

Prayer

Praise You, Lord God, for Your Light is life to me. You lead me through life by Your Light, and by the Light of Jesus Christ, I am saved for ever. Fill me even now with Your Light, so that I may shine in all I do and help to bring Light into this world of darkness. I ask this in the Name of Jesus, who is forever the Light of the World. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The deaf

We will focus our prayers this week on the deaf. Many people become hard of hearing as they grow older, so pray for those you know who struggle with this problem.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for governments to have the courage to face hard decisions*
- *Pray for young people who are tempted into taking drugs*
- *Give thanks to God for the support you receive from friends*

Meditation

(from 1 Chronicles 4:10)

I ask for Your blessing,
Creator God of Universal splendour.
Draw near to me, search my life and tell me the truth.
Forgive my sins and establish my faith.

I ask for Your provision,
Almighty Lord of ultimate authority.
Help me, and from the storehouse of Your precious gifts,
Grant me what I need to do Your will.

I ask for Your presence,
Jesus Christ of Calvary and Easter.
Touch me with the assurance of Your precious salvation,
And lead me in the path of peace.

I ask for Your protection
All powerful Holy Spirit of wind and fire.
Gather me in Your protective arms and make me whole again,
To do, and be, and live; renewed.

Bible Study - Genesis 47:13-26

¹³ Now there was no food in all the land, because of the severity of the famine; and both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan wasted away because of the famine. ¹⁴ In exchange for the grain people bought, Joseph collected all the money from Egypt and Canaan and brought it to Pharaoh's house.

¹⁵ When all the money in Egypt and Canaan was spent, everyone in Egypt came to Joseph and said, 'Give us food, or we will die in front of you! Our money is gone!' ¹⁶ 'Give me your livestock,' Joseph replied, 'and even though your money has run out I will give you food in exchange for your animals.' ¹⁷ So they brought their livestock to Joseph; and he sold them food in exchange for their horses, flocks, herds, and donkeys. So he kept them supplied with food that year in exchange for all their livestock.

¹⁸ When that year was ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, 'We cannot hide from my lord that all our money is spent; and the herds of cattle sold to my lord. There is nothing left to offer my lord except our bodies and our lands. ¹⁹ Shall we perish in front of you together with our land? Take us and our land in exchange for food. We will become Pharaoh's

slaves together with our land; please give us seed so that we may live and not die, and so that our land may not be wasted.’²⁰ So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. Since the famine was so severe for them, the Egyptians sold their fields, and the land passed to Pharaoh.²¹ As for the people, he made them slaves (and moved them to the cities) from one end of Egypt to the other.²² But he did not buy the land of the priests; for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh, and lived off this allowance and consequently did not have to sell their land.

²³ Then Joseph said to the people, ‘I have now bought you and your land for Pharaoh. Here is seed for you; sow the land,’²⁴ and at harvest time, you will give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own, as seed for sowing and as food for yourselves, your households and your children.’²⁵ They said, ‘You have saved our lives, and we are grateful to my lord that we can be Pharaoh’s bonded servants.’²⁶ So Joseph made it a law within the land of Egypt, and it is in force to this day, that a fifth of all produce should go to Pharaoh. Only the land of the priests escaped becoming Pharaoh’s.

Review

It would appear that the story of Joseph has now reached its conclusion with the bringing together of Jacob’s family in Egypt and the successful negotiations for Israel (Jacob’s family) to take possession of Goshen (47:1-12). Suddenly, however, in this extraordinary passage of Scripture, we are reminded that whilst this great story was unfolding during the previous few chapters, the lands of Canaan and Egypt were indeed gripped by a severe drought lasting many years. It required extreme measures, which through Joseph’s management, changed all Egypt forever. In this passage, we read about how all this was done and the important role of Joseph in saving the known world from starvation.

It is quite common for people to read today’s reading and feel quite uncertain about its place in Scripture. What is the purpose of this scripture, people ask? Why is this a relevant part of the story of Joseph, when all it does is describe the success of Joseph and the dominance of the Pharaohs? Then, at the end of the text (47:25), the people of Egypt clamour to express their thanks to Joseph for saving them from drought, after they have sold everything, including their own animals, land and bodies, to Pharaoh! This hardly seems to us like a genuine vote of thanks, given that the people had become bonded into slavery. From the point of view of our own world, we would imagine that the total loss of liberty described in this passage represents an extreme and unwelcome economic development. Certainly, we would not like to have been around in Egypt ourselves to lose our liberty in such a manner!

Yet this story does have its place, and it highlights why it is very hard, at times, for us to put ourselves into the shoes of people who lived at different times and places in history. Those who have studied the development of the history of Egypt tell us that Joseph established a new and powerful economy in Egypt, in which the Monarchy owned all the land and property, and the people who lived on the land were his servants (slaves). The people produced the food with which to feed not just themselves, but via taxation, they paid for and supplied a self sufficient Monarchy, a civil service, a priesthood and an army. Now, although an army is not mentioned in this passage, it undoubtedly existed in Joseph’s time; it certainly existed a few centuries later at the time of Moses, because the Egyptian army was destroyed in the Red Sea during Israel’s escape! In truth, the general stability of the land of Egypt for centuries was secured by this elaborate economic system, paid for by the taxes imposed on labourers, and instigated by Joseph; as our passage says in verse 26, it was a system which remained ‘in force to this day’. In an age in which other Empires came and went (as testified generally within the whole of the Old Testament), the people of Egypt enjoyed stability because of their economic organisation, despite their lack of liberty and the despotic rule of their Pharaohs.

Therefore, although it seems strange to us, the people of Egypt benefitted from the economic reforms Joseph instituted not simply by being saved from starvation (see 47:25). We should not forget that from the point of view of Scripture, the Covenant blessing of God was being shown to the people of Egypt through Joseph. Egypt was the first nation to receive these benefits outside of the people of Israel. In addition, Israel was spared everything that happened to the people of Egypt because of the protection of Joseph. Just previously, Genesis 47:12 has told us that Joseph provided directly for his family whilst they were in Goshen, and secondly, the verse which follows this (in tomorrow’s passage, 47:27) tells us that the people of Israel were secure and moreover, they were blessed by God and became fruitful!

Spiritually, the Covenant message in this passage is clear; God fulfils His promises to His people in their fruitfulness, and He blesses the people of the world through Israel, in this case by ‘saving’ (47:25) the people of Egypt. The story is strange to our ears for cultural reasons, but its place in God’s Word is secure!

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Joseph institutes his plan for economic reform
- The last year of drought and the last desperate measures
- The end of the drought

Going Deeper

The details of this text are difficult for people to read today, for we have little idea of what it was like to experience drought on an international scale. But it is important for us to try and enter into what happened and try to understand how Joseph's actions were possibly the best outcome for a people in the grip of nature's most deadly natural disaster.

Joseph institutes his plan for economic reform

Scholars have long debated how this passage of Scripture has come to be joined together in the form in which we have it, with verses about Israel's fruitfulness enclosing the tragic and extraordinary tale of Joseph's enslavement of all Egypt during the drought! However, they cannot agree what it means. It is impossible to say for certainty exactly which years of drought are described in which sentences, and the record of what happened is brief and entirely generalised. It is best to think of our passage simply as a description of a sequence of events in the final years of the seven year drought during which normal drought provisions failed (it was common for people to be prepared for a couple of years of drought). Joseph's control over the gathered food gave him control over almost everything and everyone.

Joseph began by selling food to the people of Egypt and Canaan until there was no more money (usually silver) and Joseph transported all the money he had been paid back to Pharaoh's house (47:14). Presumably, this fact is recorded to stave off the accusation that Joseph benefitted personally from the financial deals he arranged.

When death from starvation lies ahead, there are few options but to sell everything for food, and this is what was done next, as people sold their livestock (47:16-17). Incidentally, this is the first passage of Scripture in the Bible which mentions horses, and because it is sometimes thought that horses became a part of life in Egypt during the seventeenth century BC, this fact has been used to try and date the Biblical story. However, there is no clear scholarly agreement on the timeline back to the seventeenth century BC., so we should be cautious about such conclusions! The main problem with what we are told in this text is the obvious question; what became of these animals if they were sold to Pharaoh, and who looked after them? The answer may well be that as all the livestock was sold, Pharaoh was able to pay people at his own rate to look after them, and was able to use the benefit of their produce in his growing centralised government. We already have an indication that the care of Pharaoh's flocks and herds was a live issue (47:6)! The deals may well have involved what we might call 'mortgaging' of the cattle to Pharaoh, but with little chance of the original owners ever being able to get the animals back.

The last year of drought, and the last desperate measures

The third stage of Joseph's economic reforms came in the final year of drought in which the people came to him destitute. They gave themselves and their lands to Pharaoh in return for food (47:18-21). The idea of slavery is repugnant to us, even though all manner of immoral slavery, sexual and economic, is practiced under our noses in the world today. What was meant in ancient times was more like the bonded service of land-workers, common in many European countries until relatively recent times. Just as a nobleman or 'Lord of the manor' owned the land around his house and everything on it, so Joseph's reforms instituted this kind of system throughout Egypt, creating the basis for a strong system of Empire based around the court of Pharaoh, as described in the introduction.

The only people who escaped Joseph's attention were the priests. They were already central to the court of Pharaoh, whose life was governed by religious rituals and ceremonies. The fact that they were paid a fixed allowance from Pharaoh in food or money meant that they could survive the drought and keep at a distance from what Joseph was doing.

The end of the drought?

Although it is not said, it appears as if Joseph knew when the end of the drought had come, something he surely anticipated because of his interpretation of Pharaoh's dream (41:25f.). Having established a new centralised system of government, Joseph now controlled everything, and it was he who gave out seed to the people in order to restart the agricultural processes after the drought. He issued instructions that when the crops grew and were harvested, a tax of one fifth was due to Pharaoh (less than the total tax burden faced by citizens of Western countries today!). Indeed, compared with similar systems set up in Mesopotamia, the people of Egypt had a good deal from Joseph, because records suggest that taxes of up to forty percent and more were levied in other Empires! Nevertheless, by means of this tax, the people of

Egypt enjoyed security and stable government, but were enslaved to Pharaoh because he owned all the land!

The people of Egypt came to Joseph in gratitude for what he had done for them. Their cries of gratitude sound genuine enough, despite the slavery, for they had survived the drought; 'you have saved our lives, and we are grateful to my lord ...' (47:25). This was confirmation of God's blessing of the people of Egypt through the people of Israel, and Joseph in particular.

Application

It is not easy to see how this passage of Scripture can be applied to ourselves. We can, however, do our best to empathise with people who experience drought and the extreme decisions which have to be made in the midst of such circumstances. Joseph concentrated on doing what he had said he would do, and ensuring that the people of Egypt survived the drought, but did so at the expense of the people's personal liberty, but to the benefit of Egypt as a world power in ancient times. Even to this day, the problems of drought are intertwined with politics and economics, and as many Aid agencies have repeatedly told us, there is no reason why anyone on our planet at this time need starve. The resources are there. What is lacking today are the 'Joseph's' who are prepared to be used by God even within the governments of this world who will make it their priority to work according to God's call and the real needs of people, especially the starving of this world. This is a complex issue today, and doubtless it was in Joseph's day, but we have to believe that God is able to bless the world through His people; that is, if they will allow themselves to be used.

Today, it looks more as if the events that are happening around us point towards the second coming of our Lord, rather than a resolution of the world's problems (including drought and starvation). This alone will give us a secure future; but we do not know God's mind, or who He has set in place to help the world at the present time. Perhaps our duty is to be like the Israelites in Goshen, who trusted in the protection God had given them (through Joseph) and were fruitful where they were, whatever else was happening in the world. In our own day, and in His own way, God will lead us into His future.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, discuss your own feelings about Joseph's acceptance of slavery as a means of paying for food.
2. What is needed for the people of the world to be fed today, and how can God's people 'bless' the rest of the world in its times of need?
3. What does this story add to our general understanding of God's Word in Genesis?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

It is hard for us to make connections between our faith and the real world of politics and practical decision making. We discuss the problems of the world, but few people, like Joseph, rise to positions of power from which they can make decisions to change the world. However, God can only use those people He has called, and there is some evidence that not everyone who is called of God for a special task is obedient to that call. God certainly calls His people to make a 'real' difference in the world; I wonder how many people He has called to high office who have then abandoned the Lord because of the enemy's evil temptations.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on the Lord's call on your life. Do you find it impossible to believe that He could call you to do great things for Him? Why do you think this? If you are not the person God has called to change the world today, who has He called?*
- *Pray and thank God for the wonderful work done by great men and women throughout history, in leadership, in politics, in the sciences and the arts and every area of life. Ask the Lord to raise up more great people who will change the world, forever.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, bless us as we place our trust in You both now and in our future. As we have heard about the heaven which awaits us, let us have faith in what You have promised and confidence that You will one

day greet us in the heavenly places with excitement and joy! Grant us peace and security now, and in our eternal future: AMEN
