

Genesis 47:1-26 When Faith becomes Sight

Introduction

Can you predict the future? There are things that don't take great intelligence to work out. I could say that neither Scotland nor England will win the Football world cup in Brazil this coming summer. In the former case as they didn't qualify; and in the latter case because although they will make the tournament the lack of sufficient quality of players in the team ensures that they are unlikely to go beyond the group stage. However, that is a small matter in the big scale of things. Is it possible to predict when the war will end in Syria? Or when the effects of the recession will finally vanish from our economy and local communities? I suspect no-one feels qualified to put definitive dates on these propositions. There are things that seemed obvious long before the sporting events concerned took place –for example, Celtic winning the Scottish Premier League title and Australia winning the Ashes in Test Cricket, but there are too many things large and small that are missed by everyone. The events of 11 September 2001 in New York fall into this category. It was a disaster that has had worldwide implications far beyond Osama Bin Laden's wildest dreams. It was the costliest terrorist attack in history with insurance costs of around 40 billion dollars. New York alone required around 95 billion dollars to repair the damage in buildings and business over the following two years. The impact on Stock exchanges was huge. The Dow Jones fell by \$664 billion (£426 billion); the London FTSE-100 fell by £316 billion and global markets fell in total by approximately £3.96 trillion. It was the most expensive disaster in history. No-one appeared to see it coming, despite all the security services employed by Governments the world over [*The Times*, 10 September 2002]. In the developed world life has been changed for ever. The security apparatus at airports and all kinds of additional internal security laws, for example, will never go away. A relatively small group of people have changed the world for all of us. To an obviously lesser extent in that it was a regional matter, the famine that visited the Middle East and North Africa in Joseph's day had the potential for catastrophic consequences not only for Egypt, but in all the neighbouring countries as well. The timing of Jacob's family moving into Egypt was perfect. They did not realise at the time, but looking back they were able to see the extraordinary hand of God at work in their midst. I suspect Pharaoh understand the situation as well as anyone and he would have no superlatives left to praise Joseph and Joseph's God for the guidance given so that they could plan ahead for the coming years of famine. By the time the years of famine were over the hand of God and the wisdom of Joseph was evident to anyone who wished to acknowledge it. Genesis 47 contains a brief and sober summary of these traumatic years, but communicates most strongly that putting our faith and trust in God in the here and now will one day - in this life or certainly in the next - become sight. God usually guides us one step at a time and gives us the grace we need at the time, not for tomorrow as well. Grace for then will be supplied at the time. Jesus in an extended section of the Sermon on the Mount provided great reassurance to His followers concerning our futures. He said: *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothes?* ²⁶ *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?* ²⁷ *Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?* ²⁸ *And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin.* ²⁹ *Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.* ³⁰ *If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you – you of little faith?* ³¹ *So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?"* ³² *For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need*

them.³³ **But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.**³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:25-34). Notice the key verse is Matthew 6:33. Joseph managed to do that and the account of his life in the book of Genesis is a huge encouragement to us in making sense of our world in this generation.

1. The generosity of Pharaoh (Genesis 47:1-12)

(a) To Joseph's brothers (Genesis 47:1-6) (i) The brothers' appearance before Pharaoh (Genesis 47:1-4) *Joseph went and told Pharaoh, 'My father and brothers, with their flocks and herds and everything they own, have come from the land of Canaan and are now in Goshen.'*² *He chose five of his brothers and presented them before Pharaoh.*³ *Pharaoh asked the brothers, 'What is your occupation?'* *'Your servants are shepherds,' they replied to Pharaoh, 'just as our fathers were.'*⁴ *They also said to him, 'We have come to live here for a while, because the famine is severe in Canaan and your servants' flocks have no pasture. So now, please let your servants settle in Goshen.'* Can you recall any occasions when you as a young person embarrassed your parents? I can certainly recall a few situations. Once, when I was maybe seven or eight years old, we were visiting my Dad's cousin and his wife and their two children. Prior to the visit my mum drilled it into my brother and me not to ask about the boys birth parents. The children were either fostered or adopted. I cannot remember which it was now, but all throughout the visit there was only one thing I wanted to ask. I was an inquisitive boy who often asked questions –not always at the best of times. Towards the end of the visit I could not resist asking the forbidden question. It is amazing how quick we were ushered out of the house and into the borrowed car for the return trip home! The good byes that to a child normally take 'for ever' were over in record time. My parents appeared extremely flustered at what to me was a perfectly reasonable question. I think with hindsight it would have been better to have said nothing to us boys. It would never have occurred to us that the children were not the biological offspring of that couple! However, it can work the other way children can be embarrassed to be seen in public with their parents as they grow older. Possibly issues of clothing fashions or musical tastes or a range of other things can provide interesting moments that some feel are best avoided altogether! This was that kind of situation for Joseph. He had lived for years in the carefully choreographed world of Egypt and the court of the Pharaoh. Somehow with the minimum amount of damage he had to bring his relatives in to meet the Pharaoh and out again with the gift of suitable accommodation in Goshen. His father and brothers were country folk used to looking after animals. Their speech and social conventions were likely to be alien to the Egyptian aristocracy. In Genesis 46:31-34 Joseph has an intensive coaching session with his brothers telling them exactly what he is going to do for them. Genesis 46:31-34 stated:³¹ *Then Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, 'I will go up and speak to Pharaoh and will say to him, "My brothers and my father's household, who were living in the land of Canaan, have come to me. "*³² *The men are shepherds; they tend livestock, and they have brought along their flocks and herds and everything they own. "*³³ *When Pharaoh calls you in and asks, "What is your occupation?" "*³⁴ *you should answer, "Your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on, just as our fathers did. "* Then you will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians.' He tells them that the time will come when they are to meet Pharaoh. He wants them to be honest about what they do, but because the job title 'shepherd' was reserved for the lowest of the low and disreputable characters, they had to refer to themselves as 'livestock tenders' not 'shepherds'. It appears fairly straightforward that Joseph will do all the difficult things behind the scenes, presumably using his civil servants. They in turn, will show up when asked at the Royal Palace, smile and be deeply respectful to Pharaoh and say as little as possible. Could anything

possibly go wrong? Genesis 47:3 reminds us: *Pharaoh asked the brothers, 'What is your occupation?' 'Your servants are shepherds,' they replied to Pharaoh, 'just as our fathers were.'* Their honesty is commendable but it could have been a total disaster if Joseph had not been so well regarded by the Pharaoh. Then to make matters worse they blurt out that they have no plan B regarding accommodation. In fact they are desperate and trust Pharaoh can find them somewhere to stay. Thankfully they do at least get the right name to suggest as a suitable location. Pharaoh already knows that Joseph has arranged for his family to stay on a temporary basis in Goshen, so there is absolutely no surprise in their request. The Egyptian officials will have worked everything out in advance. Probably after their departure there would be much discrete amusement in royal circles about Joseph's less than sophisticated relatives! However, despite their mistakes and mumbled speech God overruled for their good and His glory. He will do exactly the same for you and I as well, praise His name!

(ii) Pharaoh's reply to Joseph's brothers (Genesis 47:5-6) ⁵ *Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Your father and your brothers have come to you, ⁶ and the land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land. Let them live in Goshen. And if you know of any among them with special ability, put them in charge of my own livestock.'* Public events then and now with those in authority are well choreographed. Joseph behind the scenes has briefed Pharaoh at every stage. However, officially Pharaoh is responsible for everything that happens in his realm and these two verses I picture as a public statement for the benefit of the court and other public officials, not Joseph. At the state opening of Parliament our Queen reads a speech about what 'my Government' plans to do in the next session of Parliament. In reality she has very little input if any into the programme and simply reads out a speech prepared for her by Government civil servants. Due process, though, is followed. But no-one present is under any illusions about what is actually taking place. This court scene portrays a generous Pharaoh welcoming Joseph's family to the country. He has already been briefed that they wish to live in Goshen and duly announces what Joseph had already worked on behind the scenes. At this time of year a New Year Honours List is announced. Have you ever wondered why everyone accepts the honours given? The reason is simple. Potential recipients are asked in advance –if you were to be offered 'x' –would you accept it? The choreography of the process is intended to respect the views of each participant, but ultimately ensuring that all goes smoothly in the end. Pharaoh acts as if the brothers had indicated they were herdsmen and offers potential job opportunities with his own livestock. There is no indication that he heard them mention anything at all about being shepherds who looked after sheep! Most of us don't have to play this kind of game in our workplace, but there is usually some form of protocol to observe. What is clear is that Joseph worked as an honourable man within the system which he couldn't change, but with wisdom accomplished far more than could ever have been expected. You may get frustrated at the system or red-tape to be followed in your workplace, but don't underestimate what good you might accomplish in that setting. Other people undoubtedly are watching and will respect your dedicated service.

(b) To Joseph's father (Genesis 47:7-12) *Then Joseph brought his father Jacob in and presented him before Pharaoh. After Jacob blessed Pharaoh, ⁸ Pharaoh asked him, 'How old are you?' ⁹ And Jacob said to Pharaoh, 'The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers.'* ¹⁰ *Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from his presence. ¹¹ So Joseph settled his father and his brothers in Egypt and gave them property in the best part of the land, the district of Rameses, as Pharaoh directed. ¹² Joseph also provided his father and his brothers and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their children.* In our cultural context it is probable that our parent(s) would have been presented first of all. Not in that context. It may have been necessary to bargain for opportunities for employment or accommodation for his family. This would have been humiliating for an elder man like Jacob to be seen to be begging for favours. It was far

better for him to enter the court when all the business matters were concluded. Again, everyone present understands what is happening here. However, there is an extraordinary alteration of protocol recorded in Genesis 47:7-8: *Then Joseph brought his father Jacob in and presented him before Pharaoh. After Jacob blessed Pharaoh, ⁸ Pharaoh asked him, 'How old are you?'* The lesser blessing the greater, in terms of social standing, was exceedingly rare. In Genesis 14:18-24 there is the scene of Melchizedek, King of Salem (later called Jerusalem) blessing Abraham. The prominent king was blessing a wandering immigrant to the country (in the eyes of many local residents who might have been amazed at what they had observed). Hebrews 7:1-10 looks back at that scene and reflects on it and notes: *And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater* (Hebrews 7:7). On what basis then in this public setting could Pharaoh accept this blessing with its social implications? There is one probable answer here. No-one present would have missed the contrast between the all-powerful Pharaoh on his throne and the vulnerable elderly patriarch of a family of asylum-seekers requesting residency for his family. However, in the ancient world and in some countries today people are honoured in accordance with their age. The Egyptian ideal of a very long life was 110 years. Jacob had surpassed that with ease having attained 130 years. Although he described it very modest terms as being low compared to his ancestors it was considerably longer than Egyptians could have expected. Pharaohs were viewed in Egypt not as mere mortals, but as the earthly embodiment of the great sun god Ra with supposed power over life and death. Jacob in living so long was honoured as if he had somehow affected the length of his life (and the seventeen years still to come - Genesis 47:28!). The meeting was short and formal but had accomplished all that was required. Joseph's hard work and planning behind the scenes had worked well. In our lives too there are many issues over which we have little control or input, but doing our best where we can make a difference is all the Lord and our employer can expect from us.

2. The wisdom of Joseph (Genesis 47:13-26)

(a) The seriousness of the problem (Genesis 47:13-22) (i) The progress of the famine (Genesis 47:13-20a) *There was no food, however, in the whole region because the famine was severe; both Egypt and Canaan wasted away because of the famine. ¹⁴ Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain they were buying, and he brought it to Pharaoh's palace. ¹⁵ When the money of the people of Egypt and Canaan was gone, all Egypt came to Joseph and said, 'Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? Our money is all gone.'* ¹⁶ *'Then bring your livestock,' said Joseph. 'I will sell you food in exchange for your livestock, since your money is gone.'* ¹⁷ *So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and he gave them food in exchange for their horses, their sheep and goats, their cattle and donkeys. And he brought them through that year with food in exchange for all their livestock. ¹⁸ When that year was over, they came to him the following year and said, 'We cannot hide from our lord the fact that since our money is gone and our livestock belongs to you, there is nothing left for our lord except our bodies and our land. ¹⁹ Why should we perish before your eyes – we and our land as well? Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh. Give us seed so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate. ²⁰ So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields, because the famine was too severe for them.*

We are familiar with the old saying: 'Desperate times call for desperate measures'. Its origins are unclear but probably go back as far as the Tudor or Stuart era in England. Guy Fawkes, of Gunpowder Plot fame, is alleged to have said to King James I on 6 November 1605: "Desperate diseases require desperate measures." He and his fellow plotters had planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament and thus eliminate the Government with a view to restoring a Roman Catholic Government in England. It failed and those plotters who were arrested were later tried and executed for treason. This relatively small group of men had become convinced that

the Protestant Reformation was here to stay unless they used extraordinary means to change the course of history. How would we describe Joseph's plans in Egypt during this period of famine? In simple contemporary terms he nationalized the means of production and reorganized the state in a centralized manner that looks alarmingly like a communist economic policy, as some critical American commentators have made clear. Would this be fair to Joseph to describe his work in this way? The honest answer is that this situation was critical. Without the centralized control of the food collections during the good years and the organized distribution of it in the years of famine a significant proportion of the population of the region, together with their animals would have perished. For many of us in the United Kingdom the pictures from Ethiopia showing the extent of the 1983-85 famine which led to the Band Aid single 'Do they know it's Christmas?' was our first real exposure to the horrors of famine. This single, together with the July 1985 Live Aid Concert to stir people into action to donate resources, was hugely successful even if some critical comments were made about the effectiveness of the aid programme on the ground. No-one had prior experience of handling a natural disaster of this magnitude so to succeed in feeding the people throughout its duration was a magnificent achievement. The organization of the relief programme was thorough and its execution as good as anyone could have expected at the time. At first people paid in cash or its equivalent for their food. When that source dried up their cattle were sold, which incidentally probably saved the animals' lives. Then the final thing to be sold was the private property of the citizens of Egypt. There can be no doubt that this was a traumatic time for these people, who must have feared mass starvation and the premature deaths of a large proportion of the region's population. However uncomfortable they or we might feel about the plan there was no Plan B. When we compare what Joseph did here with what the British Government didn't do during the Irish Potato Famine between 1845 and 1852 when approximately one million people died and a similar number emigrated to survive, we can see the significance of Joseph's actions. In both cases there was sufficient food to feed the people on basic rations but in Ireland unlike in Egypt the inactivity of the Government and the landed gentry was a disgrace. Irish attitudes to the British Government in the last century and a half have been greatly coloured by this tragedy. By contrast the gratitude of the people to Joseph and his administration ensured that the Hyksos dynasty survived in power for several more generations. This fact suggests that the majority of the native Egyptian population recognized that the Government had done its best to get them through this crisis.

(ii) The consequences of the famine (Genesis 47:20b-22) *The land became Pharaoh's²¹ and Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other.*²² However, he did not buy the land of the priests, because they received a fixed allowance from Pharaoh and had food enough from the allowance Pharaoh gave them. That is why they did not sell their land. Although lives were saved there must have been some social and economic dislocation. Many people would have moved at least on a temporary basis nearer the food storage facilities. It is possible, depending on which translation of the text is followed, that Joseph may have moved people into urban areas and put them on work programmes as he reorganised the economy. The building programme of food storage facilities and the digging out of the canal system to drain away the excess flood water in this period would have been labour intensive. It is possible that some native-born Egyptians resented working as unpaid labourers for a Hebrew ruler in their own country. Who knows whether the later enslavement of ethnic minorities in the country to carry out the public works programme of the next indigenous Egyptian dynasty was stimulated in part by what had been experienced of necessity in Joseph's day. We can read easily through this narrative but at the time it must have been quite traumatic for many people fearing the worst.

(b) **The impact of the solution** (Genesis 47:23-26) (i) **The description of his economic plan** (Genesis 47:23-24)²³ *Joseph said to the people, 'Now that I have bought you and your land today for Pharaoh, here is seed for you so you can plant the ground. ²⁴ But when the crop comes in, give a fifth of it to Pharaoh. The other four-fifths you may keep as seed for the fields and as food for yourselves and your households and your children.'* Joseph may have run a centralised form of governance, but the personal and business taxation rate of 20% was exceptionally low. It is well below anything experienced by citizens of Western Free Market economies. It would not be a fair comparison, though, as we expect public services such as health and education and welfare provision, for example, that would have been denied to all but the elite few in Egypt. Without delving any deeper into economics it does appear that Joseph sought to be fair and just in his treatment of the people. His economic policies both during the famine and in the years that followed appeared to be soundly based. (ii) **The success of his reforms** (Genesis 47:25a) *'You have saved our lives,' they said.* How did the people view his rule during the time of famine? Genesis 47:25a indicates that they were pleased with what he had done suggesting that he had in fact saved their lives. No Government will please all the people all the time, nor will it accomplish all it sets out to do, but in this particular social context it is clear that Joseph's popularity ratings were high. (iii) **The significance of his reforms** (Genesis 47:25b) *'May we find favour in the eyes of our lord; we will be in bondage to Pharaoh.'* It appears that the population recognised that the old ways of doing things could not survive this kind of crisis and things had to change. Undoubtedly there would have been some grumbling that Egyptian social and agricultural patterns had been changed for ever, but a majority had accepted that these changes had been necessary. Those people in our country who have experienced World War One or World War Two would be well aware that the country would never be the same again. Patterns of women's employment had changed for ever, for example. Trust in a national Government regarding the rightness of conflict and war also changed dramatically over the twentieth century, amongst many other things in the United Kingdom. It is clear when citizens recognise that a crisis could not be avoided but has to be faced and overcome that people can pull together and accomplish far more than they had thought might be possible, and at the same time put up with greater hardship than would normally be entertained. (iv) **The duration of his reforms** (Genesis 47:26) *So Joseph established it as a law concerning land in Egypt – still in force today – that a fifth of the produce belongs to Pharaoh. It was only the land of the priests that did not become Pharaoh's.* Moses is viewed as the editor of the book of Genesis in Egypt, roughly four centuries after Joseph's day. For a different ruling elite to retain an economic system of a predecessor for so long implies its extraordinary success and acceptance both by the elite and the masses in Egypt. God enabled this young man to accomplish far more than he could ever have asked or imagined taking place. Although at the time the hand of God was invisible to the majority of people in that situation, yet He was at work for their good. It encourages us in our day and generation to pray and to believe that God has not changed and that He wants the best for us also as His people. He may permit us to experience prosperity and adversity in different measures, but through it all whether we can see it or not, He is at work for our good and His glory. Therefore, we can take heart and praise Him and pray with words like those of Paul in Ephesians 3:20-21: *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*