



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Blessing the Nations

Genesis 47:13-26

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As we come to Genesis 47 this morning we're going to see a shift in the story's focus. Up to this point, the story has put most of our attention on God's blessing in the life of the covenant family. We've seen him preserving Joseph and blessing him so that he in turn can preserve his family and bless them. Not only has God spared them from starving during the great famine, but he's brought them to Egypt where they will prosper during that famine. He's fulfilling his covenant promises of blessing. But remember that there was more to the covenant than promises of personal and family blessing. God's covenant promises to Abraham concluded with the pledge that Abraham and his descendants would be a blessing to the nations. That part of the covenant was fulfilled finally in Jesus, who brought the blessing of forgiveness and new life to all humanity, and yet we see it fulfilled in part—its full fulfilment foreshadowed—over and over in the history of Israel and certainly here in Joseph's policies during the great famine. Through Joseph God fulfilled the covenant promises of blessing to the nations.

How often do we think of that larger aspect of the covenant? We have a tendency to think of God's covenant promises of blessing in terms of benefit *to* us. But what about the other side of those promises? What about God's blessing that flows *from* us in his name? Brothers and sisters, the promises of blessing that God made to Abraham were fulfilled in Jesus, but through Jesus the nations have been grafted into Abraham's family and the promises made to him are now promises made to us—to you and to

me. God will bless us as surely as he blessed Abraham, but he will *also* bless the world *through* us just as surely as he did through Abraham. But is this on our radar? Are we focused mostly on what we can get from God? Or do we really seek to carry God's blessing to the world? Is the Gospel for us primarily a message of personal redemption from hell and a life of private piety, or is it a message we proclaim to the world that Jesus is Lord, that in his death and resurrection he has conquered sin and death, and that his reign and his kingdom are a very present reality. And does that Gospel translate into living our lives in such a way that we manifest the kingdom of God and carry its blessings to the world?

Joseph illustrates this side of God's promised blessings—the *external* side and the blessings that flow through us and show the world that Jesus is Lord—not Pharaoh, not Caesar, but *Jesus*. Look with me at Genesis 47:13-14:

Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished by reason of the famine. And Joseph gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought. And Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house.

It's not clear whether these verses take us back to the beginning of the seven years of famine or if they describe the final five years. Whatever the case, they describe the fulfilment of what God has spoken to Pharaoh through his dreams and through Joseph's interpretation. Joseph had said to Pharaoh:

After [the seven years of plenty] there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land, and the plenty will be unknown in the

land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe. (Genesis 41:30-31)

As we've seen already, the famine was so severe that Jacob sent his sons from Canaan to buy food in Egypt. They wouldn't have been the only ones. All the world came to Joseph to buy grain. Remember that during the seven years of plenty, Joseph had collected twenty per cent of Egypt's produce and stored it away for these seven years of famine. But these verses paint a vivid picture as they describe Joseph "gathering up" all the money in Egypt and Canaan as people came to buy grain from Pharaoh's storehouses. The Hebrew word is the word for "gleaning"—for gathering up the few pieces of fruit left behind in the orchard or the few stalks of grain left behind in the field after the harvesters had done their work. In ancient Israel, the law prohibited the harvesters from going over the field twice; what the harvesters missed was to be left for the poor. And you can imagine how the gleaners would pick the trees and the vines clean and gather every scrap of wheat from the fields. Nothing would be left. And that's the sense of what's happening here. The lands of Egypt and Canaan have been scoured for every last coin, that grain might be bought from Joseph. There's no money left. It's all been gathered into Pharaoh's treasury.¹

And so in verses 15 we're given a very vivid picture of the desperation of the people.

And when the money was all spent in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone."

They're hungry. They have no seed to plant, they have no crops to harvest, and they have no more money to buy

¹ Helmer Ringgren, "עֲלֵקָה" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), vol. 8, pages 19-20.

food from the storehouses. But Joseph has a plan. There's more of value in Egypt than money.

And Joseph answered, "Give your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone." So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. He supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock that year. (Genesis 47:16-17)

Joseph takes the livestock of Egypt in exchange for food. It's not clear whether the people actually sold their animals to Joseph or simply mortgaged them. Mortgaging them makes more sense. Livestock were the single most important capital asset in an agricultural society like Egypt and it would certainly be more practical for the people to mortgage them rather than to sell them outright and lose them completely to the Crown. If the people did sell them, Jacob's family presumably would have profited from the sale. They had been given the task—or at least part of the task—of caring for Pharaoh's own livestock. This would have given them greater responsibility.

But when the text says that after selling or mortgaging their livestock the people had food for the year, we're left asking: What next? The famine is ongoing. What will the people do for food the *next* year? Look now at verses 18 and 19:

And when that year was ended, they came to him the following year and said to him, "We will not hide from my lord that our money is all spent. The herds of livestock are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our land. Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be servants to Pharaoh. And give us seed that we

may live and not die, and that the land may not be desolate."

The next year, the food they purchased with their livestock now gone, the people come to Joseph in desperation. "There's nothing left of our food and we have nothing left to sell you but our bodies and our land." And so the people offer all they have left: themselves and their land saying, "That we may live and not die, and that the land may not be desolate". They realise that it's better to sell themselves and their land than to die and to let the land revert to desert because it hasn't been planted. Back in Chapter 42, Jacob's desperation in the midst of the famine was expressed in those words with which he sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain: "that we may live and not die". Food was still plentiful in Egypt at that time, but now the Egyptians are in the same dire straits.

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for all the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe on them. The land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made servants of them from one end of Egypt to the other. Only the land of the priests he did not buy, for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their land. (Genesis 47:20-22)

Joseph bought the people and their land and they became servants—tenant farmers—to Pharaoh. Better to be a live slave than a dead freeman. As slaves tied to what's now Pharaoh's land, their wellbeing and their food is now Pharaoh's responsibility. And this becomes the situation of everyone throughout the land of Egypt, the only exception being the priests, who were already benefitting from government subsidies.

Then Joseph said to the people, "Behold, I have this day bought you

and your land for Pharaoh. Now here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. And at the harvests you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones." (Genesis 47:23-24)

As tenant farmers the people sow the seed that Joseph provides and at the harvest, they keep eighty per cent and the Crown takes twenty to again be redistributed the next year when the time for planting comes. Joseph sees that the people are looked after.

To our way of thinking as modern people this sounds harsh. In the modern West we place a high value—at least in theory—on liberty and private property and these people now have neither. Out of desperation they've sold themselves into serfdom—into a form of slavery. And again, this seems harsh to us. The problem is that our view of slavery is heavily coloured by our culture's more recent experience of the African slave trade. But if we look at this from the perspective of ancient peoples—and even from the perspective of the Old Testament law—it makes a lot more sense and it's also much less harsh than we might think at first glance. In fact, look at the response the people give to Joseph in verse 25:

And they said, "You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh." So Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth; the land of the priests alone did not become Pharaoh's. (Genesis 47:25-26)

"And they said, 'You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh.'" We see oppression; they saw blessing. In fact, they *thanked* Joseph for taking them on as slaves and for saving their lives.

As far as the Crown's confiscation of twenty per cent of their produce is concerned, consider that in much of the Ancient Near East kings might confiscate a third to half of the produce their people produced. In 1 Maccabees we read that before Demetrius freed them, the Jews were paying a third of their seed and half of their fruit to the Syrian government.² And while we may think of Joseph's policy as harsh, how many of us wouldn't be happy paying twenty per cent of our income in taxes in lieu of the current taxation system we have here in Canada. Twenty per cent might not seem so harsh when we think about it.

But what about being virtual slaves? Again, we need to look at the situation from their perspective and not one coloured by modern instances of slavery. In the ancient world slavery was the normal and accepted way of bailing out people who were destitute. Their wellbeing became the responsibility of their master and, if they were in debt, they were given the opportunity to pay back what they owed with their labour, while still having their physical needs taken care of. The Old Testament law lays out the ground rules for these situations, again, requiring that the slaves be properly cared for and also establishing the principle that in every seventh year, slaves were to be freed, regardless of the status of their debt. And yet the Old Testament also envisions this situation being so equitable that it makes provisions for slaves who choose to remain as permanent slaves rather than being set free after six years. Slavery in the Old Testament, when practiced in accordance with the law, could almost be compared to tenured employment while a freeman might be compared to someone who is self-employed. The freeman faced risks; the slave was guaranteed a certain level of care.³

Joseph predates the law, but the law was given with this same understanding of slavery in mind.

As we see from the text, the future kings of Egypt chose to exploit Joseph's policies to keep their subjects as permanent tenant farmers, but that wasn't Joseph's fault. At the time he acted wisely and with compassion. He saved the people just as he had saved his own family and the nation of Egypt was thankful. God had fulfilled his covenant promises as he walked with Joseph. And that fulfilment didn't stop with Joseph's personal blessing; it continued on as Joseph used his position of personal privilege to carry God's blessing to the nation of Egypt. And consider what that meant to the Egyptians. Joseph may have been adopted and made an honorary Egyptian with his appointment by Pharaoh and his marriage into one of the great priestly families, but certainly the people knew that he was a foreigner. Certainly the people knew that it was Joseph, with the help of his foreign God, who had done what the wise men of Egypt could not. He had interpreted Pharaoh's dream and then devised the plan that had saved their lives. Through Joseph, God's kingdom irrupted into Egypt. Pharaoh was the divine god-king of Egypt, but through Joseph, God demonstrated his own sovereignty over earthly kings and empires. The Egyptians believe that their gods looked after them, their land, their livestock, and their crops. But through Joseph, God demonstrated not only his power and sovereignty over the gods of Egypt, but he also demonstrated it was *he* who cared for the Egyptians, for their land, their livestock, and their crops. Through Joseph, God blessed Egypt and with that blessing caught the attention of the most powerful empire on earth. Even if only for a short while, the people of Egypt were compelled to acknowledge the God of

Joseph as their source of blessing and life.

Brother and sisters, God is sovereign. The cosmos is his temple, his kingdom and over it he reigns as Sovereign. That's been the message of Genesis since Chapter 1. Earthly kings and empires may pretend, but they're all rivals that God will defeat in the end. Think of Nebuchadnezzar's dream recorded in the book of Daniel. He dreamed of a statue made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay. It was large and impressive. But then he saw what he could only describe as a stone not cut with hands, striking that massive image, breaking it in pieces, and then that stone itself growing into a mountain that filled the whole earth. That statue represented the great empires of the ancient world and the stone represented Jesus, who came to crush all earthly empires and to establish God's sovereign rule and kingdom over all the earth. That's the Good News—that Jesus has accomplished his mission. He has established his kingdom, has ascended to heaven, and now reigns at the right hand of his father.

And this is why the proclamation that Jesus is Lord was so important for the first Christians and should be so important for us. For those first Christians, "Jesus is Lord" wasn't just a trite affirmation that Jesus directed their personal actions or that he was their source of their personal blessings. To declare that Jesus is Lord is to affirm that you and I as Christians represent and owe our allegiance to the kingdom of God. For earthly kings and empires it's a profoundly subversive message and that's why confessing and proclaiming it landed Christians in prison, in the arena, and them to martyrdom. "Caesar is Lord" was the affirmation of loyalty to the empire. It was the affirmation that Caesar was sovereign and that Caesar was the source of blessing. To declare that Jesus is Lord was and still is to declare that Caesar

² 1 Maccabees 10:30

³ See Exodus 21:5-6 and Deuteronomy 15:12-

17.

is not. It is a declaration that Christians owe no allegiance or loyalty to earthly powers, but owe all to Jesus Christ. And, brothers and sisters, this is as true today as it was in the First Century. To proclaim that Jesus is Lord is to proclaim that Jesus and his kingdom have conquered all earthly rivals; it's to proclaim that the stone not cut with hands has become the mountain and that we are part of it, working to spread it as it grows to fill the whole earth.

For those first Christians, manifesting the blessing of Jesus and his kingdom meant not only the proclamation of the Good News, but living it out as they cared for one another and for the people around them: feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, healing the sick, visiting those in prison. And this is what we've seen wherever faithful Christians have spread the kingdom. There's a reason why Christians were the first to build hospitals and schools, to provide relief for the poor, and to work for justice for those who have been oppressed, enslaved, and imprisoned. God has showered us with his loving blessings, but because he has lovingly blessed us, we fulfil the covenant by loving and blessing others as a means of sharing the good news of the kingdom—as a means to show the world that Jesus is Lord.

The greatest threat to the Gospel today may well be that as Christians we have forgotten that Jesus is Lord in any really meaningful sense. We've abdicated our responsibility. We've given over caring for the poor and the hungry and the sick to Caesar and we ourselves too often now look to Caesar for our own needs rather than to God. And yet Caesar does not minister to the needy in the name of Jesus; he supposes himself to be god and seeks only to consolidate his own power. Consider our own local hospital, established a century ago by nuns who came here, to the edge of the world, to proclaim the kingdom and the compassionate lordship of Jesus by

ministering to the sick in his name. That hospital is now Christian in name only, abdicated to Caesar, and where those offering pastoral care aren't even permitted to mention Jesus unless first asked. And so long as we continue to abdicate such kingdom responsibility we allow the world to believe Caesar's masquerade as lord. And too often we allow nationalism to overcome our allegiance to the kingdom of God and our own national political, economic, and military interests too often overshadow the greater call and priorities of God's kingdom. For all those who fall to our national interests we undermine any proclamation we may be making to them of the lordship of Jesus. And we obsess over those coins bearing Caesar's image as if our ultimate security lies in them. There's a reason why Jesus told the people to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. His kingdom and all its trappings are passing away. Instead we should be laying up for ourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust corrupt and where thieves do not break in and steal.

But dear friends, to lay up treasure in heaven means to spread the kingdom of God here on earth. The Spirit has given us gifts, not only to build each other up, but to carry God's kingdom to the world. And God, in his sovereignty, has placed each of us in a position to use our gifts. Some are on the front lines, others are in the supply line. Some are called to do big things, others are called to do small things. Some are called to carry the front line to peoples across the sea and others are called to proclaim the kingdom in their own homes and to their own children. Some are called to use their gifts in the church and some are called to use their gifts in the very palace of Caesar himself as Joseph was. Whatever your gifts and wherever God has put you, remember that his covenant promises do not end with you. God intends for you and I, as sons and daughters of Abraham, to

carry his blessings and to proclaim his kingdom to the world around us that all might know that Jesus is Lord.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you manifested your sovereignty over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt through your faithful servant Joseph, teach us how to make the most of the gifts you have given to each of us and give us boldness to be faithful in using them where you have placed us, that your kingdom might be manifested where we minister your loving grace and healing power and wherever we proclaim the lordship of your Son, through whom we ask all these things. Amen.