

Sermon: "Preventative Famine Relief"
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Some twenty-two years before a catastrophic, world-wide famine is about to hit, God initiates a preventative famine relief program. That is the bird's eye view of what transpires in the thirteen chapters long Joseph narrative. This disaster, something only God could have foreseen and planned for, has certain astonishingly simple ingredients: *worship, faith and a seventeen year old young man* (that being Joseph's probable age). Furthermore, and this is most fortifying: from God's point of view, it really doesn't take much to manage a huge crisis—any foreseeable crisis, including the one we are swept up in. Warfare, pestilence, famine, flooding and human perversity—not one, as bad as it might be, is more than God can handle.

The odds were slim to none that Joseph would turn out as well he did. I am going to postulate this: that faith is what made the difference. And we can be quite specific about the faith I in view: it was the newly recovered/reinstated(?) faith of his father Jacob. This faith was summarized for us in Gen. 35:3: **Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so there I make an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.** That's our God! Joseph, an impressionable young man of seventeen, motivated by faith decided right then and there to hitch his wagon to that God—I'll trust in ***the God who answers, who is with me no matter what!*** And, it is just like that for a seventeen year old: a very simple, very clear, very definite choice and yet that faith is also a *leap* into uncharted waters, into the unknown. How very narrow is the path of a ship on the expanse of the sea.

He was one of twelve sons, ten of them are substantially older than he and his younger brother, Benjamin. And, while Judah was the son through whom the seed of promise would pass on, the faith of Joseph "against the odds," was the instrument which God chose to use in that world moment to save all twelve sons of Jacob and Jacob, who would *by this intervention survive* to become the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, through whom the history of salvation would unfold as revealed to us through Scripture.

The sociology of the family was against Joseph's "success," the history of the family backed up that sober assessment. But, fortunately both were wrong; for apart from the life and work of Joseph, the divine plan of salvation would have failed down that line—the severe famine, which struck the land, would have extinguished the whole family as it was: the whole project was imperiled! Besides natural catastrophe, the ten older sons would have murdered the one son *God had chosen to be their rescuer*. They, *who lived for themselves*, failed

by divine intervention—the curious work in several hearts, through several sick interactions and open sin! They had no idea how dependent they were on the grace of God and on the one they loved to hate: Joseph. ***Against the odds, Joseph chose not to hate back, not to retaliate! As we all know, flash floods, tornadoes and earthquakes affect Christian homes along with all others.*** Faith affects how you handle the crises and not merely how we avert them. *Faith helps us be there for others in the midst of terrible suffering, loss and pain.* The brothers were envious, hateful, spiteful, vicious, treacherous, cruel, and “wild” boys—among other things. And, of course, the truth is that they were *mismatched* with their father, overwhelming Jacob whose model and example of fatherhood (and parenting), Isaac, was pathetic, both pitiable and lamentable. For example, Isaac played favorites but Jacob took that to a whole new level.

However, in reality, options do fail, dead ends do occur and alternatives are undertaken *so that the purposes of God are not thwarted*. Such an introduction causes several things to stand out in the text:

Of course, Jacob’s decision to return to Bethel, to God’s house and God himself could arguably be advanced as the “turning point.” It contributed.

Or any number of other critical moments in the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob could be suggested as well (sacrifice, Isaac’s betrothal). Who would have thought that Joseph, that **master dreamer**, would have turned out so well, to be so pivotal? Not in our wildest dreams! It is notable that Joseph was *a man who went about doing good, blessing and prospering others*.

It starts with his *mercy mission* to his brothers: he was sent to check on their *well-being*. This reminds me of Jessie’s mission for David—Jessie sent him with cheese, bread and wine to refresh his older brothers at the battlefield. Both sets of elder siblings struggle with envy and jealousy—sibling rivalry. But, the tattletale incident (37:2) is not necessarily determinative of this latter mission, one included to bear witness of Jacob’s fatherly concern for all his boys. The whole Shechem business may have awakened some caution in Jacob’s heart—the lads needed supervision. Seriously, just look at what they cooked up when left to their own devices (treachery, murder and plundering)?! They were not very reformed by the religious renewal of Bethel. **When they saw him from afar . . . they conspired to kill him.** (v.18) A bloodthirsty alternative to brotherly love! Hatred blossomed into murder upon catching sight of Joseph *who came with kindest intentions—“doing them good.”*

Then, there is blessing Potiphar, **captain of the guard** (Pharaoh’s guard) and a high ranking royal official, by “doing good” to Potiphar, Joseph **became a successful man**, both prosperous and powerful *even as a slave!* Potiphar’s wife attempts to seduce Joseph which he refuses to do (doing good to her despite herself!). Joseph honored the God **who answered him and was with him—!**

wonder, years latter, when Joseph is elevated to **second to only Pharaoh(!)**, in rank, privilege and power, over her own husband, how did this faithless wife carry herself before the one she attempted to seduce. How did she face the man she had imprisoned on her false allegations, covering up her lust with accusations? Did she dare meet his gaze? Joseph could have squashed her like a bug.

Then, there was the jailer—if he was someone other than Potiphar this being a real possibility, for Potiphar lived over the royal prison—Joseph was imprisoned in his basement? Maybe Potiphar was wise enough to disbelieve his wife’s story, maybe he knew her lust for that handsome man.

Joseph did good to both the baker and the cupbearer—despite one dying and the other being reinstated (who, forgot Joseph for two years!) And, supremely, Joseph was good to Pharaoh—with God’s help interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh (seven good years, followed by seven dire years of famine). The entire known world would be dependent upon the breadbasket of Egypt, upon the store houses and government supervision of worldwide famine—Joseph did good to the whole world, his whole family included. **He went about doing good.** Back to our text!

(V. 18) **But they, when they saw him, conspired to kill him.** Their problem was with their father, but they decided to take it out on Joseph. And, in a very wicked sense, perhaps they were trying to “kill two birds with one stone:” by faking Joseph’s death and then lying about it for nearly two decades, they avenged themselves on Jacob and got rid of a nuisance.

We think *biblically* about the dreams in that day as a mode of divine communication as opposed to chiefly being fodder for analysis on the psychiatrist’s couch!—dreams, vital to those times, setting forth things that would unfold in the future. The brothers didn’t like the implications; they had no intention of submitting to any one *let alone their younger brother*. However, that is what God had in mind. They thought Joseph presumptuous, vain and ambitious, living out his personal fantasies. Ironically, God uses their dismissal of Joseph as the means to move along his salvation plan: *relocating* Joseph through enslavement, through imprisonment, through abandonment, loneliness and personal oblivion. Joseph will need **the God who answers/who is with me** very much on long dark years of suffering, on his journey from the dry pit of death to the sumptuous place of Pharaoh. Did you ever wonder about his adjustment in diet, from prison fare to normal food?! The *educational value* of slavery is rarely mentioned when the topic is raised these days and, what is even more astounding, some of my black Christian friends actually thank God for “slavery” for through it (*relocation*) they came into contact with the gospel and were saved. That “dividend” also is suppressed in our cultural dialogue. Joseph knew Egyptian society from the

bottom up and related well to them all! He was an exceptional child. Israel herself experienced four hundred years of slavery as part of their formative *national* experience as a people! Jews oppressing other people must be exceedingly grievous to our Father in heaven—by which I mean Palestinians in modern Israel. God planned for slavery to be a part of their heritage—he was looking for advocates against it or *so it appears to me*. Servitude is best preparation for leadership, as Jesus says, **He who would be greatest among you must be servant of all.** (Matt. 23:11)

Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce beast has devoured him, and we will see what becomes of his dreams. (v.20) How's that for premeditated, cold-blooded murder?! What are the odds for escaping that plot and snare? Reuben, perhaps seeking to ingratiate himself to his offended father, **rescued him out of their hands.** (v.22) This intervention may have moved Judah to reconsider their actions. They strip Joseph of his robe and toss him into a waterless pit—where death, by starvation and dehydration, alone, awaited him. This is traumatic for the lad, and horrifying regardless! **Then they sat down to eat.** (v.25) It is this detail that brought to my mind the idea that *maybe* they sat down to eat the refreshments that Joseph might have brought from home. That would indicate a higher degree of **spitefulness!** **And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites** (mind you, these are close cousins to them! Kin selling kin to kin—I suppose, whatever makes a shekel!), **coming from Gilead . . .** so they haul him up and **sell him for twenty shekels of silver.** (v.28) Two shekels for each one of them.

Now I pause for a moment. Recall it is through Judah that the line of promise is to come down—Joseph would be such a worthier candidate!—but here Judah, whose reprobate character will be exposed in spades in chapter 38, has the function of getting Joseph sold and relocated to Egypt *where he can be where he needs to be* to eventually obtain the status of governor of all Egypt. Climbing out of the abyss of prison, from slave status to supreme ruler (next to Pharaoh)! God's plan is to make provision for the tribe of Israel *to survive the coming famine* and these “brothers” came very close to aborting their own future, all their prospects. Against the odds, despite their wickedness, faith prevailed.

Remember also: Isaac was a miracle child. Jacob and Esau were miracle babies. And, yes, Joseph was a miracle child, too. All of them borne to barren women by divine intervention. It was through this people that the divine Messiah, *another miracle baby!*, would come so the family had to be preserved. But the plan of rescue **takes 22 years to bring to completion!** But, **against all odds**, Joseph sees that it is **God's hand** and not their hatred which brought about his deprivations and sufferings. He rescues those who rejected and enslaved him!

“God is not surprised by the sins of his people and then scratches his head about how to “use” it for good. He is in charge of everything in the narrative from the beginning. He plans it. The he predicts it in a dream. Then he superintends it [the impending crisis] for 22 years. Then he completes it in the rescue of his people.” (J. Piper)

Psalm 105:16-19:

And He called for a famine upon the land;

He broke the whole staff of bread.

17 He sent a man before them,

Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

18 They afflicted his feet with fetters,

[lit. *His soul came into*] He himself was laid in irons;

19 Until the time that his word came to pass,

The word of the Lord [refined] tested him.

God took away Joseph’s family (for a season and on purpose), God enslaved him, had him falsely accused and imprisoned, even the famine, that was God’s doing, too. He imperils his own his people (and the whole world!) and, through testing, danger and peril of death, devises their deliverance! *That is how God overrules crises —his **modus operandi**.* That’s the story of Joseph! The huge take-away is this: if you think there is such a thing as random evil, think again—if God is sovereign, and I believe he is, then, sinful men do not win. God transmutes their evil intentions, delivers sinners and the ending is glory and triumph *for all who believe. **He rules over the crises.***

Defeating the famine took oodles of planning and faithful workers. Worship, faith and Joseph were more than adequate! We are engaged in a pandemic, and beyond that the great spiritual conflict between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness continues. Satan and his demonic forces are embedded, it would seem, everywhere—the whole world seems held in their sway! The cascade of crises seems unending and very turbulent. Can the captives be set free once more? Can any lost ground be redeemed? Yes! Yes, more can be brought in before the Last trumpet because it is the Lord who raises up and the Lord who tears down! He establishes who governs, who wins, who loses. He causes **all things to work together toward good for those who love him and are called according to his purposes.** A huge crises was on the horizon. A CRUSHING WORLD FAMINE, but God averted it and he did so with worship, faith and a single young man. Our crisis is not the “end!” It is not for us to lie down, cash in the chips and die. Let us arise, love courageously, do good defiantly—who knows God may be ***averting this crisis through us***! Is anything too difficult for our God? Take courage. Fear not. Follow our King!

Amen.