

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Thirteenth Week -- Tuesday

JOSEPH BUYS THE LAND FOR PHARAOH

"When that year had ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, 'We will not hide from my lord that our money is gone; my lord also has our herds of livestock. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands'. . . . Then Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for every man of the Egyptians sold his field, because the famine was severe upon them. So the land became Pharaoh's. . . . Then Joseph said to the people, 'Indeed I have bought you and your land this day for Pharaoh. Look, here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. And it shall come to pass in the harvest that you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh. Four-fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and for your food, for those of your households and as food for your little ones.' So they said, 'You have saved our lives; let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's servants'" (Genesis 47:18-25).

The policy which Joseph recommended to the Egyptian king and which he carried into effect well deserves our attention.

During the seven years of plenty, Joseph caused one-fifth of all the produce of every district to be hoarded up in immense granaries. It might seem inadequate, seeing that this fifth part of the produce of each year was to sustain the whole population during a year of famine. But when we consider the enormous export of corn from that country, which continued even to later times when Egypt was the granary of Italy, it may readily be apprehended that one-fifth of the produce of an extraordinary fertile year might be made to suffice for consumption during one year of famine.

How did the crown acquire possession of this corn? Some think that the whole produce was taken up by the government and then was doled out to the people. Others think that a certain calculable surplus was taken and stored up. And then there are those who think it probable, by the light of subsequent events, that the produce-tax of one tenth, usually paid to ancient governments, was at this time doubled and made one-fifth, which constituted the surplus treasured up for future years. As this was afterwards *sold* to the people, some infer that the corn was bought up by the crown.

We must confess that we are not convinced of the freedom and generosity of the Egyptian

government. However, we consider two possibilities. First, the people were serfs to the crown and therefore cultivated the land; hence the government took as their right all the produce the people did not require for their own subsistence. Second, the government claimed the right of purchasing the corn at its own price and leaving a sufficient amount for the people who produced it.

The mere existence of such a right is sufficiently hard for us to comprehend, but we must not judge these matters by what transpires in our own day. The Orientals have never troubled themselves much about abstract rights. They seldom question any power a monarch thinks fit to assume so long as its application does not press to onerously upon the individual. In the present case, it is quite probable that the extreme importance and urgency of the occasion was regarded as justifying the utmost exertion of the royal power without greater regard for private rights--if any such rights were recognized--than we usually find among Eastern nations. The mission of Joseph was to provide for the famine, and this he was bound to do in conformity with the existing ideas and institutions of the nation without raising new questions about government and political rights.

The case may have been somewhat different when the years of famine came and all the food of the land was in his hands--food which would all have disappeared during the years of plenty without his care, leaving the people with no remedy for looming starvation. The nation then lay at his feet; and seeing that a man will give all that he has for his life, he had the power of acting as seemed good in his eyes. Whether he had some regard to the advantage of the people or to that of the crown, whose servant he was, may be a question with us, but it was probably no question with him in whose view the advantage of the king and the people were doubtless one.

The state had corn in abundance and the people had no food. It was the duty of the state to see that none should perish from lack of food while it was in such abundance. But it would not have been wise or prudent to have supplied corn without cost to those who had the means of paying for it either in money or what could be substituted for it. This is now so well understood that during the recent famine in our sister country the government taxed its ingenuity to find means for those who were in need to exchange their labor for the food which the care of the state provided. The whole concept was to avoid the appearance of *giving* away its bounty. The men who spent their days repairing roads would no doubt have been better pleased to receive the food without cost, but the wise thought differently. And if so much danger was in this case apprehended from the precedent of feeding a people gratuitously for a few months, how much greater would have been the danger of doing it for the seven long years of famine in Egypt?

Joseph's plan of *selling* the corn instead of *giving* it away should arouse our praise rather than reprehension, for it enabled him to forego the vulgar popularity that profuse but unreasoning bounty can always obtain. In this transaction we find that the more we examine it the more laudable, wise, and free from objection it is. His ideas were in advance of his age, and he is

entitled to the greater credit because we cannot rightly expect more from him than the spirit of his own age demanded. Let us now look into his actions more closely.

When the famine began, Joseph opened the storehouses and began to sell the corn, not only to the Egyptians but to such foreigners as came for it. The foreigners clearly came in the hope of sharing in the benefits enjoyed by the people of Egypt by purchasing corn at the price it was sold for in that land. At first the payments for corn were made with money. But money at length became exhausted and so Joseph consented to take property in exchange for the corn. They began with their cattle. And as the people had not the means of feeding their livestock and must have been anxious that their horses, flocks, and herds should be in hands that could preserve them from perishing with hunger, and as the number must have been greatly diminished during the previous period of famine, we need not be surprised to learn that this resource lasted but one year, at the close of which all the cattle in Egypt had passed into the possession of the crown.

What resources now remained? These were not times for lending or borrowing, of putting the evil day far off. The questions before men were those of life and death. They came to Joseph, and showing that they had nothing left but their persons and their lands, they offered both as the price of their subsistence during the remainder of the famine, with seed-corn being given for the time when the operations of agriculture might be resumed. This offer was accepted by Joseph. He did not make the proposal, and it was one that he may have hesitated to make. But the proposal being offered by the people and even pressed upon him, he yielded to their urgency and accepted it in the same large terms as it was offered.

However, the offer as made is not to be understood under the popular notion of buying and selling. When Joseph says, "I have bought you this day, and your lands, for Pharaoh," it means little more than "acquired." Even at the present day in the East a wife is said to be "bought," and the money that passes between the husband and her father is called the "price." This is far from implying that she has become a slave. So in the present case with Joseph, although the people relinquish their lands they do not expect to cease to occupy or cultivate them. They are indeed anxious that the land shall not be desolate, and one of their stipulations is for seed-corn, all of which would have been needless had they become mere slaves or serfs. Had the land become absolutely that of the king, they had little reason to care about it; for Pharaoh would know how to care for his own, and he certainly would himself have provided seed-corn for its culture.

What the people expected was clearly that they should henceforth become tenants of the crown instead of free proprietors. This they call being "servants," a term which merely implies that they were under obligations short of absolute freedom. There is no word in Scripture answering to "tenant." The tenant is called the "servant" of the proprietor. According to this phraseology, our own tenant-farmers would be called servants, seeing that they cultivate lands not their own and are bound to render to the landlord a large proportion of the value of the produce as rent. Although Joseph's language sounds harsh to us, it is well to understand that the true meaning of

what he says is this: "Having this day acquired for Pharaoh certain rights over you and your lands, I shall now proceed to inform you to what extent these rights will hereafter be enforced." He then states that they are to remain in occupation of the lands of which the king had become, by their cession, the proprietor, and that they were to pay one-fifth of the produce as rent to the sovereign as their landlord, in lieu of all other duties, taxes, and charges whatever. When we consider that in all probability a tenth at least had previously been paid to defray the expenses of government, the real *additional* charge is ten percent--totaling in all twenty percent.

The true view of Joseph's proceedings must be taken from the point of view of the age in which he lived. It is therefore well that we have the means of knowing not merely how it was viewed by his contemporaries generally but how it was regarded by the very people themselves. Let us remember that the proposal was their own, and that when Joseph accepted the offer, perhaps even under a more liberal construction than they had expected, their language was not that of complaint but of warm and admiring gratitude--"You have saved our lives!"