

## THE HOSTAGE WHO RULED EGYPT, II

Scripture Reading: Genesis 41:38-43, RSV

The story of Joseph is regarded by literary critics as one of the finest short stories in all of literature. It has the mystery, the pathos, the tragedy, the conflict, the suspense—all the great qualities that we identify with literature. It would be presumptuous for me to try to preach a sermon on Joseph in one week. Two weeks aren't really adequate but I will attempt to outline some of the critical points and comment on the rich theological meanings of the story.

Last week's sermon ended with Joseph in prison, where he has been put in charge of the other prisoners, two of whom were members of Pharaoh's court—the chief butler, or cupbearer, who had access to the most private bedrooms of Pharaoh, and the baker. Why they are in prison is not explained. Being in charge of the prison, Joseph was also expected to serve them and to deal with their problems. He notices that they are both feeling rather depressed and he asks them what is troubling them. They tell him that they have both had dreams and they can't understand the significance of the dreams. In the ancient world, dreams were considered to have a portent that we don't appreciate today. Both of these men felt that these dreams had significance for their futures but they didn't know how to interpret them.

Joseph says that, with God's help, he thinks he could explain the meanings of the dreams. The butler took courage and told his dream first. Joseph gives him a very favorable interpretation: In three days you will be restored to power. The baker decides, "Well, I guess I can tell my dream then." The baker finds out, however, that in three days he will be executed.

Joseph, of course, saw the cupbearer as a ticket out of prison. He felt that if the cupbearer would speak a kind word to Pharaoh and tell him about Joseph and the good work he was doing, he might be released from prison. As the narrative unfolds, the cupbearer promptly forgets Joseph. Years pass.

Then the Pharaoh starts having dreams and he knows that these dreams are not just stomach upsets. He senses that these dreams have significance—seven fat cows (full of Egyptian imagery) are eaten by seven thin cows; seven full ears of grain are swallowed by seven gaunt ears of grain. Scholars have found that the person having the dream tended to depend on an intuitive feeling that when the proper interpretation was presented, the dreamer would "know" it. All of the usual interpreters of dreams for the Pharaoh were unable to give him the "proper" explanation.

The cupbearer then remembered Joseph and told the Pharaoh he knew of a man who might be able to help him. Joseph was summoned from the prison.

When Joseph hears the dream and gives the interpretation, the Pharaoh instinctively recognizes that Joseph is right: There are going to be seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. He didn't know what to do to show his appreciation to Joseph. As the Scripture Reading indicates, when Joseph convinced Pharaoh that he had the correct insight and even outlined a plan for meeting the crisis, Pharaoh decided that this was the man who should run the program. (I'm sure he must have heard of Joseph's administrative ability in jail and in running Potiphar's household. It is even speculated that Potiphar may have helped Joseph's career in prison.)

## THE HOSTAGE WHO RULED EGYPT, II

Pharaoh's response is unusual: "Can we find such a man as this, in whom is the Spirit of God? Since God has shown you all this..." This is so strange because the Egyptian pharaohs regarded themselves as gods. It would be most unusual for a god to give credit to another God. Scholars are suspicious that at this time, the land of Egypt was being ruled by non-Egyptians—the Kyksos, who were more tolerant of the Semites.

This Pharaoh is so impressed with Joseph that he makes him second in command and gives him a wife—Asenath—who is the daughter of one of the priests. We're told that Joseph was about 30 years old now.

There is an important lesson on which I want to comment. Against his will, Joseph is thrown into a pit and sold to slave traders. He is then taken to Egypt to live in a pagan's home. I suspect that Joseph could not keep the Sabbath as he wanted to in Potiphar's house. I suspect he couldn't always eat the way he preferred. Now Joseph is elevated to a major position in Egypt and he takes a wife who is the daughter of a priest. That meant that he joined the priestly class, by virtue of marriage, and was in fact in line for the priesthood. While all these events are happening, God is blessing him. God is leading him and saying, "I will be with you." Joseph is way off the ideal. Nevertheless God is with him.

I see this same type of lesson throughout the Old Testament—in the polygamous situations that were permitted, the story of Esther, etc. What you have illustrated is the fact that when the ideal cannot be lived, God asks us to do the best we can under the circumstances and he will bless us. We are to learn how to adapt to the exigencies of situations, to reality.

There are people, for example, who know no end of guilt because they cannot send their children to a Christian school. Sometimes it is because they are located too far away from an elementary school. I know of places in Maine where there are no SDA elementary schools and the children go to public schools. Some even continue and go to public high schools in their towns because their parents are either too poor or they feel it would be best for the children to be at home rather than at a boarding academy at the age of 13 or 14. Many members in the church are critical of those people for their decisions. They feel that they are not living up to the ideal. The fact of the matter is that there are times when you *cannot* live up to God's ideal.

Joseph was in that kind of situation. Look at all of the ideals he had broken: He didn't marry someone from his own religion. He was serving a pagan king. You could elicit several areas in his life where he departed from the ideal.

There are many of us who find ourselves having to choose, not between what is ideal and what is evil, but between the lesser of two evils. While we have principles in the Bible and they are ultimate and cannot be shifted, those principles are applied very differently in different cases. You have numerous statements about marriage, yet through both the Old and New Testaments you have compromises. People are being allowed to divorce, because the ideal just can't be realized. In the Gospels you have the situation where the woman caught in adultery is told by her accusers that she should be stoned. Jesus says, "I know Deuteronomy says you should stone a woman caught in adultery but I'm saying something else." The principle was that you shouldn't commit adultery, but Jesus didn't decide to apply the principle in that case in that way. How the ideal is to be applied depends on the reality of the circumstance.

## THE HOSTAGE WHO RULED EGYPT, II

That is an extremely important lesson to be gained from Joseph's experience. Make the best decisions possible. Take life as it comes, good and bad, and go on knowing that the Lord blesses you. We have this Israelite hostage, this man sold into slavery, thrown into prison, who is now ruling Egypt. He is wealthy, powerful and famous.

The famine comes but Joseph is ready. One-fifth of every harvest was put aside and Egypt is ready. Up in Canaan where Joseph's father and his brothers live, they aren't ready. Famines always affected Canaan far more severely than they did Egypt. Canaan had them more often and more severely. Word finally gets back to Jacob that there is grain in Egypt and that it can be bought. Facing starvation he sends his sons, except for Benjamin, to Egypt to purchase grain. Jacob had already lost Joseph, the son of his favorite wife Rachel, and he was not going to lose her only other son—Benjamin.

Apparently Joseph was the one who personally made the decision to sell grain to foreigners.. You can imagine the scene. In come these rag-tag shepherds from Canaan, all looking exhausted and perhaps a little thin because of the scarcity of food. They walk in before this great Egyptian monarch. He recognizes them. Joseph's heart starts pounding. On the spur of the moment, he devises a plan by which to analyze and to test the kind of persons his brothers have become. Fifteen to twenty years have passed. Joseph is about 37 or 38. The brothers didn't know him.

Joseph decides he wants to know what kind of men they are now. He notices that Benjamin isn't with them and he thinks, "I wonder if they did something to Benjamin, similar to what they did to me." He begins to inquire about their family. "Well, we have one brother at home with our aged father. He is the youngest."

Joseph begins to accuse them of spying and he puts them in prison for three days. He demands that they get the youngest brother and bring him to Egypt before he will believe anything they have told him.

Finally Joseph changes his strategy and decides he will keep one brother in prison and send the rest of them back with the message that they must bring the youngest brother back if they want more grain.

While he makes this offer, his brothers begin conversing in their native tongue. Not knowing who Joseph is, they don't realize he understands everything they're saying: "We knew that what we did to Joseph would come back to haunt us." Reuben says, "I told you you shouldn't hurt Joseph" and thus establishes his innocence. "We're getting the reckoning for the blood we have spilled. We're never going to get out of here alive." Joseph has to leave the room. The Scriptures say he wept. He got control of himself and came back.

He keeps Simeon in prison and sends the other brothers back to Canaan. Their sacks are filled with grain but he isn't through with them yet: All of the money they had paid for the grain is found in the sacks at their first resting place. They're terrified. "What happened? They're going to think we stole the money. The Egyptian soldiers are probably on their way for us now."

They continue on home, tell Jacob the story but he will not allow them to go back to Egypt for more grain. "I've lost Joseph. I've lost Simeon. I'm certainly not going to let you go back, especially not with Benjamin. Forget it. Simeon is just going to have to survive on his own."

## THE HOSTAGE WHO RULED EGYPT, II

Almost two years pass. The famine doesn't let up. Jacob needs more grain. It's a matter of survival and he has to take the risk. He doubles the money he is going to offer the Egyptians and sends special gifts. Back they go with Benjamin.

When Joseph saw Benjamin, his full brother, he was overcome. While the brothers were being lodged, Joseph decided to throw a banquet. They were summoned to the palace. They thought they might be thrown into jail again. When they got to the palace, they found that a feast had been arranged. They were seated separately, since the Egyptians never ate with foreigners. As the ruler, Joseph ate by himself. To their amazement, they were arranged in order of their age, with Benjamin being at the end of the table, and he had five times more food than all the others! Joseph is testing: How are they going to react? Am I going to see the same envy and jealousy that I saw when I was a boy?

Not knowing that anyone can understand them, the brothers talk very freely in their own language about these developments. Their feelings and concerns are beginning to come out. They express their hopes that everything will go well, that Benjamin will not be harmed, because they know it would hurt their father.

Joseph has the grain sacks filled again and the brothers head back to Canaan. This time, however, Joseph has inserted his own personal drinking cup in Benjamin's sack. The Egyptian officials pursue the caravan, stop the brothers and accuse them of taking Joseph's cup. They say that whoever did it will have to be taken back to Egypt. The brothers are so sure that none of them could have possibly committed the theft that they say, "Sure, go ahead and search for the cup." Where is the cup found but in Benjamin's grain sack?

The cup was not valuable simply because it was made of silver or gold. These cups had a special significance in Egypt. They were regarded very much like crystal balls are regarded today. The Egyptians believed that you could divine the future by watching oil and water mix in the cup. The brothers knew that when the cup was found in Benjamin's sack, they were in trouble.

They all return to Egypt. Joseph tells them that he will keep Benjamin with him as his slave and they may go back to Canaan. Judah has particularly promised his father that he will not allow anything to happen to Benjamin, so he audaciously asks to speak to Joseph privately. He pours out his heart and tells him that his father lost one of his sons many years ago and that he has never fully recovered from that loss. This youngest son, who is now accused of being a thief, is the only other son that Jacob has of Rachel. If Judah were to go back without this boy, his father would surely die. He pleads with Joseph to let him or any of the other brothers remain in Benjamin's place.

We have a totally different attitude toward the younger brother than when Joseph was thrown into the pit. Joseph can see that the brothers have changed, they do care about their father's feelings, they aren't tied up with envy and suspicion.

Joseph decides that he must speak the truth now, so he orders all of the Egyptians from the banquet room. From the outside of the door, however, the Egyptians can hear Joseph's reactions.

Joseph begins to cry aloud. He says to his brothers: "I am Joseph. I am alive!" Put yourself in the brothers' shoes. This can't be Joseph. It's impossible. They can't speak. They look at each other and

back at Joseph. They figured that if this was really Joseph, they certainly were in serious trouble!

Joseph can perceive their fear and their concern and he says, "Come near to me." In a very passionate passage, the Bible says that he fell on Benjamin's neck and wept. Then he went around, kissed each brother and wept and told each one that he had forgiven them and they had nothing to fear.

What magnanimity of spirit! What a man Joseph was. No revenge. Joseph says to them:

Do not blame yourselves for having sold me here. God sent me here in advance of you as an instrument of survival. [I'm not sure about his theology. I don't think God ordered his brothers to sell him into slavery, but once that was done, God made sure that everything was worked out for everybody's good.] So it was not really you but God who sent me ahead of you to insure a remnant on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance.

There was a very good chance that Jacob and his family would have perished in that famine, if the events surrounding Joseph had not happened. Joseph goes on to say:

Hurry back to my father and tell him that Joseph still lives and that he is lord of all Egypt. Come to me without delay. You will live in the region of Goshen where you will be near me. There I will provide for you—for there are still five years of famine ahead and that you and your family and all that is yours may suffer no want. Surely you can see for yourselves that it is I who am speaking to you.

They finally believed. The Egyptians learned that these were Joseph's brothers and that they had been reunited. They told Pharaoh and he was so thrilled for Joseph that he was happy to honor every commitment made by Joseph.

Joseph sent them back with tremendous provisions and all kinds of luxurious things that they couldn't possibly have bought, but Benjamin was given more than anyone else. Joseph said to them as they left, "I don't want you to quarrel on the way home. I'm assuming that you fellows have learned your lesson."

Imagine now the sons coming back to Jacob. They have kept this secret for more than 20 years. Their father has grieved and suffered for all this time thinking that his son had been killed by a wild beast. Now they must go home and tell him that it was all a lie. We allowed you to suffer for more than 20 years, because we couldn't tell you the truth. That was the hardest thing those men ever did.

At first Jacob cannot believe the story. The *Anchor Bible* puts it that "His heart went numb, for he could not believe them." And they gave every detail of the story, as they recited how they had indeed lied. As Jacob saw the tremendous wealth they had brought back, Jacob began to believe that Joseph was alive. He forgave his sons and said, "I must go and see my son Joseph before I die."

When Joseph hears that they have arrived in Goshen, he gets in his chariot and goes out to be reunited with his father. None of this could have happened unless everyone involved in this terrible series of crimes had been willing to forgive. When you are going to have to adjust the ideal to the realities of situations, there has to be a pervasive atmosphere of forgiveness. We have to be tolerant, patient and forgiving of one another. When people make terrible mistakes but truly want reconciliation, we must

## THE HOSTAGE WHO RULED EGYPT, II

be forgiving. Reconciliation is the key. Forgiveness is the heart of this story—Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers, Jacob's forgiveness of his sons.

After an emotional reunion with his father, Joseph takes him to meet the Pharaoh of Egypt. As Ellen White puts it, Jacob, being used to talking to the greatest King of the universe, walks into the court and raises his hand and blesses Pharaoh in the name of Yahweh. He thanks Pharaoh for his graciousness and his goodness to his son and to his family.

The last thing said about Joseph is very revealing. Even though Joseph had been essentially raised as an Egyptian, had been immersed in Egyptian culture, assumed an Egyptian identity and held a major office, just before he died he said, "Please take my bones and bury me in the land of my fathers." He never ceased being a son of Jacob.

Because of that, God was with him and blessed him. Regardless of what happens to us, regardless of the experiences through which we pass, as long as we remember that we are Sons of God, he will not forsake and abandon us.