

“Serve the Bread”
 Sermon for 1 November 2020
 Pastor Sam Richards
 Texts: Gen. 43:27-34

I forgot to mention the Joseph doctrine (“Give the credit to God!”) last Sunday, something that the steward ascribed to when he said, **Your God, the God of your father, has put treasure in your sacks** (verse 23). The steward’s conversion/faith actually makes more sense of his complicity with Joseph! Joseph first articulated this doctrine in the matter of dream interpretation: **Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me.** (40:8) Joseph followed up on this in 41:16 when he declared: **It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace.** That is a curious answer for a newly released inmate/slave to give the potentate of all Egypt! How did Joseph know it would be **an answer of peace**? Other translations use terms such as **the answer he desires** (NIV), **set you at ease** (NLT), **an adorable answer** (ESV/NASB), **good meaning** (CEV), **a favorable answer** (HCSB), **without God an answer of safety will not be given Pharaoh** (Brenton Septuagint Translation), and **a prosperous answer** (Douay-Rheims Bible).

“I cannot do this by any power, or virtue, or art of my own, for I am but a man, as your magicians are, but only by inspiration from the great God. Thus he gives the honor from himself unto God, and leads Pharaoh to the knowledge of the true God.” -Matthew Poole.

If, as Calvin suggests, this comment is a prayer, and not a prophecy, it would constitute a courteous wish—which is in keeping with Joseph’s deference to Pharaoh. This could be tagged as an apologetic, or evangelistic comment by Joseph and that would be in keeping with his faithfulness as well as reinforcing the idea what he may have tutored his steward later on in his career as governor of Egypt in the true Hebraic faith, passed down from Abraham!

Consider the following passages on preparation and apply it to the steward who is doing Joseph’s/God’s bidding:

I go to prepare a place for you. (John 14:3) Luke 22:7 **Now the first day of Unleavened Bread came, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. 8 And so Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and prepare the Passover for us, so that we may eat it.” 9 They said to Him, “Where do You want us to prepare it?” 10 And He said to them, “When you have entered the city, a man carrying a pitcher of water will meet you; follow him into the house that he enters. 11 And you shall say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher says to you, “Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?”’ 12 And he will show you a large, furnished upstairs room; prepare it there.” 13 And they left and**

found everything just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover.

So the brothers are outside the door, oblivious of their sin, yet sensible of their guilt—they are suspicious, distrustful of this banquet thing¹: **It is because of the money, the money that was returned . . . we are brought here so that he, the governor, can make a case against us, to seize us to take us as slaves with our donkeys.** (43:18) Funny how our fears give the template of our conscience! Our projections tell a tale: what they wished and imposed upon Joseph, they are frightfully afraid of for themselves! This signifies that they are not focused on the test of their honesty: **bring your youngest brother . . . to prove you aren't spies. . . to see if there be any truth in you** (42:15-17).

I find it striking and significant that the accusation of being spies *has been dropped with their return with Benjamin*. It was on the basis of being charged as spies that they were incarcerated for three days on their first visit to Egypt. It is worth recollecting that Abraham had been entertained at Pharaoh's court (Gen. 12:15) many, many years prior.

Then there is their present, "the gift of the best of Canaan!" (lit. **the song of the land!**) Sent to sweeten the deal, or to curry favor with the governor. There must have been a considerable nostalgic impact to the balm, spices and myrrh, honey and nuts on the erstwhile host! Like pork rinds, hot sauce, barbecue and pecans from Texas to a Texan sojourning in a far country! This present becomes a hospitality gift! A customary practice that has been around for ages. So, once their angst, misgivings and suspicions have been overcome through the ministrations of the steward, the brothers enter, and **bow to the ground** before the governor—not knowing that this is in fact Joseph, and the very fulfillment of his adolescent dreams. **Joseph doesn't appear to take much relish in this homage** and I think we can assume that he is processing this turn of events—he now understands more fully what that dream was about. **God's protection of Jacob's family through him—not just divine provision!** *This is God's chosen family, the offspring of Abraham and the Old Testament church!* What I mean is that Joseph knows that this whole business is much bigger than his status, or dominance—his eye is on the prize of family reconciliation. And while he was anxious to know that his family is moving under his protection and care, that he has been sent ahead by God, and elevated by God to preserve their lives!

What a might happy meeting—like the saints reunion with their Christ!

He attempts to move on with his inquiries: **Is your old father well of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?** (v. 27) And they respond by bowing down in homage a

¹ John Gill points out, with regard to the animal slaughtered, that Egyptian worship of bovines may have had its origin in this historical episode: remember the fourteen cows which appeared in Pharaoh's dream sequence?! Gill suggests that the worship of cows, originated in this manner, may have been superimposed rather than predating the great famine

second time! **As he lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son**, bowing with the rest to them—with all those who participated in his abuse (!), something he was innocent of!—he said, **Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me?** Benjamin was the only twenty-something year old in the band. And then moves on, saying **May God be gracious to you, my son.** (v. 29) This is the second perplexing time that Joseph speaks of God—perplexing because this is a supposedly pagan setting! The first time was back when Joseph released all but Simeon from prison: **Do this and live, for I fear God.**

Let **the fear of the Lord** be sentry, surveillance and guard at the entry to your house as well as the gate of your heart!

If you are honest men, let one of you be confined to your prison house, but you go and carry grain for your houses. And bring your youngest brother to me so that your words will be verified. (Gen 42:18-20) Joseph is doing this so as to feed his famished family back in Canaan and move things forward on their eventual relocation to Goshen—where irrigation from the Nile would mitigate the worse conditions of the remaining famine years. And there they'd be a church plant in Egypt

What follows next is an answer to Jacob's prayer: **May God be merciful to you before the man** (43:14) for Joseph, upon seeing his younger brother was "stirred in the bowels of his compassion/ his mercy was warmed" **and he sought a place to weep; and he entered his chamber and wept there.** (v. 30) And it is not unlikely that his spontaneous expression of joy coincided with this visceral response to Benjamin, his baby brother! Now while there is nothing noting the presence of his wife and two young sons, there is little reason to suppose that they would have been excluded—this banquet was not a state function, but **a celebratory meal in the home**, with all the trimmings, held in honor of Benjamin, the youngest son. This, too, was perplexing behavior—to all but Joseph and his steward, and perhaps his wife. Now I have read of Joseph being considered a member of the priestly caste because of his marriage to this daughter of a priest—this would be in addition to his status as governor, second in command only to Pharaoh.

Having dealt with his strong emotional response to seeing Benjamin, all grown up—this is something he had longed for intensely for years!—Joseph regains his composure, re-enters the banquet hall, seats himself (probably at the family table) and says, **Serve the bread.** It is not particularly helpful to render this, "Serve the meal." (v. 31) Because Joseph's family is breaking bread together, for the first time in decades and in the absence of their father Jacob! And as I pointed out last week, the brothers are sent back to Egypt a second time to buy **some bread** (43:1)—buy some food is no better substitute for the Hebrew than "serve the meal." And that is because bread is the symbol of life, grain is the staff of life. Very particular bread is broken at the Passover feast, but bread breaking and table fellowship are **marks of God's family**—pictured here in the pre-redemptive era, in Egypt. Jesus was

recognized in **the breaking of the bread** at the evening meal in an inn on the Emmaus Road because of that act's familiarity at the table fellowship shared by the disciples in their season with the Lord Jesus. It was a signature gesture, a mark of identity—something wonderfully familiar. Anyway, the serving of the bread was the first course of the following banquet.

Now the three separate table settings are carefully laid out for us: Joseph by himself due to his elevated rank, the Egyptians by themselves and the nomadic Hebrew seated by themselves. Now it seems likely that the meal was served from the high table, Joseph's table—portions were divided and distributed by the host and a huge significant was attached to this process. I say this because the five-fold portions of Benjamin are what lead us to conclude that the banquet was in his honor as well as a stunning expression of hospitality!—five-fold was the Egyptian way of conveying honor at a meal to the recipient. *But this is just a tiny piece of a much larger story! It erases the false notion that God's plan revolves around us! We have to wonder what went through the brothers' minds as they observed this honor heaped on Benjamin—the sharing of portions from the high table took time, had visibility, meaning everyone saw what was going on. We know that it was not envy, but it seemed, apart from the specific request for his presence, that he should be, being the youngest, so honored!*

It is written, **He took portions** (lit. *he sent messes/portions*) **to them from his own table**. The most likely candidate for this duty, would be, the steward! The confirmation that this was not the host, Joseph, lies in the words **he sent portions** designating which portions went to which guest, showing his favor to each. Throughout all of this, we mustn't overlook the fact that by his sheer existence, Joseph is a witness *to bring their sin to remembrance—which is a supreme gift of mercy, God desiring their restoration and forgiveness.*

Time alone cannot erase the stain of sin. It takes the atoning work of Jesus! Work, occupation, family life can divert/deflect one's attention for a moment, but not eliminate thoughts about unconfessed and repented of sin. Eventually, a certain resignation attends this constant review: what was done cannot be undone, we say with sadness, however regretful the sin might now appear. The fact of a self-chosen life . . . the initial wrongness, rebellion, or just plain stupidity ring the changes of our conscience. It must be crystal clear that the fear, distrust and suspicion of God wrought by sin is a constant—they are spiritual hindrances to be overcome. Compensatory goodness, the piling up of meritorious deeds to counterbalance the sinful actions, is an endless and impossible course of action. Never good enough, never enough actually. There is no excusing sin that truly cuts it with God, or with our own hearts. The lamentableness of sin can be crushing, or crippling. All of that to say that the true purpose of conviction is to call us back to God, to bring about reconciliation. And that the only way for the distrust to be eradicated is by faith, real belief in a real atonement. This is the template, or pattern of God's merciful

intervention in the believer's life. It is momentous, it is the germ of future spiritual advancement . . . it is a draught from the source of living waters.

A. Fuller (in sermons @ biblehub.com) writes: And now, I apprehend, it was Joseph's wish to discover himself to his brethren, or *rather to enable them to discover him*. There are three things in particular while they were at dinner, each tending to this end, and as I conceive it, designed for it.

1. The order of the tables (one for his family, one for the "strangers," and one for the Egyptians [a witness to the proceedings!]). The design of this was to set them a thinking of him, and who he was, or could be. That the Egyptians and Hebrews should eat apart could easily be account for; but who, or what is this man? Surely he must be a foreigner . . . {like them, tipping his hand?}

2. The order in which they themselves were seated; it was "before him," so that they had full opportunity of looking at him; and what was astonishing to them, every man was placed "according to his age." But who can this be that is acquainted with their ages, so as to be able to adjust things in this order? Surely it must be someone who knows us, though we know not him. Or is he a diviner Who or what can he be? They are said to have "marveled one at another," and well they might. It is marvelous that they did not know from whence, or suspect who he was.

3. The peculiar favor which he expressed to Benjamin, in sending him a mess five times more than the rest. There is no reason to suppose that Benjamin ate more than the rest; but this was the manner of showing special favor in those times. It was therefore saying in effect, "I not only know all your ages, but towards that young man, I have more than a common regard. Look at all this, and look at me, look at me, my brother Benjamin. **Dost thou not know me?**" But all was hid from them. Their eyes, like those of the disciples towards their Lord, seem to have been holden (sic-*withheld from*), that they should not know him. Their minds however are eased from apprehension and they drank, and were cheerful in his company."

That they should honor the regard of their parents, for Joseph, and for Benjamin is a lesson the brothers need to master. One wonders: did they recall their snacking beside the pit into which they had cast their distraught brother when they received bread from his hand? Joseph is returning good for evil, blatantly—just as Jesus gave us righteousness for our sinfulness. Our homecoming to heaven is prefigured in this Egyptian banquet! **Amen.**