

Joseph saves Egypt

HN 10/10/04 pm

Reading: Genesis 47, I Peter 2

Study: Genesis 47:13-26

Psalms: 107:1-7, 112:1-5, 112:6-10, 107:8-9

Begging is widespread in India and indeed not uncommon in our city nowadays. Some beggars are disabled and not able to work but others are quite healthy. I asked a fellow once why he did not get a job and work for his living. He said he could make more money begging!

Knowing this and also the Biblical command – *if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat* – a pastor devised a small test for beggars who came to his door. Being a pastor he got more coming to his door than most people. He had a pile of bricks in his backyard. When a beggar came and he was able bodied he asked him to move the pile of bricks to the other side of his yard. When that job was done, he gave the beggar a meal and maybe some clothes. For the next beggar he asked the same thing!

Joseph had many coming to his door asking for bread as the famine became very severe in the land. Did he give them grain freely? Or, did he seek something in exchange? Some think he was being harsh and exploitative when he took all their money, and then demanded their livestock in exchange for grain. But neither the narrator nor anyone in the story accuse Joseph of exploitation. On the contrary, the people who received the grain were very thankful. *You have saved our lives* they said.

Egyptians saved

The focus of the story briefly turns back to Joseph and his administration of Egypt. Why is this you might ask? His family had come down to Egypt and Jacob is back on the scene. The focus now should be on these chosen people of God. Well the famine continued and the people of Egypt and Canaan were still in danger of starvation. We come here it appears to the last two years of the seven year famine – for they are told at the end to go and sow the land (v.23).

Joseph had been given a job to do and he was seeing it through to the end. Pharaoh appointed him to preserve the land and its people during the seven years of famine, according to the revelation of God. He was responsible to Pharaoh, even as he was responsible to God who sent him to Egypt. God sent him not only to preserve his own people (45:7), but also to be a blessing to the nations according to the promise given to Abraham.

The Egyptians had been buying grain from Joseph but now the money ran out. Perhaps at first they had some grain stored for themselves but clearly not sufficient. We might ask ‘did they believe the word from God as Joseph and Pharaoh did’. They would have had opportunity to store up grain themselves for the seven years of famine. They started buying grain from Joseph but then the money was finished.

In desperation they came to Joseph – *give us bread for why should we die in your presence* (vv15, 19). Joseph offered to give them grain in exchange for their livestock. They still had resources, which could be exchanged for grain to eat. They were not asking for handouts. They were happy to bring their livestock – in fact very pleased that Joseph was willing to take such payment. What would he do with all their livestock?

In the next year they came again. This was probably the last year of the famine. Their money was gone. Their livestock was gone. Again death from starvation stared them in the face. But they still had some resources. They had their land and their labour, which they came and offered to Joseph in exchange for grain. *Buy us and our land for bread*, they pleaded with him (v.19) – *that we may live and not die*.

Joseph then bought all the land of Egypt- not for himself but for Pharaoh. And the people he moved into the cities. Maybe he gave them jobs there on a food for work program. Or maybe it was easier to feed them in the cities. But all this was done justly and without force. This was not a tyrant grabbing peoples land and forcing them into slavery.

In fact similar procedures were laid down in the Levitical law code with one proviso – what was that (Leviticus 25)? The Sabbath and the Jubilee. In Israel all land had to be returned to the original owner in the 50th year (Jubilee) and all bonded labourers had to be offered freedom. We are not told if this was done in Egypt.

Through a dream God revealed to Pharaoh the future for this nation and for all nations- 14 years into future. In the wisdom of God Joseph suggested what should be done and the Pharaoh appointed Joseph to save the land and its people. Everything happened exactly as God had said. The famine was severe and the land languished or wasted away. But through Joseph, God had made provision to save the people. They were blessed indeed.

God has revealed unto us what will happen in the future- in his holy word. We do not know the day but we do know for certain that Jesus is coming back again. Are we preparing for that great day – the day when all that we see in this world will be shaken and will disappear? The only way to be saved is by being in Christ.

Jesus told us to lay up our treasure in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in to steal (Matthew 6). For a famine Joseph stored up lots of grain. For the return of Jesus Christ and the end of the world we store up grace (Hebrews 12:28). We store up the fruits of the Spirit. We store up faith, hope, and love. Such things cannot be shaken; they cannot be taken from us.

Joseph's family

The land of the priests was not acquired by Joseph for they were given it by the Pharaoh and also allotted a grain ration. These men were set apart to minister to the Pharaoh. In Israel the Levites were similarly set apart to minister to the people. They were given special lands and allowances different to the other tribes. The land of the Levites was not to be sold- *it is their permanent possession* (Leviticus 25:34).

What about Joseph's own family? He settled them in Goshen and provided for all their needs during this famine (v.12). Was this showing partiality? Was this nepotism? In light of Joseph's complete integrity and honesty with regard to all the money he took – *he brought it all to Pharaoh's house* (v.14) – this could hardly be the case.

Joseph provided for them himself, as a relative should. Under the Levitical code a kinsman or close relative was supposed to redeem one who had fallen upon hard times and sold his land and himself into slavery (Leviticus 25, also Boaz, and Ruth). We also have the example in the parable of the prodigal son. When he fell upon hard times he decided to return home and work as a hired servant because his family was obliged to help him in this way.

What does the New Testament teach us? The same thing! *If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever* (I Timothy 5:8). These are strong words and rightly so. Far too many fail to take this responsibility seriously in our day, and in our 'every man for himself' mentality.

A man we knew in India was killed in a road accident leaving five children. His brother who already had six children of his own took these children into his home and brought them up. Another young man we knew has just started working in his first job. From his wages, he paid for the education of his younger sister.

Joseph

Finally some comments on Joseph himself. As already mentioned he acted with complete honesty and integrity in all his dealings with the people and with Pharaoh. He did not turn things into a black market as so often happens when shortages occur. He did not exploit the people, nor pocket money for himself. All the money went to Pharaoh. All the land went to Pharaoh.

Time and again when men get into high positions like Joseph they fall into corruption. They want to take more than their rightful wages. They want the perks of the job. And not only men in high positions. It can be in any position in life that people are tempted into corruption.

It may be hard to believe but we had a postman who was corrupt. He wanted a bribe just for delivering our mail. Policemen were notorious for taking bribes, as were judges and politicians. Such conduct destroys a man and destroys a nation. We must be alert to this in our own lives and in our nation.

Joseph was a man who loved the brotherhood, who feared God and honoured the king. *How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God* he said to the wife of his master. He walked in the fear of the Lord when he was a slave and continued to do so when he was a governor. May each one of us do the same all the days of our life!

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