

JANUARY 20

Genesis 44-46 (also referenced Jan. 19)

Today you read Genesis 44-46, and have come through what must be seen as the Great Climax of the Account of Joseph.

Before Joseph will reveal himself to his brothers and graciously move to meet the need of their extremity, he puts them to another severe test -- to see if they have really changed in any way -- to know if having betrayed him and broken their father's heart more than 20 years ago, for the gain of a mere twenty pieces of silver, they would once again leave a brother behind and return to their father, this time for the sake of gaining their own freedom. The account stresses the offer of freedom to them, both in the encounter with Joseph's steward who stressed that all but the possessor of the cup would be free to go their way, and then again in the words of Joseph himself to the whole group -- "The rest of you", he says, "go back to your father in peace." This was clearly Joseph's way of testing the character of the men to determine whether or not they had indeed changed. Joseph knew full well that the brothers he had known would not have had to think twice about such a choice. They would have taken their freedom and run, leaving Benjamin to fend for himself as a slave in the household of the mysterious Egyptian. But the brothers have changed -- substantially. When the steward of Joseph, and the armed men he would have brought with him, place Benjamin under arrest and tell him he will be a slave but the others are free to leave, there is not even a debate about what they should do -- they just turn around and all of them head back to Egypt together. Then when Joseph repeats the offer of freedom to the brothers, Judah makes this impassioned speech and begs to be allowed to "redeem" the life of Benjamin with his own. He wants to take Benjamin's place, to take the punishment for him.

This is a wonderful foreshadowing of Jesus that you might want to put in your notebook under "Jesus Sightings." Many, many generations later One from the tribe of Judah will come who will stand substitute for the sins of the whole world. The brothers have passed Joseph's test; he will hide from them no longer; and from this point his generosity and forgiveness is unmasked and unfeigned.

Now before we move on, I want you to notice another "authentic" bit of local Egyptian color in the story. It concerns the silver "divination cup" that Joseph had placed in Benjamin's sack, and the mention of "divination" (the practice of telling the future and learning "hidden" things by means of some rite or ritual.) We know that divination was practiced in ancient Egypt and that one of the methods used was mixing oil with wine in a cup and watching the movement of the oil upon the wine. Possessing and using a divination cup would be a very "Egyptian" thing to do.

This might not have been a problem for Joseph, but it would pose a huge problem, for any Israelite after Moses, for in the Mosaic Law there are strict prohibitions against divination and other occult practices which are called "abominations" before the Lord (Deuteronomy 18:14). Even before Moses laid down God's law on

these matters, Balaam reluctantly testified (Numbers 23:22) that divination was not practiced in Israel. Precisely because God, the God of Israel, revealed Himself to them and told them all that was necessary for them to know. The mention of a divination cup in the Joseph story then is out of place for the people of God, but very much in character for an Egyptian household. Why was Joseph using it? It may be that Joseph, possibly as a result of taking the daughter of an Egyptian priest for a wife, had acquired this pagan practice and actually used the cup in this way. What is equally possible, however, and maybe even more likely, is that the divination cup was part of his Egyptian "cover" -- a way to explain to his brothers his uncanny ability to know things about them that could not be humanly known (like their ages, when he arranged them in order of their ages at the dinner party) without yet revealing his true identity.

We have already noted back in chapter 42 that the brothers are still carrying with them the guilt of what they did to Joseph. Back in that chapter it was their proposed explanation to each other of why things were going so far wrong when in this instance they had done nothing wrong themselves. The response of Judah to Joseph's accusation in 42:16 is interesting in this regard. Judah says, "*What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servant's guilt...*" Perhaps Judah was simply being fatalistic and saying, "Hey - there is nothing we can do or say here that will convince you, because God has convicted us -- the evidence is stacked against us. Even though we stole nothing, this proof is in the bags. We are really innocent; God has convicted us." I tend to believe that Judah was truly admitting guilt here -- not for the theft of the cup for which Benjamin stood convicted -- but for something else -- the treacherous act of selling Joseph into slavery. If that is true, then however oblique, this is a real indication of confession of sin and repentance in Judah and his brothers.

Now comes the dramatic climax of the whole account. The moment of revelation is at hand. Joseph's own emotions are out of control; they so overwhelm him that Pharaoh himself hears about the commotion. Through his tears he cries out, "*I am Joseph*" - and his brothers are too terrified even to speak.

Last week we spoke briefly about the doctrine of providence -- the belief that God supernaturally orders and directs the lives of His people and indeed all people, to accomplish His own purposes and will for their lives. Joseph had certainly come by experience to understand that doctrine in a deeply profound and personal way.

*"I am Joseph the one you sold into Egypt and now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you...God sent me ahead of you to preserve you, a remnant on the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So it was not you who sent me here but God. He made me father to Pharaoh (more local color in that authentic title) lord of his entire household and ruler of Egypt ..."*

Now last week when we first looked at this important Biblical doctrine, we noted that Scripture teaches that God is working out specific plans not just in the lives of

the great ones, but in our lives as well. Today as we think again about this doctrine, it is important to learn that there are always at least two agendas being worked on in our lives. Man's agenda -- which may or may not be righteous and good, and God's agenda, which is always good. In chapter 50, after the death of Jacob, Joseph will reiterate this principle in assuring his brothers that he is planning no revenge. "*You meant it for evil,*" he will say, "*but God intended it for good.*"

Joseph's brothers had an agenda for him -- it wasn't a good one. He had one for himself. It was a better one, but it wasn't necessarily God's -- his Egyptian overlords had a third agenda for his life, but the agenda that really counted - the only one - was God's agenda. He sent Joseph to Egypt.

In thinking about the subject of providence (and we'll talk about it much more I'm sure) you need to understand that God's ability to override human actions and turn bad things into good things that shape us and promote his eternal plans, does not remove from men the responsibility for the choices and actions they make. The fact that God was working His plan in Joseph's life did not in any way remove the responsibility or the guilt for his brothers' act of treachery in selling him into slavery -- or the responsibility of Potiphar's wife for lying ... nor for that matter did it relieve Joseph of the responsibility for making wise and godly choices.

This dual track of man's responsibility and God's sovereignty runs together through nearly every page of Scripture and through every single day of our lives. It is often difficult for us to see them both or to understand how they are related. But they are there and they are related -- inextricably!

Take some time today for reflection.

Look at your own life. When you see your past, how is it obvious that God has been at work to place you where you are today?

What in your life today is a mystery that God might be working on for his future purposes? How might he be working deeply in you now to prepare you for the future? He is in control!

This has been Mark Ashton reminding you that your life is in God's hands!

Peace be with you.