

Grain in Egypt

Genesis 42:1-38

Over the course of many years, I have learned to cherish the doctrine of God's sovereignty. The doctrine of His decrees, his providence. The doctrine that he preserves and governs all his creatures and all their actions. I don't want to argue or debate in contentiously. I don't want abuse the doctrine by applying it carelessly or thoughtlessly, as if it were a weapon with which to beat someone over the head. But I cherish that doctrine. I admit that I had the customary stumbling blocks when I was first taught that doctrine during my college years. How could that be, I thought? If God is sovereign, how could man still be responsible for his actions?

But I got over those stumbling blocks, mainly because the Scriptures were so plain. So I grew quickly to love and appreciate the security of that doctrine. God is in control. No matter what happens. No matter what the circumstances. No matter what I do, even when I sin. God is still in control. That doesn't make hard circumstances easy, nor does it diminish any sense of our responsibility and freedom in terms of our own actions, but it does provide the context. The context of security and confidence in the plan and purpose of God.

In it's broadest context, that's the message of these chapters of Genesis regarding Joseph and his brothers. We've seen it before, and we'll see it again. The sovereignty of God in accomplishing his purpose cries out to us page after page. And in that context, we still see the actions of men. Responsible actions. Sometimes good actions. Sometimes bad actions.

In our text today, this story of the first journey of Joseph's brothers to Egypt, I want to study the actions of everyone

involved--the actions of Jacob, Joseph's brothers, and of Joseph himself. And we'll evaluate those actions, but all of it in the context of God's sovereignty. First,

I. THE ACTIONS OF JACOB SHOW THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD'S PURPOSE.

This is a real life story, one in which the situation is pretty easy to understand. There is famine in Canaan. Jacob, along with his eleven remaining sons, are beginning to be without food, without grain. But the reports have come down from Egypt that there is grain in Egypt.

We, of course, know why. We studied chapter 41 the last two weeks. Egypt had stored grain during the seven years of prosperity. So we read,

v.1-2

Interestingly, we're told that Jacob's sons "just keep looking at each other." They seem bewildered, perhaps thinking of their brother Joseph whom they had sold into slavery, whom they realize might still be alive in Egypt. The implication is that they were somewhat reluctant to go, again, perhaps because of their guilty conscience. They had, of course, kept secret their terrible sin of selling Joseph into slavery for twenty years now.

But they did go, at least ten of them. Jacob insisted that Benjamin, the youngest, stay behind.

v.3-5

So what's going on in all of that. Well, we see Jacob's fear, fear of harm coming to Benjamin, the sole remaining son of his beloved wife Rachel. We also see Jacob's insistence that the other brothers go to Egypt to buy some grain. A perfectly reasonable request. And Jacob's sons join with what must have

been thousands upon thousands of families travelling to Egypt for the same purpose.

But Jacob's sons weren't just another family. They were God's family. They were God's people. They would become God's nation, not merely the family of Israel but the nation of Israel. And as we've seen before,

A. God's purpose was to deliver his people out of Egypt.

That's what's going on here. God is going to deliver his people out of Egypt. So first, he has to send them into Egypt. And he does. According to his own sovereign will. And with Jacob's great fear, we see that,

B. God's purpose will be accomplished despite the fearfulness of men.

The fear is clearly identified in verse 4, the inordinate fear of harm coming to Benjamin, a fear which, at the very least, reveals a weakness of faith.

We see that fear manifested at the end of this story also. The brothers go to Egypt. Unknowingly, they meet Joseph, the one in charge of selling the grain. He accuses them of being spies, and to prove their identity he requires them to go back home and return with their youngest brother Benjamin. In other words, the whole family must return. Jacob refuses.

He sees the money which Joseph had put into their sacks, and Jacob must have begun to think that perhaps his own sons had been dishonest in Egypt. He thinks that they might well be accused of theft when they returned, and truthfully, but unknowingly, he accuses his own sons in the loss of Joseph and Simeon, who was being held in the Egyptian prison until the family returned.

v.35-36

There is a sense of self-pity in that statement, an overstated conclusion of feeling sorry for himself. "All these things are against me!"

And despite Reuben's bold and apparently courageous promise, Jacob refuses to go along with the plan. He will not send Benjamin along.

v.37-38

Such a fearful, fatalistic, depressing outlook. One not focused upon the Lord at all. He says, "If anything would happen to Benjamin, I could not be comforted under any circumstances. I would go to my grave in the anguish of sorrow."

Well, there the matter stood for the time being. Jacob's fearfulness won the day. But God's purpose was that the people of Israel, beginning with the family of Jacob, would go down to Egypt. And as we'll see in the next chapter, they did. Despite this initially fearful response from Jacob.

The point? God's purpose will ultimately be accomplished! And God would deliver his people out of Egypt. Let's look deeper now at Joseph and his brothers. First, the brothers. What do we learn from their actions?

II. THE ACTIONS OF JOSEPH'S BROTHERS SHOW THE FOOLISHNESS OF TRYING TO HIDE A GUILTY CONSCIENCE.

It is interesting to note that this passage is the only instance of an actual confession of sin in the book of Genesis. There is a lot of sin by people described in this great book, but this is the only time that sin is acknowledged by the people who sinned.

In other words, after 20 years, these brothers still have a guilty conscience, and that is the reason I mentioned that their bewilderment described in verse 1 might be caused by a guilty conscience. That guilty conscience is also revealed in,

v.28

They saw the money in their sacks, the money they used to buy the grain returned to them, and their hearts sank. “Their hearts failed them.” They knew that when the time would come to return to Egypt, the governor would have still a further charge to bring against them. They attributed this development also to the Lord’s judgment on them, having already become keenly aware of the apparent relation between their own predicament and the one they had inflicted on Joseph.

“What is this that God has done to us?” Those are the words of a guilty conscience. Those are the words of men who realize that they can’t escape from the penetrating view of God’s eye. And they illustrate for us so well the general biblical principle that,

A. It is impossible to escape the consequences of your sin.

They understood that very clearly, realizing that they were being punished for their sin. Notice that. They understood that the consequences of sin was punishment.

v.21a. “Then they said to one another, “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.”

And they confessed their sin in greater detail than was given to us when he had committed the sin. We read of Joseph’s distress and pleading when he was put into the pit and then sold

as a slave.

v.21b. “...therefore this distress has come upon us.”

This has come to us as a punishment. This situation has come to us because of what we did to our brother. And they were right!

Reuben, the oldest, adds even further insight.

v.22

“...his blood is now required of us.”

To this day, what is too often missing even among God’s people is this sense of accountability. Of responsibility. Of a willingness to accept the consequences of our own sin. Repentance and confession of sin means throwing yourself on the mercy of the court. Repentance means saying, “I sinned. I am guilty. I deserve whatever punishment is handed out to me.”

When we encounter repentance and confession of sin today, it is usually limited to, “I’m sorry. Sometimes it might even reach the level of, “I was wrong.” But seldom do we ever truly acknowledge and accept the full consequences of our sin. “I was wrong. I accept my punishment.”

You see, a repentant sinner is not in a position to determine his punishment. A repentant sinner is in a position only to plead guilty and then throw himself on the mercy of the court. No excuses. No extenuating circumstances. No blame-shifting. Just the godly sorrow of repentance.

That humility is the by-product of understanding this very simple biblical principle, that it is impossible to escape the consequences of your sin. To put it in other words, “your sin will

find you out.”

Num. 32:23 “But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out.”

And so, the brothers of Joseph realized that they would have to give an accounting for the blood of their brother Joseph. They realized that with the trouble they were in, they were receiving what they had long deserved. We read in verse 28,

v.28 “Then their hearts failed them and they were afraid, saying to one another, “What is this that God has done to us?”

Now, in this context, it is encouraging to know what kind of a judge our God is. It’s encouraging to be able to read in the Scripture what God will do when we do, in fact, throw ourselves upon his mercy. And what we read is that he will have mercy!

Joel 2:12 “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” 13 So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. 14 Who knows if He will turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him—A grain offering and a drink offering For the LORD your God?”

God is merciful. When we confess our sins, he does forgive us our sins. But we still must confess to God what David confessed to him, that we deserve his justice!

Ps. 51:3 ‘For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me. 4 Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight—That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge.”

That’s repentance! It is appropriate to plead for mercy, but

only if you realize that what you deserve is justice! And the warning is very personal, and personally applicable, especially if you are hiding your sins from God, or think that you are. Your sin will find you out. It is impossible to escape the consequences of your sin.

There is another aspect to the foolishness of the brother’s sin, which is their attempt to thwart what God had predicted. Do you remember what caused all this in the first place? It was a dream God gave to Joseph.

Gen. 37:5 “Now Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him even more. 6 So he said to them, “Please hear this dream which I have dreamed: 7 There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Then behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf.” 8 And his brothers said to him, “Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.”

Well, what God had predicted came to pass. Despite their sinfulness in selling Joseph as a slave. They thought that they would thwart God’s will revealed in the dream, for if Joseph were a slave surely they would never have to bow down to him. How wrong they were!

v.6

And we are told in verse 9 that Joseph immediately remembered the dreams about them. Those dreams were being fulfilled. Even though they didn’t realize that it was he, the brothers did, in fact, bow down to their brother Joseph.

B. It is impossible to thwart God’s prophetic revelation.
What God says will happen, will happen. It is that simple.

And even the sinfulness of man and the foolishness of trying to hide a guilty conscience won't change what God has decreed. Thus there is only one meaningful message to say to anyone who has a guilty conscience, which is the call to confession and repentance. With the promise, then, of forgiveness. For,

Prov. 28:13 "He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy."

Also,

Ps. 32:3 "When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. 4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah 5 I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," And You forgave the iniquity of my sin."

And most simply,

1John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

So much for Joseph's brothers, foolishly trying to hide their guilty consciences. What about Joseph himself. What do his actions reveal? On the surface, you might think that Joseph is trying to get even with his brothers, that he is being vindictive.

v.7-17

But actually, Joseph is showing anything but vindictiveness. I submit to you that,

III. THE ACTIONS OF JOSEPH SHOW THE GRACIOUSNESS OF GODLY MATURITY.

I believe that there is godliness here. Maturity. Compassion seasoned by his years in prison. So what is Joseph doing in speaking to his brothers this way? Above all else, I believe that he is testing them. Testing them in a good way. To redeem them

from their evil ways. I believe that,

A. Joseph tests his brothers to bring them to repentance.

Look at those verses again.

v.7

Roughly, or harshly, doesn't mean sinfully. It doesn't mean he was being ugly and rude. It means simply that he was being suspicious. As he should have been. After all, you can just imagine how many people would be trying to take advantage of Egypt's generosity in selling grain. And everyone coming from foreign lands into Egypt to buy grain had to obtain a direct permit from Joseph before he would be allowed to do so. It might well be that, under cloak of such a purchasing mission, outsiders might enter the land for subversive purposes. Foreign kings might covet Egypt's wealth and desire to infiltrate and sabotage and possibly invade and plunder the land. It was up to Joseph to carefully screen all such alien travelers to be sure of their purposes. Joseph's job was to look out for spies!

Indeed, the ancient Egyptians were inclined to view all foreigners with suspicion. All who entered at the northeastern boundary were regarded as potential enemies. Joseph was doing his job! And, he speaks to his brothers in such a way as to give them the opportunity to confess their sin! By accusing them of being spies, he forces them to identify themselves and to defend themselves.

v.8-12

They do identify themselves, with a good defense against espionage, for surely a father would not send ten of his own sons together on a spying mission.

v.13

But the test continues, for they have not yet confessed. Joseph calls their hand, and demands that their youngest brother join them.

v.14-17

Unknown to them, Joseph understands their conversation, and hears them speak of their sin openly. So he continues the test. Despite his own personal compassion and love for them, he insists that they return with Benjamin.

v.23-24

That story was, of course, repeated to Jacob by the nine brothers who returned home. Jacob hears the story in verses 29-34

Joseph actually suppresses much of his compassion, for it appears that his emotions would want to quickly identify himself and be reconciled with his brothers and father. But the fruit of repentance would have to come first in the lives of his brothers. We can tell that Joseph's motives were good because, ultimately, he doesn't suppress all his compassion. His compassion becomes very obvious.

B. Joseph shows compassion in caring for his brothers' needs.

First, he relents from keeping all the brothers but one in Egypt. Instead, he allows them all but one to leave. Instead of sending only one home to get Benjamin, he keeps only one as a guarantee that they will return.

v.18-20

That was true compassion, admittedly based upon his own fear of God. Then when the nine brothers prepare to leave, he gives them provisions for the journey and returns the money they

paid to buy the grain. Again, from Joseph's perspective, that was compassion. Love in action.

v.25-28a

Gone are all the traces of his youthful pride that had caused his brothers to hate him. Nowhere to be found are any thoughts of retribution or bitter anger. What is left in Joseph is the graciousness of godly maturity from a man who had learned obedience through his sufferings.

Let me tie all of this together by noting that we find that same graciousness from another man who learned obedience through what he suffered, a man whose greatest act of compassion is demonstrated by the sacrament that lies before us. I will conclude this chapter about Joseph with reference to the one who, like Joseph,

Hebr. 5:8 "...learned obedience by the things which He suffered. 9 And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, 10 called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek."

Hebr. 4:14 "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."