

“Come to Dinner”
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As a side note, the great preachers that I frequently consult (Begg, Spurgeon, Maclaren) in sermon preparation share this: *none of them deal with this passage in the material available to me!* I came up with four reasons why I should preach on it: 1. the banquet has features suitable to the salvation message, to renewed fellowship with God and our brothers—it is a supremely teachable moment! 2. Jesus dined with sinners and used meals as a format for instruction in spiritual truth. 3. This feast is kingdomlike in nature—all those invited, came to dine! 4. It is a supreme example of table fellowship—God’s desire to commune, or to sup with us—and signifies that not one person on his guest list is missing.

Has it ever occurred to us to ask: why the description of this banquet? What would God have us learn from such a *seemingly* ordinary, or mundane matter? They **ate a meal at noon**, perhaps, only as a matter of convenience—yet it would afford them plenty of time to **drink and be merry . . .** to talk, reminisce, share and get re-acquainted . . . this banquet is a type of communion which culminates in the marriage feast of the Lamb in Glory. But where exactly is the gospel for us in all this?

The revelation of God for us in Gen. 43:15-34 details for us: 1. **the hand of God** and *the goodness of God implied*; 2. a demonstration of hope (the rising of filial love to supplant cruelty and hatred); 3. the impact of forgiveness (rooted in conquering love); 4. displays the enormity of sin (the highness of its offense to God and the costliness of its removal/forgiveness); 5. and we see *displayed* the sheer miracle of forgiveness which we are **duty bound and privileged to extend to others**: to the lost and to those particularly who have sinned against us! *And all of this before we are even seated at the table!* All this revealed in the setting of a formal meal at noon to which the eleven brothers are invited and at which they are honored. We won’t get past the invitation phase of things—there is so much here—there will be plenty to digest. First imagine going from the deprivation in Canaan to a sumptuous feast in Egypt!

Perhaps something we might come up with is this: while it looks to be “ordinary,” it actually wasn’t. It was a family reunion after decades of separation. By that I mean unbeknownst to the guests—all twelve brothers are in the room. (That’s the reunion piece, Joseph, the missing brother is present *in cognito*.) The other brothers, minus Simeon who was held in Egypt, have been having common meals all the way from Canaan to Egypt. *But not a sumptuous feast at which they are seated around the table in birth order!* Their meals on the road, so to speak, were more mingled, informal affairs—a matter of eating out of the cooler some prepared food on a long family trip at a turn-out, or scenic overlook?? This world in

an inn, and we are travelers passing through. . . let us learn to focus on important and eternal things during our time here below—just as Joseph does.

Take these men to my home, and slaughter an animal¹ and make ready, for these men will dine with me at noon. These instructions direct our attention to the steward, or “the ruler of my house.” Hmm, Joseph has gone from being the steward of Potiphar’s house, to having, as governor, a steward of his own, directing the affairs of his household! That is not merely a step up for Joseph! No, **this man, central to the main action of the first half of this narrative** is a trusted and trustworthy servant. And, it would appear, from what follows that he is fully in Joseph’s confidence—he knows that **these men** are not just rough-cut strangers who showed up randomly at the food distribution center.

Make ready. The floor in the banquet hall is to be swept and washed, the tables are to be arranged and the intimate seating plan is to be put in place. **Make ready.** The cooks, the butcher, the butler, the baker and the servers are to be notified. The steward oversees it all. He sees that the table is set, the candles (if any) are lit. The dishes are to be prepared and the baked goods! All before the steward can stand and announce: “Dinner is served!” I suppose fresh flowers would be arranged. And, I think that the centerpiece of all this decoration would be *the grief of Jacob²*! He is laid low by the loss of Rachel, followed by the loss of Jacob, and presently he wants listlessly and lifeless for the outcome of this journey—fearful that all his sons will be lost to him. Jacob’s blindness to the activity of God, for him, not against him, stems from his inconsolable grief. He cannot move on, he cannot hope and live until he is comforted: **Blessed are they that mourn, they shall be comforted!** And this narrative explains why, why those that mourn are to be comforted! That is a piece of the gospel, don’t we think?

In light of this we might suggest that this banquet is a celebratory one. The conclusion of one season is at hand and a new day lies directly ahead—a day of peace following general amnesty!

The steward knows that they are brothers—a fact affirmed in the intimate seating arrangements!—and by now, he probably ***knows all about their former treachery***—how they sold his master into slavery in lieu of killing him! Yet he remains poised, gracious, in control. *This background information is all on “a-need-to-know” basis!* And, it seems evident, that Joseph has truly invested spiritually in this man even to the point of sharing his faith in the one true God. We are all like this steward in that we are in the know when it comes to what Christ is up to with regard to the lost! We are instruments in His hand.

¹ This particular detail covers something the Egyptians found offensive about the Hebrew diet—Hebrews killed and ate bovines which they worshipped—the meal may indeed have consisted of veal, the fatted calf saved for important feasts. Poultry was very common food.

² The distortion of grief is rectified by comfort. The distortion of guilt is corrected by forgiveness.

Within the four walls of Joseph's home, true religion and prayer may have been practiced. The steward is instrumental in Joseph's dealings with his miscreant family. Of course, all of that is not evident from first blush, but the harder we look into this banquet business, the more these implications, and these themes emerge. For instance, the steward may know that Joseph has already forgiven his brothers but that he is, wisely, testing them to see if they have matured spiritually, if they are trustworthy now—or, as the text asserts **honest men, good men**. Joseph may have had an interest in seeing the outcome of his prayers for his brothers. To be sure this is a little like first meeting the family of your beloved—you want to be ready, on your best behavior, seeking a favorable response by a favorable self-presentation. That this is an exam is unquestionable.

This banquet is a personal and private affair. It transpires in the governor's home. Joseph's hospitality to a random band of Hebrews might have raised eyebrow's at Pharaoh's court! Egyptians held the Hebrews, what Jews were before becoming either Israelites, or Juhadites/Jews, *in contempt*. This prejudice mirrors that of the Jews against tax collectors and sex workers (prostitutes) in first century Palestine (Jesus' day, a millennium and a half away). They were a proud nation and *the seeds of subsequent subjugation* were found to be in this social attitude and *presumption of superiority*. The Egyptians believed that their gods were the only true gods, and that the "territorial gods" of other nations were superstitions, false gods. So racial, social/cultural and religious prejudices all played a role in Egypt's national life—and is reflected in their dining habits. Let me drive this point about "territorial gods" home before we move on. The steward is careful to say, **your father's God** when referring to El Shaddai, or to Elohim, and not the god of Canaan (the territory from which they came). **How did he know to do that?** He must have learned the distinction between **their father's God** and the gods of Canaan because he had been instructed in that matter by Joseph! Instructed, and converted. He says, "**Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks** (v. 22) **I had your money.**" Perhaps he was in possession of a receipt that accounted their purchase as paid in full, the text doesn't say what the basis of his declaration is. He is stressing the goodness of God by saying this! But, wait, we know that *he was instructed to put their money back* in their sacks! That means there was no miracle of replenishment entailed. So just how did God accomplish that—he used the steward!? The steward consciously served the Lord. Through God instructing Joseph, who then directed the steward as to His will in the matter. The money then was returned out of obedience to God: **Peace to you! God has given you treasure** and the steward, the delivery man(!), is in on it! His response may even have been scripted by Joseph.

SO, the steward is the central figure in the proceedings leading up to the meal! Joseph was busy at the office. The men are brought to Joseph's house, and they are refreshed: **their feet are washed and the donkeys are fed**. (v. 24) We note that **the men were afraid** because they were brought to Joseph's home (v. 18)

and their fearful response to this kindness is a *distortion* wrought by their sense of guilt as well as they certainly knew that they were capable of treachery of that sort (Remember Shechem! Or consider governmental seizure of assets, confiscation of goods, and persons?, the appropriation of property.): **It is because of the money in our sacks** (first time around) **we are brought in that he might make a case against us and seize us, to take us as slaves with our donkeys.** (v.18)

Now there are two chief ways to exegete this section: 1. first, we might take it as the outworking of a guilty conscience; or 2. we might take it as a self-protective effort to demonstrate transparency—an indication that they were totally honest, not wanting to even take advantage of a mistake in financial exchange! Given who they are talking to, the steward (and, of course, through him to Joseph!), I tend to lean in the direction of the brother's³ protesting their honesty guilt being secondary here. Guilt is more directly and plainly associated with Gen. 42: 14-24 where they state explicitly: **We are truly guilty concerning our brother for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear, therefore has this distress come upon us.** (v. 22) This **pleading**, or begging features in the parable Jesus shares in Matthew 18 as we shall see later!

There actually was no guilt associated with the money in the sacks!

However, if Gen. 42 demonstrates an active conscience . . . Gen. 43 equally demonstrates a desire to be open and honest. While these represent solid moral advances in the character of Joseph's older brothers—they have, as we know, two further “tests” coming, to prove the genuineness of their change: the portions of favor shown Benjamin and the planting of Joseph's cup in Benjamin's sack—are both offices that the steward may have personally performed! It is worth pointing out that Benjamin was a suckling child when Joseph was sold into slavery! It would have been impossible for him to recognize Benjamin, which is not the case with their older brothers!

Then, to further assuage their anxiety, and as a sign of good faith, Simeon (who was probably notified of his brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin before being restored to them) is brought forth and restored to them. We should note however that this is after the explanation of the returned monies! And, incidentally, all of this transpires outside the door of Joseph's home. The psychological reward of getting Simeon back (good faith) and the faithful summary of the involvement of God in the money issues (a huge release) were preliminary to the ensuing hospitality. There was no punishment, as feared, for there was no harm, no foul, in these dealings! And, because we are counting, God is referenced, recognized(!) twice in this banquet narrative: first by the steward, and later, by their “Egyptian” host: **God be gracious to you, my son.** (v. 29c) This should have piqued their curiosity in addition to calming their spirits; it would be very perplexing to hear God mentioned

³ They would have hardly appeared to be brothers when they abused him! They were more like avengers (protesting the studied favoritism of their home life). They were dream cancellers, or executioners—more a pack of wolves than “brothers.”

so pointedly in a pagan setting. Is this not a take away? A point made by the inclusion of this in this moment of hospitality? The hand of God is openly demonstrated. Remember Abraham's declaration: **I thought there was no fear of God in this place?** He was wrong, Jacob was likewise mistaken—Josep's brothers are in that same place.

There is also hope in this demonstration that blood is thicker than water! I mean ***that filial and fraternal affections are rising to the surface***, that these affections have apparent power to overcome selfishness, resentment and envy, sin, cruelty and hatred. And that cruelty and dishonor shown to their father—for the purported death of Joseph was a dagger to Jacob's bleeding, broken heart over the loss of his beloved Rachel.

However, the affable peace enjoined here is terribly superficial if it does not extend to *a full and entire repentance for their sinning*. It is one thing to be aware of one's sin, and quite another to be sincerely remorseful—so remorseful as to be *determinative*, determinative of a change in direction, or practice. Repentance is a cease and desist order on a pattern of sin! Un-forgiveness is the assumption of immutability, it suggests *that repentance is quite impossible* on the other party's part. I suppose it is therefore a form of moral prejudice, a prejudgment of the situation. The horror of the offense is so high that we turn from the offense, and the offender. The offense against God and against Joseph by his brothers was staggeringly high. Jesus speaks to this in Matthew 18:

21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus *said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

Notice that Peter asks "how often," but Jesus replies with "how deeply, or, at what cost is obedience." Jesus deals with the why, Peter is just counting! To illustrate his point, in Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus told the parable of a king owed ten thousand talents (a talent was worth 6,000 denarii, and a denarii was a day's wages, in contemporary terms, let's say \$150 dollars that amount to 90 billion dollars⁴). Further, in the parable, this servant is owed 100 denarii, or 25 dollars. The debts involved are in a ratio of 600,000 to 1! The one who was forgiven much refused to forgive the pittance owed him by his brother! The king is infuriated:

You wicked (as in heartless, ungrateful and pitiless!) **servant, I forgave you all the debt that you owed me because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you . . . and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.**

So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from your heart, do not forgive his brother his trespasses. (Matt. 18: 32-35)

⁴ Or, it would take 200 years of three hundred unpaid work days each to make up the debt owed.

And in case you think that standard too high, Luke 17:3-4 reports that Jesus had something further to say to his disciples (who we are!), on the seven-fold forgiveness “owed” our “repentant” brothers:

3 [TAKE HEED TO YOURSELVES] Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4 And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ [you shall forgive] forgive him.”

When we get past the shock of this directive, or get up off the floor!, we realize that this is the secret to Joseph’s forgiveness. *He has taken heed to himself.* **If your brother sins, rebuke him** is pretty open and what to do if he repents is very plain and clear: forgive him!—we must care enough to confront. That is our mutual duty. **And if he sins against you seven times in a day . . . and repents seven times!** *Forgive him—care enough moves to love enough—lest you prove an ungrateful debtor!* Secondly, forgiving is an act of compassion, or of mercy. *Taking heed to ourselves* is paying attention to our role, or our part, in the forgiveness business when it comes to deal with sin, and particularly when a brother sins against us! God is paying attention to us *as we deal with sin*, and with offenses by others!

So let’s get back to dinner—it’s about to be served! The guests have been put at ease, despite the superficiality of that peace. Does this mean they were eating and drinking as in the days of Noah? Particularly in obliviousness to sin as in the days of Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah, or as apparently prevailed in pre-exilic Jerusalem in the days of Amos the prophet: **Woe unto those taking their ease in Zion.** (Amos 6:1) As well as in post-exilic Israel, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Okay to review the good news in the passage:

The hand of God in the details____(check)
 The goodness of God in the events____
 The demonstration of rising hope____
 the victory of filial love____
 the victory of love over cruelty and hate____
 The enormity of sin____
 offense fo God____
 costliness of removal____
 The sheer miracle of forgiveness____
 our duty____
 our privilege____
 our partnership with Christ in this work of reconciliation____

Amen.