
Protection and Provision

Genesis 47

Introduction John Adams is one of the revered and respected fathers of our nation. His greatest biographer, David McCullough, has given us the story of this sacrificial, saintly man. Much of what I am going to say is taken from a talk McCullough gave at Hillsdale College and is taken from *Imprimis*, May 2006, a Hillsdale College Publication.

John Adams was born a poor farm boy. He entered Harvard at 15. He set himself to read “forever”. He was a deeply devoted Christian. The correspondence between him and his beloved wife, Abigail, are some of the most amazing letters ever written. He served our country well. He sacrificed often for its advancement. He argued for the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. He chose Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence. He appointed Washington as head of the army. He appointed John Marshall as Chief Justice.

As he retired from public service, he met with heartache and hardship. He suffered terribly with physical ailments. His wife and daughter both died in the same season of the year. He was abandoned, forgotten and even vilified. Let me now give you the “feel of his fiber” by McCullough.

One of the few things that Adams had left that he adored in his last years were his fruit trees. But then came one March night a terrible ice storm, and he woke up the next morning to see all of his trees shattered. This could have broken him, but it didn't. Listen to what he wrote:

A rain had fallen from some warmer region in the skies when the cold here below was intense to an extreme. Every drop was frozen wherever it fell in the trees, and clung to the limbs and sprigs as if it had been fastened by hooks of steel. The earth was never more universally covered with snow, and the rain had frozen upon a crust on the surface which shone with the brightness of burnished silver. The icicles on every sprig glowed in all the luster of diamonds. Every tree was a chandelier of cut glass. I have seen a queen of France with 18 millions of livres of diamonds upon her person and I declare that all the charms of her face and figure added to all the glitter of her jewels did not make an impression on me equal to that presented by every shrub. The whole world was glittering with precious stones.

Adams died, as many of you know, the same day Jefferson died. Jefferson had been his closest friend, then his political rival, then his political enemy. After twelve years of neither speaking to each other, Adams initiated the first letter of what was to be one of the great reconciliations in our history. The correspondence between these former presidents lasted until their deaths, and is some of the most wonderful letters in the English language. And then they died on the same day, each in his own bed, surrounded by his books. And it wasn't just any day. It was the 4th of July, 50 years after the Declaration of Independence.

The movement of God's purposes has been constantly forward even through tremendous obstacles. We have seen it in the life of John Adams. We have seen it week after week through Genesis. Just when it seems hopeless, God moves with his power to fulfill what He has promised. So, now, at this moment, God's people have left the Promised Land in the midst of a terrible famine and seem to be settling into Egypt. How is this a good thing? Abraham had come back to Egypt during famine with disastrous consequence for his reputation. His son, Isaac had done the same. Yet, in Egypt God has chosen to enrich and prosper them both.

This is the constant dilemma for God's people living in exile away from our homeland in heaven. Obstacle after obstacle seems to arise. Just when we seem to making a great advance, some setback brings us up short. This besets our personal lives and our lives together as God's people. I know that we hoped much to have a new facility by now with greater advantage for ministry and opportunity for outreach. I know that some of you have experienced financial or health reversals when you hoped for further progress.

How will we respond to all this? Does God keep His promises? How do His providences unfold? Do we become fatalists just shrugging our spiritual shoulders at whatever comes to pass? Is there a way to be submissive to God's providences while still engaged in the world around us with wisdom, confidence and deft spiritual balance? I believe so. I believe this is precisely the question, the dilemma Moses is dealing with here for the sake of all who hear and heed what he says.

The Interaction with a Pagan King

(v.1-18)

One of the great challenges facing the leadership of God's people is how to interact with pagans in authority. Joseph is the second in command in Egypt. But he still must engage the Pharaoh in seeking a place and protection for his own people.

In this unit, Moses highlights the wisdom of Joseph who models how to engage pagan people as God's kind of man. Here the providence of God has brought the son of Israel to have first place in the pagan world as he supplies them bread and brings them to servitude under an earthly king. Joseph's admirable faithfulness and diligence have brought him to positions of leadership where ever he has been. But we have not been told how. Now we see how Joseph's leadership functioned.

In the Procuring of His Favor

(v.1-6)

Joseph's presents himself before the Pharaoh. He carefully announces the arrival of his brothers and his father with all they have and own. As he had asked earlier, he has settled them in the land of Goshen. Joseph wants to ensure that this is not just a temporary situation. He is going to secure this part of Egypt as a permanent portion as long as they dwell there.

Joseph also chooses five of his brothers to bring before the Pharaoh. We are not told the reasons for choosing only five. But it is a conscious act both in how many he chooses and in the ones he chooses. This is a bit of "putting your best foot forward." However, the idea here is not appear in a way that encourages a compromising mingling with the Egyptians, but rather highlights the desirability of separateness.

There are two challenges here then. They are going to need space and identity. They must have space for their present flocks and future prosperity. They must also be able to maintain their uniqueness as God's people. They must live in Egypt without becoming Egyptian. They will want to pursue their vocation under God and continue to grow and multiply as God's people. Their challenge is like ours. We must live here in this world. But we must not become a part of the world. We must learn to live in and engage with the world without being poured into its mold. Israel prospered and maintained her identity. But the wilderness wanderings are full of how much Egypt had gotten in God's people while God's people were in Egypt. This is what all God's heart work in hard providences is all about. It is the uprooting of Egypt from our hearts so that we will love God and neighbor.

So, Pharaoh asks the obvious question men ask of each other all through time and all over the world, "What do you do for a living?" Based on their occupation as shepherds (which the Egyptians despised), they ask for the separate land where they are now pastured called Goshen. The Pharaoh offers them any land they want and is glad for them to take the land they request. Recognizing their abilities, the Pharaoh even turns over his flocks and herds to their care.

In the Presenting of His Father

(v.7-18)

Joseph then brings in his father to present him to Pharaoh. Surely he has told the Pharaoh stories of his family and father. Given all the Pharaoh seems to know about God, Joseph has related this family history to God's promises and provisions. So here is the grand patriarch of this great tribe. Here is the man to whom God had affirmed the covenant and through whom God would bring about the 12 tribes. He stands before this pagan ruler and he conveys a blessing upon the Pharaoh. This is not just a greeting. This is God's man, the covenant head of the future messiah and father of a nation. The Pharaoh may be the one upon the throne, but nevertheless, the greater is blessing the lesser.

The Pharaoh asks him how old he is. Ah, he is 130 years old. Further, Jacob responds with by apparently complaining of his lot in life. Compared to his forefathers, his life has been relatively short. And all his days have been full of hardship, grief and evil. It is hard to be kind to Jacob at this point. Here, I believe, he succumbs to one of the sins of old age – the troubles of the past are magnified and the blessings of the present are minimized. Here is an opportunity to exalt God, to show in the midst of the hardness of life, the amazing and unforeseen greatness of what God has done. But no, all he can say is that he has lived 130 years and it has been really tough. May God give us the grace in the senior years of life to be seasoned with spiritual joy and hope even in the midst of physical decline.

Just a brief note – Jacob giving his age here also helps with establishing a timeline to Adam. Here is another milestone, among others, that mark the years from Noah's flood through Abraham's call to Israel's leaving at the Exodus.

The closing of this day sees Joseph busily settling everyone in, providing for their needs and making all at home. His careful faithfulness and wisdom has secured a great place for his people and all with the favor and smile of the Pharaoh.

The Provision for a Pagan People

(v.19-26)

We have seen how Joseph brought his needs and requests to the pagan ruler. Now we see how he implemented a program for distributing the stockpiled food.

In the Selling of the Larder/Largesse

(v.13-18)

The Egyptian people begin to run out of their own private stores. So they must come to Joseph to do what the foreigners coming had to do: pay for the grain that he had stockpiled.

First, over a year they spend all their money. Joseph sells them the grain as the famine deepens. He gathers up the money coming in and adds it to the Pharaoh's wealth. He continues to sell the grain as long as the people have the money to buy it. The effect over the duration of the famine is to move all the currency from general circulation and put it at the disposal of the king.

Once the Egyptian people begin to run out of money, they come to Joseph again for the grain. He makes them an offer. They can trade their livestock for grain. So, for over a year, the Egyptian people buy the grain they need by exchanging their live stock for it. Joseph is accumulating vast wealth and resources for the Pharaoh. Surely, the effect is to impoverish the people. Eventually, this will begin to serve to impoverish the nation.

In the Purchase of the Land

(v.19-22)

In accordance with what would later be codified in God's Law, Joseph sells the food to the Egyptians in exchange for their freedom and their land.

Now for many, this is troubling. Why, given their increasing plight and dire hardship does he simply not give it to them? Leviticus 25:14-43 addresses parallel situations for Israel as they receive God's law. It was a great act of charity to buy the land of the destitute and bring them on as servants so as to provide for them. The modern welfare system of forcible taking from one group who has in order to freely give to those who don't have or won't work is unbiblical and immoral.

We who have grown up under the welfare system have so breathed its air that it is difficult to accept what the Bible clearly says. In the both the Old and New Testaments, the people of God were to care for each other in personal and corporate ways. In the Old Testament, every farmer was to leave the corners of the fields unharvested for the poor to come and glean. But the poor had to come and work for what they received. Never did the Jewish government nor Levitical tax system force the taking of money or harvest from producers in the economy to simply dole out to those who were needy.

Yet, the Bible commands people to love neighbor in such a way that we take care of one another. In Leviticus 25, if a person was so destitute that they had nothing, they could offer themselves and their lands for sell. It was considered a great mercy when someone stepped up to accept the offer. The term of the sale was limited – it could only last until the next Sabbatical year or, by agreement, to the next Jubilee (70th Year). The person could be redeemed by a relative or could redeem themselves if they inherited wealth. What appears

to us to be taking advantage of their plight is in God's view, an act of charity and compassion.

The New Testament picks up on this: the corporate benevolent care is for God's people. It is always voluntary. It may be covenanted or promised. Personal, individual charity to neighbors, whether they are believers or not, is also commanded. This reflects God's way in salvation. The benefits of salvation are freely given by the free-will of God who dispenses His mercy and benevolence as He sees fit. There is no room for demand on our part. We are supplicants who give up all to our King when He gives by grace to we who are utterly depraved, destitute and desperate.

So, the providence of God in bringing the famine and in placing Joseph where he was is being worked out. Part of God's purpose in the famine was to bring the whole economy under the ownership and control of the Pharaoh. Further, Israel was not subject to this as they owned and grazed their own lands. God had promised to preserve them and to prosper them. Now, he does so in a most surprising places and in most unusual ways.

In the Making of the Law

(v.23-26)

Now that the Egyptians had begun to sell their land to the Pharaoh, Joseph proposed a way for them to live on the land and be able to pay the Pharaoh for the privilege. This system we would recognize from history and European feudalism. The local baron or king owns the land. The people live on his lands and farm it. They pay him from what is produced as their rent. They keep the rest for themselves. In this way, the people can sustain themselves at present and in the future. We are not told if Joseph instituted some system of redeeming the land.

So, with the affirmation of the people, Joseph made the statutes permanent. The Pharaoh owned all the land. The people who lived on the land and farmed from the land paid a 20% rent on the produce from the land. Moses is recording this for the sake of the Israelites. They had learned over the 40 years what a hard task master a wicked king is when he has absolute control. They had seen the importance of land to a functioning economy. Having been reminded of all this, they should then welcome the framework and freedom that God's Law would afford them.

Well, this has been a bit of a tough bit of preaching. But it is important for us to think carefully and Biblically when we make statements about our responsibility to the poor. Hopefully, this morning, you are spurred to take up your Bible and work through some of this for yourself.

The Protection for God's People**(v.27-31)**

This final section highlights how Joseph's wise administration is a part of God's good providence.

In the Prosperity of his People**(v.27-28)**

In the land they have settled in, they prosper. For 17 years, they gain much in wealth and grow into a great nation. These two verses are the thematic line for the New Covenant. God had sent them down to Egypt. God had protected and prospered them in Egypt. They are away from the Promised Land. But there, they are subject to God's very great care. Let this be our encouragement, we who are the people of God living away from the Promised Land. We are still under the care of our God. He will protect and He will provide until it is time for the Exodus.

In the Promise to his Father**(v.29-31)**

Jacob believes God's promises. Though he is now living away from the Promised Land, he believes they will return. But he is coming to the end of his life. He does not want to die and have his remains left in Egypt. So he summons Joseph. He makes him promise to bring his body back with them when they return to the Promised Land. This is a great expression of his faith. He both believes the promises of God and is submitted to the providences of God.

Here is a simple and yet very hard lesson for us. We want to believe the promises of God. We can take Him at His Word. But we so often crave different circumstances than God has placed us in. So we must not only believe in Him but must bow to Him. We must do so in a way to look forward to the future and commit it entirely to His wise and sovereign purposes.

Lessons

Now, what instruction is intended for us upon whom the ends of the ages has come?

Seek the way of wisdom in the midst of God's providences. Your difficult circumstances are an opportunity to display the glory and greatness of Christ as He gives you wisdom. Make Him look large as you wend your way through the opportunities and obstacles.

Engage pagan or unbelieving (same thing) authorities with careful wisdom, forethought and speech. God's people of all people should be people-wise. We should not simply assert our rights or make our demands, particularly from the stance of being a Christian.

Grow old with grace. Be becoming a senior saint who serious and joyous. Do not magnify your present troubles nor your past hardships except where and when you can magnify God who is sustaining, yea even better, who is causing you to thrive through them.

Be fierce in your adherence to God's Word even when it counters the accepted wisdom of the world. We must passionately care for the needy while not violating God's Word in caring for them. We will find the third way between giving to our own in need and requiring appropriate work in return. For your own study, note how the widows who are taken on for permanent support must have no family to care for them and when they do, they give their days for practical ministry in the church. (See 1 Corinthians 7; 1 Timothy 5; James 1) I do not believe the Bible teaches a welfare system of any sort. I am deeply suspicious of the government's faith-based initiatives for care for the needy. I am sure in a future series, we will be addressing publicly our understanding of the Bible on these issues and how they impact practical care for the poor.

Let us keep faith with our families. We have miles to go and promises to keep. When we honor our parents by caring for them and providing for them as we can, then God is pleased with us. Give them the honor and support you are commanded while keeping the Lord's Day as unto Him.

