

Joseph—being made to suffer

A sermon on Genesis 37

A feature of the Prayer Book lectionary is the number of readings from Genesis in the season of Lent. To a large extent, these focus on the life of Joseph, whose significance for the future of his own nation is very great. Without him, neither the Israelites nor the Egyptians would have survived the seven years of famine that God brought on them. By him, not only were the people saved, but God was glorified in the most wonderful and clear way.

The life of Joseph, and the ministry to which he was called, prefigures the Lord Jesus Christ in key areas. He was the beloved son of his father, but hated by his brethren and betrayed. He became as good as dead, but, in his apparent death, he acted for the salvation of those who betrayed him. Finally, he was wonderfully restored to his father, and, through him, God was glorified.

The matter which claims our attention, however, is the fact of his being made to suffer.

Joseph was made to suffer

The life of Joseph is filled with suffering. Initially the favourite son of his father Jacob, he quickly became an object of hatred to his brothers. This was, first, because of his father's special treatment of him, and, secondly, because they understood the significance of the dreams he had. These dreams showed that the day was coming when his whole family would bow down to him. But that was only the very beginning of his trials, and these would get much worse.

Joseph's experience shows a downward spiral. The love his father showed was offset by the hatred his brothers showed. His recounting of the dreams displeased his brothers, and the fact that there was more than one, tending to the same interpretation, did nothing to improve relations. So it was that, when Jacob sent Joseph to see what his hard-working brothers were up to, they saw him coming (no doubt his multicoloured coat made him easy to spot), and they plotted their revenge.

The plan was to kill him, but, following Reuben's suggestion (meant as a ruse, Genesis 37:22), they sold him as a slave. To cover the disappearance of their brother, who they knew had been sent by their father, they dipped his coat in blood and made it appear that they had found it, evidence that he had come to a sticky end from some wild beast.

Joseph, we are told, was bought by the captain of the guard, whom we call Potiphar, though that is more likely to be his title. In chapter 39 we read about his experiences. The Lord prospered all he did, and he became the overseer of the whole house. Though still a slave, he had as privileged a life as could be hoped for in the circumstances. But this was not to last, as the mistress of the house entertained lascivious thoughts about the young slave. Joseph fled from her, leaving behind his garment. She used this as evidence that it was he who had made advances towards her, and not the other way around. Joseph was cast into prison, and his situation was now far worse than it had been.

In Genesis 39:21 we read these encouraging words. 'But the Lord was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison.' As the Lord had made Joseph prosperous in Potiphar's house, so now he made him prosperous in the prison. The nar-

rative tells us that everything was committed into his hands, and he ran the whole prison so well that the keeper had no reason to check on him. Even here, in a place where hope would have been in short supply, the Lord showed his mercy and grace towards his faithful servant. Though he was suffering, he was not without blessing, and though the fulfilment of those dreams must have seemed impossible, he prospered.

Then, in chapter 40, we read about the royal baker and butler, or chief cupbearer. These officers of the court probably held only ceremonial roles, and were really advisers to Pharaoh. Joseph was made their servant, v. 4, and they had opportunity to see his wisdom when each had a dream. Joseph was able to give the interpretation of those dreams, and in due time his words proved to be faithful. The butler was restored to his office, and the baker was executed.

Joseph's hopes of justice proved vain, at least for a while. The butler forgot about him until Pharaoh also had a dream. Then, remembering Joseph's plea, 40:14f, he informed his king that he knew a man who could interpret dreams. Joseph was fetched from the prison, given a chance to clean himself up, and brought before Pharaoh. The Lord graciously granted Joseph the interpretation of the dream, and so the will of God for Egypt was made known. Furthermore, Joseph's counsel—that 'a man discreet and wise' (41:33) be appointed over the land—was heeded, and Joseph himself was given the role. By his wisdom, Egypt prepared for the coming famine, by gathering a double tithe of the harvest in the seven plentiful years, and by building grain stores to hold the harvest for the time to come.

Life could hardly have been more different for the former slave. He was now the second ruler over the greatest nation on earth, and his word was law. He who had served was now served, and he who had ruled the household of another now had his own household under him. He married, and fathered two sons, 41:50ff, and he gave God the glory for all that he had.

The famine that came affected more than just Egypt. The people of Canaan to the north also felt the effects. In time, old Jacob sent his remaining sons to Egypt to buy corn. There they came face to face with the brother they had treated so cruelly, and he had opportunity to get his revenge on them. Instead, he showed love, but in such a way that he was also reunited with his whole family. In the process, he heard his brothers confess their guilt concerning him, 42:21ff. This moved him to tears. When he saw his full brother Benjamin, 43:29ff, he was once more moved to tears. When he was reunited with his father, 'he fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while' (46:29). What had seemed impossible had come to pass, and father and son saw one another again. The despised younger brother had proved to be the saviour of the whole family, and the truth prophesied in the dreams was gratefully embraced. Whereas once the family had resisted the very thought of bowing to Joseph, now they did so in gratitude for all he had done. Joseph's sufferings were at an end.

Of course, the whole life of Joseph, and especially his sufferings, were intended by the Lord to come to this point; that, through him, the covenant people would be defended, blessed, and helped. 'The iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full', and the judgment of God would fall on the land of Canaan. To spare the Israelites the temptation of living among a people given up to judgment, God took them out of the land and into another. This temporary dwelling was pleasant, and ideally suited to their lives as shepherds and herdsmen, even though their semi-nomadic lifestyle was distrusted, 46:34.

It was not merely the salvation of Abraham's descendants that was at stake. Here was the one through whom the Messiah would come (49:8–12, esp. v. 10). Had the Israelites perished in the famine, what would have become of God's covenant with Abraham? If the Israelites had succumbed to the sins of the Amorites (had they remained in Canaan) how would they have been spared the threatened judgment? Of course, the Lord could have delivered them in a hundred ways, and yet he chose to do so in a way that, most wonderfully, prefigured the sufferings of the Messiah.

Jesus Christ was made to suffer

The life of our Lord Jesus Christ is a life of suffering. This was foretold, Isaiah 53, and this was prefigured in Joseph and others. But, lest we make the mistake of measuring either our Lord Jesus or our salvation by the extent of his sufferings, as if this was a commercial transaction, let us consider their nature.

In the first place, Jesus Christ suffered in making himself of no reputation. This is the statement made by the Apostle Paul on the subject, Philippians 2:7. Our Lord Jesus made himself of no reputation against the backdrop of being in the form of God, v. 6. That is, all that properly belongs to God concerning majesty, glory, power, wisdom, holiness and more, belonged to Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity before the incarnation. All this he put away, as a king might take off his royal robe, so that he no longer had the outward appearance of the Godhead. He did not cease to be God any more than the king ceases to be the king just because he takes off his robes of state. In the appearance of the matter, however, he no longer carried the outward manifestation of his Godhead.

This may seem a small thing to us. A king, after all, is not above the law, whether he wears the robes of the chief magistrate or not. God, however, is God by very nature and character. To appear as anything other than God is not a requirement any can put on him, and is only something he can choose to do. In so choosing, he hides from his creation the true nature of his person. We are foolish and blind, and we do not see God for who he is unless he appears in at least a degree of his majesty. In the incarnation, Jesus Christ made himself of no reputation.

In the second place, Jesus Christ suffered in taking on himself the form of a servant. This is the very antithesis of who he is. The Lord of the Universe, the Creator of all that is, the One whose word governs and upholds the very course of the stars and other heavenly bodies, whom the angels live to serve, is now in the form of a servant. Note the contrast between being 'in the form of God' and taking on 'the form of a servant.' We may mistakenly think that this means he only gave the impression of being a servant: but if so, how do we explain his having first been in the form of God? Did he merely give the impression of being God, or was he actually God? If he was actually God, he actually became a servant. The wonder of the incarnation, concerning the bringing of the manhood into God, is that Jesus Christ is both God and man: he never ceased to be God, and yet he actually became a servant.

When one considers the servants of the Bible, one must include those whose calling is to serve God in heaven, the angels. From time to time we read about their appearing on earth, and of the fear they brought on people. The angels serve God in the purity of holiness, and are sent from his presence to do his will. Did Jesus Christ become an angel, perhaps even the chief of the angels? He did not, for,

In the third place, Jesus Christ was made in the likeness of men. Of all the creatures whose existence is owed to the creating power of God, none is less worthy than man. Man, whom God made to be a little lower than the angels, who was created in the image of God, and to whom great authority was given, is the one who wickedly rebelled against his Maker. Man is the one who brought the curse on the whole creation, plunging the good order of God into ruin, and bringing the judgment of the Flood on the earth, and the confusion of languages on his species. It was the sin of man that called forth the wonderful grace and mercy of God, to promise the seed of the woman and all that followed from it. And Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman, came as a man in fulfilment of the promise.

In Romans 8:3 Paul writes of 'God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin.' Paul is not saying that Jesus became a sinful man, only that he became a man. But he became a man *after* the Fall. He did not become a man when humanity was perfect, but when humanity was corrupt. He was himself without sin (both in the imputation of sin and in the deed) but yet he came at a time and in a form when sin was universal. As a consequence it

was easy for his enemies to accuse him of sin: everyone else was and, as they had no idea he is God, they just assumed he was guilty as well. Worse, they assumed they were less guilty than he, not least because they considered themselves to be the wisest men as far as the knowledge and worship of God was concerned. Had he appeared as God they could not have made this mistake. In that he was made in the likeness of men, they could cast all manner of aspersions at him. So much of our Lord's life of suffering stems from this, that he was made in the likeness of men.

In the fourth place, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. This, because he was found in fashion as a man: he had the recognisable form and appearance of a man. Being a man he was cursed. Being under the curse, he became obedient to death. But it was not just that our Lord, in becoming man, was subject to the ageing process and to the common diseases that afflict the body. No, he became obedient unto a particular death,—an unnatural death,—a judicial sentence of death,—the death of the cross. The cross is the tree upon which any who hang are accounted cursed, Deuteronomy 21:22f. Thus, to the Jews, Jesus was 'smitten, stricken of God, and afflicted' (Isaiah 53:4). His death was at the command of Rome, John 18:31–32, and so he was crucified with two malefactors. He made his grave with the wicked, Isaiah 53:9, although his tomb was provided by a wealthy man, as the same verse foretold.

Jesus Christ died not for his own sins but for the sins of the people. We know well the words of the high priest, John 11:49–52, and we know that Jesus is the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world. 'He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.' This is the fountain opened in the house of David 'for sin and for uncleanness' (Zechariah 13:1). Here is the blood of the atonement, the sacrifice of propitiation.

And if we doubt the reality of Christ's physical as well as mental and spiritual suffering for us, read of his time of prayer in the garden prior to his arrest. Here is sorrow more than we can know, as the blessed Son of God submitted to the Father's will, that he might redeem the very ones who hurried him to the cross. 'A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.'

Conclusion

What, you may wonder, has this to do with Joseph? This, that the will of God for Joseph was that he should save his people through suffering. He should endure the cruelty and hatred, both of his own family and of the Egyptians, that he might save both from the famine. In fulness of time, as we saw last week, Israel would be enslaved by the Egyptians. Joseph had already been enslaved, and had triumphed over his masters through the grace and power of God. In so triumphing he had acted as their saviour. How much more does our Lord Jesus Christ, who has borne the curse in all its awful fulness for us, rise triumphantly over his foes? Yes, he triumphs openly over the principalities and powers he has spoiled, but he does so with healing in his wings, that he may grant life to all who believe in him. Joseph granted life to all who came to him, and in so doing he made Pharaoh the owner of all Egypt, Genesis 47:13–26. Jesus Christ will deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father, 1 Corinthians 15:24. Joseph wept for his brethren, and Christ wept over Jerusalem. The one wept for those who had brought him to this point by their sins, the other for those who would shortly feel the fulness of God's wrath for their sins. Joseph's sufferings ended in the glorious salvation of his people: how much more do the sufferings of Christ end in a greater, fuller and more wonderful salvation of his people? Joseph's salvation was short-lived, in that the descendants of those whom he saved would be enslaved. Christ's salvation is without end, in that all who believe in him, though they were dead, yet shall they live, and live for ever more. Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift, 2 Corinthians 9:15. AMEN.