George Lawson, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Scot:

“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 and basest of crimes; but in his 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 today; 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 tomorrow shall be as this day.” [*The History of Joseph*]

We simply do not know what tomorrow holds, not in our own lives and not in the life of our nation. But there is one thing we do know: the Lord is using everything in this world - every nation, every event, every part of your life and mine - to carry out his holy purposes. And if you belong to Jesus Christ, then you can be certain that his purpose is for your good.