

## Joseph Sees His Brothers Again September 20, 2020

The scripture passage for today's lesson skips ahead through the years of plenty that Joseph saw in Pharaoh's dream, to the years of famine. A year of famine, when rains failed to appear, was typically survivable. There were alternatives, and animals could provide sustenance for a while. But two years was very bad. Three was a catastrophe (as in the time of Elijah). It was two years into the famine when Joseph's brothers show up in Egypt to buy grain.

Notice that even the Egyptians have to buy grain (41:56-57) even though it was taken from them as taxes in the first place. The price might have been set fairly high because that would encourage conservation, and those needing it would be desperate enough to pay a higher price. This is economic behavior as old as civilization. The idea that anyone has a "right" to be fed by others is very modern. In this case, the food being sold was the past fruits of labor of the Egyptian farmers, together with the wisdom (from God via Joseph) that it needed to be carefully saved against the coming need.

People from other lands as well as Egyptians were allowed to buy grain, but logistical challenges would have prevented any massive shipments elsewhere. By Roman times, Egypt was the "breadbasket" of the Roman empire, with regular and well organized shipments crossing the Mediterranean Sea. But Joseph was thousands of years earlier. Southern Canaan was, relatively speaking, right next door, about 200 miles away. That's still a long way to go for the limited supplies that could be carried back. Notice that they did still have asses to use as beasts of burden (42:26). The NRSV uses the word "donkey," but donkeys are considerably smaller. The Egyptians still had their animals at this time too. So, while the famine was bad, it was not a complete disappearance of vegetation – the asses and other livestock were still finding forage. Nobody would have fed edible grain to animals, as happens in our day. There may also have been plants that were edible (but inferior) that survived. But the grain used for bread was failing.

So, Jacob sent his sons to buy grain, leaving out Benjamin, who would have been young, maybe even as young as ten if he was born after Joseph was carried away to Egypt. More likely he was in his late teens, about the same age Joseph was when Jacob lost him. So, that wasn't an unreasonable precaution. Joseph would be approaching 30 by now, so all the other brothers that were sent would have been about thirty or older.

By this time Joseph was the head administrator of Pharaoh's grain reserves, and supervised the sales. He would have had people working for him that handled

grain sales routinely, but he reasonably would take a special interest in foreign grain buyers. These would have been mostly from Canaan, the only land near enough that such trade was practical. Joseph would know that sooner or later his family was likely to appear, just as Abraham, his great grandfather, had come to Egypt during a time of famine. His concerns over spies were valid as well. The Hittites to the north in Anatolia (modern Asiatic Turkey) and Syria would have been suffering from the famine too, since they lacked a reliable water source like the Nile River. One response to famine is to invade and take over a neighboring land that has food. While even Egypt was suffering, they did have food reserves, and would have been a tempting target for the Hittites, even as far away as they were. Some of the Canaanite cities might also have formed an alliance and invaded.

(Egypt would have suffered from lack of rain as did other lands, but the Nile river floods to provide water that originated in the highlands of modern Ethiopia and central Africa. It's not clear why Egypt was suffering from famine, except that the floods may have been reduced. At this time irrigation was not nearly as developed as it would be later. A 20% tax on seven years of even a doubled grain harvest would have provided only about three years' worth of grain at the normal consumption rate, without selling any to foreigners. Very likely at least some grain could still be grown along the Nile.)

So Joseph, now a high officer of Pharaoh, speaks to his brothers through a translator. He could easily recognize them. They looked the same, just ten or so years older, and maybe somewhat thinner. He would be completely unrecognizable to them. He would be clad as an Egyptian official, speaking Egyptian, had likely grown somewhat, and would even be different in posture, seated, while they would be standing. Joseph would not know what their attitude would be. It wasn't impossible that they could indeed be spies, cooperating with the Hittites or other Canaanites. He tested them. That was a reasonable precaution.

Notice that Joseph himself used the prison as a temporary holding place, not a long term punishment. His brothers spent three days there before Joseph sent them off with food (and their money). He held one as security: Simeon. The brothers were to return with Benjamin. Joseph knew the famine had a long way to run. They'd be back.

Why Simeon? Simeon is brother #2. Brother #1, Reuben, had earlier tried to prevent Joseph from being killed. He also spoke up as the brothers were before Joseph to buy food to say that their situation was retribution for what they had done to Joseph. The fact that earlier Reuben had not been able to lead his brothers in moderation had to be due to unanimity among the three next oldest, Simeon, Levi and Judah, to deal harshly with Joseph. Judah, the most junior of the four oldest,

was the one in favor of selling him into slavery rather than letting him die. So Joseph would likely see in Simeon the most hostile senior brother. Simeon and Levi together had shown their violent nature in the affair at Shechem earlier. So the choice of Simeon is not surprising. It may even be that Joseph intended to remove Simeon's influence within the family prior to the next visit, but that's speculative.

Interestingly, of these four elder brothers, the only one to survive as a landed tribe was Judah. Simeon's small territory was south of Judah. If any Simeonites survived the period of the Judges, they must have become Judahites; they are not heard of again. Judah was the southernmost tribe in the time of Saul and David, and later the main tribe (with Benjamin) of the Kingdom of Judah. Reuben, as a tribe, seems to have disappeared when the Moabites reconquered the Plains of Moab, where they had settled, during the time of the Judges. Survivors of Reuben may also have joined Judah (across the Jordan River) or Gad, in Gilead, farther north. Nothing is heard of Reuben after the period of the Judges. Levi continued as a "tribe" but without any allotted territory. They were scattered around to serve as religious leaders, ultimately concentrated more in and near Jerusalem where the temple was, again, in Judah.

The second group of four brothers were sons of the two maids, and the next two were Leah's last children, likely not much older than Joseph. Then Benjamin was born after Joseph. We don't know how long after.

The lesson writer focuses on two particular issues. One is "mass incarceration." Quite honestly I don't think that issue has anything to do with this lesson. All instances except Joseph being in prison were for temporary holding while awaiting judgment. As mentioned last week, Joseph's longer period in prison was exceptional and a mercy compared to the death sentence expected. Simeon's stay in prison was intended, at least as stated, not for punishment, but as a security against the other brother's not coming back. In later language, he might be called a "hostage." In western culture the idea was developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century that prisoners should be "reformed" instead of "punished". You'd hear the word "Reformatory" substituted for "Prison," especially for younger criminals. Earlier, punishment was seen as a deterrent to others committing the same crime, and death was a common punishment for many crimes. Now, in theory, time in prison is supposed to be both punishment and reform. In practice there are criminals who do reform, but many simply reside in prison until their next crime spree. The usefulness of their being in prison is that during that time they are not a hazard to society. That may not be the best strategy for the issue, but it's understandable, if there is concern for the victims and not just the criminal.

The second issue is a matter of justice, and here again the lesson writer's concerns seem focused on modern views that seem out of place when we look back on Joseph. It may have been unjust that Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. But that was a common situation at the time and for long afterwards – the innocent inhabitants of a city taken in war would likewise have been enslaved, just as unjustly. The ancients did not have the appreciation of human rights that developed over three or four millennia from Joseph's time to today. God had to work with humanity a long time through a many painful events before Jefferson would write those words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Even when Jefferson was writing this, there still wasn't recognition that ALL men should have equal rights, and women were not mentioned explicitly. Pharaoh, hearing Jefferson's words, would say, "What nonsense!" So would just about everybody else from that time.

We do know that injustices occur. Just plain corruption is a big part of it. The powerful are always picking on the weak. The "Kids for Cash" scandal locally is just another example of humanity's story for most of history, though shocking to us in our day when we expect better. Yes, it is bad when the innocent are wrongly or unjustly punished. Any process of justice in the real world is going to have "false positives," where someone is convicted who shouldn't be, and "false negatives," where someone isn't punished who should be. Where is the right balance? Generally in our country it balances toward avoiding false positives, wrongful guilty verdicts. This is a hard issue. We, as a country, give it more attention in our modern day than ever before, but it is still hard.

The lesson writer seems to think that Joseph is taking revenge by putting his brothers in jail for three days, and that this is unjust retribution. From that, I suppose, the author writes "The second concern that arises from Joseph's situation involves how we, as individuals and collectively as a nation, respond when we experience injustice or are confronted with potentially harmful actions by others." That leads on to the author decrying the use of weapons. Again I think the author is stepping completely outside the story. Joseph was fulfilling his duty to Pharaoh by careful testing even his own family, whatever his personal motivations may have been. I think he had good reason. He then showed mercy, by holding only one of them instead of, as he had originally said, holding nine of them and letting only one return (42:16). Not only that, but he returned their money (42:25) and gave them food for the journey. That doesn't seem like vengeance to me, although his choice of Simeon for the hostage was almost certainly not random, as mentioned earlier.

The other problem with the author's "second concern" is that nations and individuals are different. The first purpose of a nation is to defend its citizens against violence from without, and weapons are a necessary part of that. An individual may say, "I surrender," and appeal to kindness of the aggressor, trusting God for deliverance. That is what Jesus did. It is the call to martyrdom of one's self. Not of others. A nation cannot do that if it retains an ability for self-defense. Yes, there were those who said, "Better Red than Dead." The idea was that to avoid the violence of war, government should not fight tyranny but surrender, and allow citizens to be incorporated into the communist empire, which the intellectuals believed would eventually triumph anyway. That is just plain wrong. Our armed forces put their own individual lives at risk to defend us, the citizens of our country, from the violence other countries, and surrogates of those other countries, might do to us. We should honor them for their willingness to defend us, not abhor their willingness to use and endure violent means when necessary. We do not want to be enslaved!

The philosophy of limited retaliation in Exodus and Numbers that the lesson writer mentions were first codified by the emperor Hammurabi of Babylon many centuries earlier. That was a big advance over the idea of unlimited retaliation articulated by Cain's great, great grandson Lamech in the days before the flood (Genesis 4: 23-24). Yes, Jesus said "Turn the other cheek" and "Go the extra mile." The idea of leaving vengeance to God is an important principle in the Old Testament as well as the New. Seeking to turn the heart of the evil doer through returning good for evil is a New Testament idea that we as individuals may strive to live by. But it's not right to force others, rather than ourselves, to do that. Complicated issues, these are. They are not really connected to the Joseph story.

Next week the Joseph story culminates in the family reunion. There are some good things we can take away from it. Let me suggest something to think about: The "Patriarchs" are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, just one for each generation. Abraham had a total of eight sons (see 25:1-2). Only Isaac was the son of the Promise. Isaac had two, but only one got the blessing. Recall how Jacob "stole" the blessing from his brother Esau (Genesis 27). But after Jacob, it's "The Children of Israel." No longer just one chosen son to carry the promise, but a tribe, then a nation. What happened? Something to consider.

*Prayer: Lord of all the worlds that are, grant us wisdom and perspective as we reflect on the difficulties that we and others face this day. Assure us by your presence that there is good to be found and done when we look carefully at our situations. Amen.*