

“GOD SENT ME BEFORE YOU”

This is the last chapter in the unit that runs from chapter 43 to chapter 45, covering the brothers’ second visit to Egypt. Over the course of this visit, Joseph tested his brothers in a variety of ways to see if their repentance was genuine. Now he finally reveals himself to them. And thus we could say that this chapter is the payoff to the whole Joseph story. Everything has been building up to this point. And it is in this text that Joseph first expresses the overarching theme of this part of Genesis: “it was not you who sent me here but God.” It is in this chapter that we clearly see what one commentator describes in these words: “All the episodes in the Joseph story contribute to demonstrating how God’s purposes are ultimately fulfilled through and in spite of human deeds, whether or not those deeds are morally right.” [Wenham, ii, 432] This is a key theme in this chapter. It testifies to God’s providential control over all the events that take place in his world.

After hearing Judah’s speech, recorded for us in the previous chapter, Joseph could see that the Lord had worked a deep and abiding repentance in his brothers’ hearts. And his response to this is very telling. Here we see that Joseph truly loved his brothers, in spite of all that they had done to him. He wept with tears of joy over God’s work of grace in their lives. There is no vindictiveness or vengefulness on Joseph’s part. He truly forgave them. We can see this by the fact that he sent everyone away before he revealed his true identity to his brothers. He sent everyone else away in order to protect his brothers from having their crime exposed before the Egyptians. He wanted to make sure

that his family would be held in high regard by Pharaoh. So he made sure that the brothers' crime was not made a matter of public knowledge.

What was it that enabled Joseph to be so forgiving towards his brothers? It was his firm and settled conviction that the Lord was in perfect control over everything that had taken place. He really believed that it was the Lord, not his brothers, who sent him to Egypt. This is one of the Bible's most powerful examples of how trusting in God's providential control over all the affairs of our lives prevents us from retaliating against people when they wrong us and keeps us from growing bitter over the injustices that have been done to us.

The brothers, however, were initially shocked and dismayed to learn the true identity of the man with whom they had been dealing during their visits to Egypt. And it is not very hard to see why they would feel that way. Joseph had power, lots of power, and they had none. They had done something terrible to him, and now they were completely at his mercy. What was he going to do to them?

What he did was what they least expected. He forgave them. He assured them that he was not going to harm them. He was going to take care of them during the remainder of the famine. Now, it is true that Joseph did not ignore what they had done to him. He did not pretend that they had not done anything wrong. That would have been false comfort. No, he acknowledged their sin, stating it right up front: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." They were responsible for their actions. They had

sinned. That is why Joseph had to test them in the preceding chapters to see if they had truly repented of their sinful ways.

Yet even though the brothers were fully responsible for their sin, God was the one who was in ultimate control over what had happened to Joseph. Here is one of the Bible's most explicit statements about the interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It shows us very clearly that while man is always held responsible for his sinful actions, the Lord always works through those actions in order to accomplish his purposes. I do not deny that there is great mystery in this. But there is no doubt that it is what the Bible teaches. God is sovereign over his world in such a manner that even our sinful acts, acts for which we bear full responsibility, are made to perfectly "concur" or agree with his overall plan and purpose. As Joseph puts it later on in the book, his brothers meant evil against him, but God meant it for good.

I would encourage you to meditate upon this doctrine frequently, because it is a doctrine that is very practical. It is immensely comforting for us to know that nothing can happen to us unless it is God's will for it to happen to us. None of the bad things that happen to you in this life are outside of God's sovereign control. If you get sick, if you get in a car accident, if you lose your job, if a loved one dies, if someone steals from you, if someone harms you in any way -- no matter what, the Lord is in control of everything that happens to you. And as Christians we can be certain that it is all for our good. The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism puts it so well when it says that God "so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my

head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation.” And John Flavel, in his classic book on divine providence, puts it this way:

“‘Tis true we often prejudge [Providence’s] works, and unjustly censure its designs, and in our many straits and troubles we say: ‘All these things are against us’; but indeed Providence neither does nor can do any thing that is really against the true interest and good of the saints.” [*The Mystery of Providence*, 19]

As Flavel says, we cannot always see at the time how the things in our lives are being made subservient to our salvation. But we can begin to see it when we look back and reflect. That is surely how Joseph came to his conclusions about God’s providential dealings with him. I doubt very much that he would have said the things that he says to his brothers in this chapter when he was being carried away from his brothers as a slave, or when he was thrown in prison as a result of the false charges of Potiphar’s wife. But as he meditated upon what had happened to him, he was able to see more clearly how God’s hand was in it.

Of course, we will only obtain a complete understanding of how God worked all things together for our good on the day when we are with Christ in glory. Nevertheless, we can still find a great deal of comfort in meditating upon God’s providence in this life. Here again is John Flavel:

“[T]hough our present views and reflections upon Providence are so short and imperfect in comparison to that in heaven, yet such as it is under all its present disadvantages, it has so much excellence and sweetness in it that I may call it a little heaven...It is certainly a highway of walking with God in this world...How often have the hearts of [Providence’s] observers been melted into tears of joy at the beholding of its wise and unexpected productions! How often has it convinced them, upon a sober reflection of the events of their lives, that if the Lord had left them to their own counsels they had as often been their own tormentors, if not executioners! Into what and how many fatal mischiefs had they precipitated themselves if Providence had been as shortsighted as they!” [22-3]

When you take the time to think about what is happening in your life from the standpoint of divine providence, trying to discern in what ways God might be using these things for the sake of your salvation, you may not get all of your questions answered, but if you keep on trusting in the Lord, you will find comfort.

Joseph tells his brothers that God’s purpose in sending him ahead of them into Egypt was to preserve a remnant among the covenant people. God spared them from being overcome by the famine. And he also worked through Joseph to prepare a place where the people of Israel could multiply into a great nation while maintaining their distinct identity. Had it not been for the famine and for this entire episode, the Israelites probably would have been absorbed into the Canaanite peoples around them. But through Joseph,

God settled his covenant people in the land of Goshen, a separate area in Egypt that was suitable for their work as shepherds. And as we will see in the next chapter, God even used the Egyptians' aversion to shepherds as a means of preventing the Israelites from being absorbed into Egyptian society.

This is something that God continues to do throughout the history of redemption. He always preserves a people from himself. There are times when things look bad for the church, but at no time will there cease to be a remnant of the true church. Even in the days of the prophet Elijah, which were dark days indeed for the covenant people, the Lord encouraged his prophet by telling him that he would preserve seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed down to Baal.

After Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and comforted them by telling them about God's hand over all that had happened, he instructed them to go back home so that they could bring Jacob and the rest of their people back to Egypt during the time of famine. After all, that was the reason why God had sent Joseph ahead of them in the first place. But notice what happens after Joseph gives them these instructions. Moses tells us that Joseph kissed and wept and talked with his brothers. We are not given much in the way of detail, but what a moment that must have been. Imagine the brothers' shame as they stood before the one they had hated so fiercely and saw him showing them nothing but love. Imagine their relief. Imagine their gratitude. It serves as a beautiful picture of the grace that our Lord extends to us in the gospel.

We see a further illustration of God's grace in how the brothers were provided for as they prepared to depart. Pharaoh himself told them that he would see to it that they were well taken care of during their stay in Egypt. They were given wagons and provisions and changes of clothes and money for their journey. Keep in mind that only a short time before this all hope seemed to have been lost. God had reversed their fortunes in a remarkable way.

Notice, however, that even though Joseph was convinced of the genuineness of his brothers' repentance, he still warned them not to quarrel on the way. He believed that they had changed. He could see their relief and their gratitude, but he also knew that they were still sinners. He knew that they would be tempted to argue over how they were going to handle telling their father about what had really happened to Joseph. Who would they say was chiefly to blame? Whose idea was it? What about the lies they had told Jacob? There would have been plenty to argue about.

But when they arrived back home, they did as Joseph had instructed them. They told their father about Joseph. And as Jacob's sons brought him this good news, news that was better than anything he could have imagined, he did not believe them, at least not at first. It took time for his despairing heart to believe. This is one of the effects that despair has upon us. It makes it hard for us to acknowledge the good things that the Lord is doing for us, even when they are right before our eyes. Despair causes us to look at everything with a jaundiced eye. Jacob had been living in despair for over two decades, and it was only by God's grace that faith won out in the end. As the text tells us, Jacob

revived. Notice that, after he has revived, he is not called Jacob but Israel. Once again, Jacob has struggled with God, and once again faith has won the victory.

God sent Joseph ahead of his brothers for the sake of their salvation, but he did so by means of the brothers' rejection of the one through whom they would be delivered. This is a picture, a type, of what God has done for us in Christ. When Joseph's brothers realized who he was and understood what had happened, they must have been utterly dumbfounded at the greatness of God's mercy to them. They deserved death from Joseph's hand, but he gave them life instead. And so it is with everyone who looks to Jesus Christ in faith. When we realize this, we will readily take up these words, penned by Samuel Rutherford, and make them our own: "When I look to my guiltiness, I see that my salvation is one of our Saviour's greatest miracles." [*Letters*, 320]