

"A PICTURE OF GOD WORKING ALL THINGS FOR THE GOOD OF HIS ELECT"

I. Introduction

- A. This is the climactic chapter in the unit that runs from chapter 43 to chapter 45, covering Joseph's brothers' second visit to Egypt.
- B. Over the course of this visit, Joseph has tested his brothers in a variety of ways to see if their repentance is genuine.
- C. When he is convinced that it is genuine, he reveals himself to them.
- D. And as he does this, he stresses that *God* is the one who sent him to Egypt, even though they were the ones who sold him into slavery.
- E. This points to the key theme in the story of Joseph.
- F. As one commentator puts it, "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]
- G. God worked through the sinful actions of Joseph's brothers to advance his saving purpose in the lives of the covenant people.
- H. As we study this passage today, we will see how it provides us with a picture of God working all things for the good for his elect.

II. God Blesses Us in Defiance of Our Demerit

- A. Our text opens with Joseph responding to the speech made by Judah in the previous chapter.

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1. In that speech, Judah pleaded with Joseph to take him into custody in place of Benjamin.
 2. Judah could not bear to think of the sorrow the loss of Benjamin would bring to his father Jacob.
 3. This made it clear to Joseph that his brothers had indeed repented of the selfishness and jealousy that led them to sell him into slavery.
 4. Joseph's response shows that he truly loved his brothers, in spite of all that they had done to him.
 5. He weeps with tears of joy over God's work of grace in their lives.
 6. There is no vindictiveness or vengefulness on his part.
 7. He forgives them.
- B. Joseph's forgiveness toward his brothers is evident in the fact that he sends everyone away before revealing his true identity.
1. The reason why he does this is to protect his brothers from having their crime exposed before the Egyptians.
 2. In order to make sure that his family is held in high regard by Pharaoh, he does not let his brothers' crime become a matter of public knowledge.
 3. Thus, Joseph extends goodness to his brothers when what they deserved was severity.
 4. This is a picture of the grace that God extends to us in Christ.
 5. As J.I. Packer explains in his classic book *Knowing God*, "The grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity, and had no reason

to expect anything but severity.” [120]

- C. The brothers are both shocked and dismayed to learn the true identity of this man with whom they have been dealing in their visits to Egypt.
 - 1. Joseph has power, lots of power.
 - 2. They have none.
 - 3. They did something terrible to him, and now they are completely at his mercy.
 - 4. What is he going to do to them?
 - 5. What he does is what they least expected.
 - 6. He forgives them.
 - 7. He assures them that he is not going to harm them.
 - 8. On the contrary, he is going to take care of them throughout the remainder of the famine.

- D. Notice that Joseph did not ignore what his brothers had done to him.
 - 1. He did not pretend that they had not done anything wrong.
 - 2. He acknowledged their sin, stating it right up front: “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.”
 - 3. This reminded them that they were responsible for their actions.
 - 4. They had sinned.
 - 5. This is why Joseph had gone to such great lengths to provoke them to repentance and to test whether their admissions of guilt were the

result of godly grief over their sin.

- E. Joseph reassures his brothers by explaining that God was in ultimate control over what had happened to him.
1. He tells them, “do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.”
 2. While they were the ones who sold Joseph into Egypt, God was the one who sent him to Egypt.
 3. This is one of the Bible’s most clear statements about the interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.
 4. It tells us that while man is always held responsible for his sinful actions, the Lord always works through those actions in order to accomplish his purposes.
 5. There is great mystery in this, but there is no doubt that it is what the Bible teaches.
 6. 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 concur with his overall plan and purpose.
 7. As Joseph puts it later on in the book, while his brothers meant evil against him, God meant it for good.
 8. This was what enabled Joseph to be so forgiving towards his brothers.
 9. He had come to the settled conviction that the Lord was in perfect control over everything that had happened to him.

10. He truly believed that it was the Lord, not his brothers, who sent him to Egypt.
 11. This shows us that trusting in God's providential control over all the affairs of our lives prevents us from being bitter and vengeful.
- F. It is an immense comfort to know that nothing can happen to us unless it is God's will for it to happen to us.
1. None of the bad things that happen to you in this life are outside of God's sovereign control.
 2. If you get sick, or have a car accident, or lose your job, or lose a loved one, or are treated unjustly — no matter what happens, the Lord is in control of it all.
 3. And as a Christian, you can be certain that it is all for your good.
 4. The answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism puts it so well when it says that the Christian finds comfort in knowing 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."
 5. What an astounding thought it is that all things must be subservient to my salvation!
 6. Yet it is easy for us to forget that this is the case.
 7. As the Puritan John Flavel points out, "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]

8. While we cannot always see how the things in our lives are being made subservient to our salvation, there can be times when we begin to see it if we will look back and reflect.
 9. Surely this is how Joseph came to his conclusions about God's providential dealings with him.
 10. He would not have said the things that he says to his brothers in this chapter when he was being carried away as a slave, or when he was thrown in prison on false charges.
 11. But as he meditated upon the things that had happened to him, he was able to see more clearly how God's hand was in it.
- G. Joseph tells his brothers that God's purpose in sending him ahead of them into Egypt was to preserve a remnant among them.
1. God spared his covenant people from being overcome by the famine.
 2. 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.
 3. Had it not been for the famine and for this entire episode, the Israelites probably would have been absorbed into their surrounding Canaanite culture.
 4. 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.
 5. And as we will see in the next chapter, God used the Egyptians' aversion to shepherds as a means of preventing the Israelites from being absorbed into Egyptian society.

- H. What God did for Israel in this episode is something that he does for his people all throughout the history of redemption.
1. He always preserves a remnant.
 2. There are times when things look quite bad for the church, but at no time will there cease to be a remnant of the true church.
 3. 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.

III. God Effects Our Repentance

- A. Once Joseph has revealed himself to his brothers and comforted them by telling them that God's hand was over all that had happened, he then instructs them to go back home so that they can bring Jacob and the rest of their people back to Egypt amid the famine.
1. This was the reason why God had sent Joseph ahead of them in the first place.
 2. God sent Joseph to Egypt for the sake of the preservation of his church.
 3. But in order for this to happen, the brothers will have to tell their father the truth about what they had done.
 4. This would not have been an easy thing for them to do.
 5. It would require a great deal of humility and self-abasement on their part.
 6. Remember, these men had been rationalizing their actions and suppressing their guilt for two decades.

7. Will they really be able to admit their sin before their father?
 8. They will, but only because God continues to effect repentance in their hearts.
- B. We can see how God does this when we consider what happens after Joseph gives his brothers instructions.
1. He kisses and weeps and talks with his brothers.
 2. We are not given much in the way of detail, but what a powerful moment that must have been.
 3. Imagine the brothers' shame as they stood before the one they had hated so fiercely and saw him showing them nothing but love.
 4. Where they expected to find a vengeful enemy, they found a warm-hearted brother.
 5. Imagine their relief.
 6. Imagine their gratitude.
 7. The Lord worked through this overwhelming experience to soften and humble their hearts.
- C. In addition to Joseph's warm affection, the brothers were well-provided for as they prepared to depart.
1. Pharaoh himself tells them that he will see to it that they are well taken care of during their stay in Egypt.
 2. They are given wagons, provisions, changes of clothes, and money for their journey.

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3. Keep in mind that only a short time before this all hope seemed to have been lost.
 4. God had reversed their fortunes in a remarkable way, and this further softened their hearts.
- D. Even though Joseph is now convinced of the genuineness of his brothers' repentance, he still warns them not to quarrel on the way.
1. He believes that they had changed.
 2. He can see their relief and their gratitude.
 3. At the same time, he knows that they are still sinners.
 4. He knows that they will be tempted to argue over how to handle telling their father about what had really happened to Joseph.
 5. Who would they say was chiefly to blame?
 6. Whose idea was it to get rid of Joseph?
 7. And who came up with the lies they had told Jacob to cover up their sin?
 8. They would have plenty to argue about on the long journey home.
 9. Each brother would have been tempted to justify himself by shifting the blame onto the others.
 10. Joseph's warning about not quarreling was another thing that God used to effect repentance in their hearts.
 11. How could they disregard such a warning when it was issued by Joseph, who extended such amazing forgiveness and kindness to them in spite of how they had mistreated him?

- E. When the brothers arrive back home, they do as Joseph instructed.
 - 1. They tell their father about Joseph.
 - 2. This news is better than anything Jacob could have imagined.
 - 3. It is so good that he cannot believe it at first.
 - 4. It takes time for his despondent heart to believe.
 - 5. This is one of the effects that despair has upon us.
 - 6. 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.
 - 7. Despair causes us to look at everything with a jaundiced eye.

- F. Jacob had been living in despair for two decades, and it was only by God's grace that faith won out in the end.
 - 1. Just as the Lord had effected repentance in the hearts of the brothers, he also caused Jacob to repent of his despair.
 - 2. As the text puts it, his spirit revived.
 - 3. And notice that after this revival takes place, he ceases to be called Jacob.
 - 4. As we read in verse 28, "And *Israel* said, 'It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.'"
 - 5. Israel was the name that God assigned to Jacob after he wrestled with God beside the Jabbok river.
 - 6. Once again, Jacob has struggled with God, and once again faith has won the victory.

- G. We should also note that Israel's coming to Egypt marks the fulfillment of something that God had foretold to Abraham many years before.
1. In Genesis 15, God said, "your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years... And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." (Gen. 15:13-16)
 2. Once again, we see something of the mysterious nature of God's providence.
 3. While he brought Israel to Egypt in order to preserve them in a time of famine, Israel's tenure in Egypt would culminate in bondage, oppression, and the threat of extermination.
 4. Yet in all of this, God was mysteriously working out his plan of redemption.

IV. Conclusion

- A. God sent Joseph ahead of his brothers for the sake of their salvation.
- B. But God did this by means of the brothers' rejection of the one through whom they would be delivered.
- C. As we noted in an earlier sermon in this series, this is a picture, or a type, of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.
- D. 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.
- E. They deserved death from Joseph's hand, but he gave them life instead.
- F. So it is with everyone who looks to Jesus Christ in faith.