

**“THE GODFATHER”**  
**The Story of Joseph – 4**  
*Genesis 45:1-28*

Last week we saw that Joseph had risen to become the most powerful man in Egypt after Pharaoh himself. From the pits of the prison, where he had been unjustly incarcerated, he became overnight the chief administrator of the entire nation due to his God-given ability to interpret Pharaoh’s dream and his wisdom and discernment in applying that interpretation to the situation he saw around him in that nation.

The situation was that, after seven years of bumper harvests, there would be a famine across the whole region and there would need to be a programme of stockpiling during the good years in order to provide enough food for the people in the bad years. As the famine takes hold and its effects are felt throughout the whole of the Middle East, people from other nations come to Egypt to try and buy grain. Amongst the refugees from the north-east, from Canaan, were Joseph’s brothers. At first, Joseph does not let on who he is. And they, of course, do not have a clue who he is.

It has been many years since they saw Joseph. We don’t know how long Joseph had been in Egypt before he was imprisoned, but he spent two years in there after interpreting the dreams of the baker and the wine-taster. There had been seven years of bumper harvests and two years of famine since he was promoted to his position of power – so that’s at least eleven years, and he would certainly have changed in that time. On top of that, he would be dressed as an Egyptian and would no doubt be wearing his hair and beard differently. And Joseph’s brothers would not have been expecting to see him at all. The last they saw of him was being dragged off by some slave traders, who could have sold him anywhere along their route. It’s often difficult to recognise people in a context where you don’t expect to see them, as I often find.

Joseph actually makes life a bit difficult for them to begin with, insisting on their bringing their youngest brother, Benjamin, to see him. Then he plants stolen goods on them and makes a big fuss about it. It is very probably their response to all these goings on that convinces Joseph they are changed men. Eventually, it gets to the point where he “*could no longer control himself*” (45:1). Now, if this was *You’ve Been Framed* or *Surprise! Surprise!* Joseph would surely have gathered the largest crowd he could get and made the most of the moment of truth. But instead he sends out all his attendants and is left alone with these overawed and rather frightened brothers.

Can you imagine the scene? You’ve come all the way down to Egypt, been messed about by this seemingly all-powerful figure, been fitted up as thieves, left hostages in the palace, and now, once again, you’ve been summoned to appear before a man who could easily have ordered your death with a wave of his hand. He appears agitated and anxious, then suddenly clears the hall of all his entourage. Is he going to kill you himself? Instead of starting to rant at you, he breaks down in tears and his sobs can be heard all over the palace. What do you do? How do you cope with an over-emotional despot when you are refugees in his country and expecting any moment to hear some other unreasonable demand on you, or even an order that you should be executed? It’s understandable that they should be “*terrified at his presence.*”

And then he beckons them closer. Maybe he’s just drunk and he’s going to tell them all that they’re his best mates. Or perhaps he’s so stressed out that he’s going to take it all out on them and have them killed. But to their utter amazement, he looks up and says, “It’s me – Joe, your brother! You sold me all those years ago, and now here I am.” Uh oh! He *is* going to kill them. Plans for revenge have been festering in his mind for years and each day he’s been perfecting his plan to torture them and get his own back for what they did to him.

But no! Joseph too has changed. He is no longer the spoiled brat with the poncey coat and the weird dreams about how wonderful he's going to be. He's no longer the sneak, the bullied victim, the goody-two-shoes. He's a man of immense power, haunted to some extent by his own past, but ready to acknowledge the way in which God has been at work. He tells his brothers that he's now the Godfather – that's what the expression in 45:8 means. He says he is "*father to Pharaoh*": "father" is a title of honour given to the viziers, the ruler's special advisors and confidants. And Pharaoh is a living god. He's the Godfather, about to make them an offer they cannot refuse. (Which reminds me that I heard last week of the post-modern Godfather, who made his enemies an offer they couldn't understand!)

But despite that position of awesome power, Joseph repeats again and again that he's there only because God has put him there. Look at 45:5,7,8,9 and his protestation in 50:19. We saw last week, didn't we, how Joseph acknowledged that all his gifts came from God as he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh and his servants. He knows his place in the great scheme of things and, although in human terms he is at the very top of the heap, it's only due to the gracious provision of God that he happens to be there.

Eventually, Joseph's father, Jacob, and around seventy of his family make the trip down to Egypt and settle there. Jacob dies in Egypt and is buried with full honours by the Egyptians – and Joseph's brothers get really scared again. They believe that Joseph has put off taking his revenge on them out of respect for their father, but now he is dead there is nothing to hold Joseph back (50:15). But even now Joseph is not interested in settling old scores and he replies to them with words that sum up what this story has been all about – "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*" (50:20). Having said that, he reassures them and treats them with kindness and love.

As we've said several times while we've been looking at this story, this isn't really the story of Joseph, it's the story of God. And in this story, as in all stories in the Bible, we see God's strategy unfolding. We have seen God's **purpose**, his **promise**, and his **plan**. And that mirrors something of God's greater plan, for which we are giving thanks this morning in our celebration of communion.

## 1. GOD'S PURPOSE

Joseph's brothers intended to harm him. As we saw the first week, they were justifiably fed up with Joseph's ravings. He was daddy's golden boy and was always swanning about in the special coat he'd had made for him. He sneaked on them to his dad while they were out in the fields, and they hated him for it. So when they had an opportunity, they threw him down a dry well and were going to leave him to die. But Judah reminded them all, in a moving speech, that he was their brother, their own flesh and blood, so they shouldn't kill him – they should sell him instead and make a bit of money out of him. They wanted rid of him. They meant to do him as much harm as they could short of ending his life – and, to be frank, some of them wanted that.

But God's purpose was very different. His purpose was "*the saving of many lives*" – not only the lives of his own people, the tribe of Jacob, but the lives of thousands of Egyptians. Indeed, looking at this in the light of the whole of the message of the Bible, we can see that the purpose of God is nothing less than the salvation of all men and women, whoever they are and from whatever race they come. The fact that God was involved in the rescue of the entire Egyptian nation from the effects of famine says something very powerful about the common grace that is at the heart of God's purpose. Yes, he had his chosen people, the Jewish nation, but he had chosen them only to be a "*light to the nations*", an example and a means of extending his purpose of salvation to everyone – even to you and me. Read on through the Bible, Old Testament and New, and you will find it clearly stated again and again and again that it is God's will that none should perish, but that all should be saved to enjoy eternal life with him.

## 2. GOD'S PROMISE

And to that end, God made a promise. He had promised Joseph's father – and his grandfather, and great-grandfather – that he would bless all nations through them. In a dream Jacob had while he was at Bethel (or Luz, as it was also known), God made this promise (*Genesis 28:14,15*). And it was now starting to be fulfilled through one of Jacob's offspring. Of course, it would be – God always keeps his promises. And again, throughout the Old Testament there are references back to the promises made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob: whenever God's people are in need of encouragement, they are reminded of those promises and of the ways in which God has been faithfully keeping them.

And the promise holds good on into the New Testament. God's promise is that salvation and blessing are available to all. Yes, it came through the patriarchs and the people whom he had chosen as the nation of Israel, but just as he extended his grace to the people of Egypt through the Hebrew Joseph, so he extends his offer of eternal life to everyone through the Hebrew Messiah, Jesus. Peter, standing up in front of the crowds on the day of Pentecost, cried out, "*The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call*" (*Acts 2:39*). That's a promise for you and for me – centuries after the time of Joseph and after the time of Peter – but it still holds good because God always keeps his promise, often in the most dramatic and unexpected ways, as the story of Joseph demonstrates.

## 3. GOD'S PLAN

God has his purpose, his "mission statement", if you like: the salvation and blessing of all people. And he'd made his promise to that effect. Today we'd call it his "Customer Charter", probably. But he needed an action plan to bring it about. It's a plan that would probably not get through the watchdogs and standards offices today. His plan to bring about the salvation of the Egyptian people in their time of famine involved steps such as the betrayal of Joseph and the selling of Joseph. They were things in which others played a part, but it would have seemed incredible to them that God was keeping his promise, fulfilling his purposes through having Joseph thrown down a well, being sold into slavery, being seduced by a senior civil servant's wife, languishing in a prison, and being promoted to the right hand of an imperial despot. It happened, though, didn't it? And all those things which Judah and his brothers had done which they did in order to harm Joseph were actually meant for good by God.

That is only part of the plan though. It's one small segment in God's overall plan – not a five-year plan, or a fourteen year plan, or a plan for the duration of one parliament, but a plan for eternity. For God's purpose of offering salvation and blessing to all people, he hatched a plan which reached its fulfilment in Jesus. Once again, the details seem incredible. To overcome evil and defeat death, God became human and entered this world in the form of a baby. The baby grew to manhood and was betrayed and sold, then nailed to a cross and left to die. That's what this bread and wine are all about.

Judas and those who used him meant it for harm. They meant Jesus to die ignominiously and irrevocably on the cross. They were fed up with his teaching and his miracles. They wanted rid of a man who comforted the poor and dispossessed and sinful, but who challenged and rebuked the comfortable. They intended to harm him for good and all, but God intended it for good. Just as God's plan for Joseph was unwittingly carried forward by those who wanted to see the end of him, so God's plan for all humanity was unwittingly carried forward by those who thought they had disposed of him.

It doesn't make sense, does it? At least, it doesn't make sense to us who look at things from our own human perspective and who find the ways of God beyond our understanding. But this is God's purpose: he wants to save you and me from the eternal consequences of our sin and our disobedience. He has

promised to do that – this book, the Bible, is jam packed with promises to that effect, and we can read just how he has kept so many of them already. His plan may seem strange to us, but it is working – as the lives of many of us here today can demonstrate.

This is not the story of goings-on in a remote corner of the globe three and a half millennia ago. This is part of the story of God's purposes being fulfilled – purposes in which you have an part to play. Peter's words, which we quoted earlier about the promise of God for everyone, were addressed to those who wanted to know how they should respond to the message of Jesus. If you are asking that question, if you want to be able to receive what God has promised, then all you have to do is reach out and accept. It's a promise for you – and God has done all the planning already so that you can benefit from it.

Joseph's story has come to an end. If you want to read the whole lot, then you can find it in *Genesis 37 – 50*. But the story of God's purposes will never come to an end. Make sure you're part of that story.