Joseph Makes Himself Known

In 1st Kings chapter 18 Elijah had his famous confrontation with Ahab and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. After the prophets of Baal had failed to summon fire for their sacrifice, Elijah prayed and God sent a fire which consumed all the wet wood, rocks and even the soil. It was a mighty display of God’s great power witnessed by all who were present. In the next chapter Elijah fled from Ahab and Jezebel fearing for his life. He was staying in a cave when the word of the Lord came to him asking “What are you doing here, Elijah?” When he replied that he was zealous for the Lord, God told him to stand on the mountain as He passed by. A powerful wind, an earthquake then a fire appeared but God was in none of those. Finally God’s presence was known in a gentle whisper speaking to Elijah. God had fed Elijah with ravens, miraculously provided food for Elijah, a widow and her son, brought the widow’s son back from the dead then sent the consuming fire to Mount Carmel. Elijah was used to seeing God work miracles but the gentle whisper was God letting him know that he was with Elijah at all times. Proverbs 15:3 tell us that the eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good.

Ray Pritchard preached a sermon quoting from a sermon preached by Charles Simeon some 200 years earlier. In his sermon, Simeon talked about the “hidden secrets of divine providence”. In our study of Genesis, we see that Joseph understood God’s divine providence. The chapter begins with Joseph finally revealing to his brothers that he is Joseph, the long lost brother they had sold into slavery 22 years earlier. The KJV says that his brothers were troubled by Joseph’s presence. The NIV puts it more bluntly, they were terrified. I wonder if they thought that God had raised Joseph from the dead to torment them. I am sure that the brothers expected the worse when Joseph told them who he was but Joseph reassured them telling them not to be distressed or angry with themselves. He told them that God had sent him ahead of them to prepare for the famine that would grip the land. Joseph tells his brothers that not only are they forgiven, but they are invited to live with him in Egypt where he will provide all their needs. When Pharaoh learned about the reunion of Joseph’s family, he invited the entire family to come and live in Egypt, even telling them to bring nothing with them since they would have the best that Egypt had to offer. Joseph sent them on their way telling them not to quarrel on the way. He probably anticipated they would blame each other for what had happed years earlier or that they would resent Joseph’s favoritism towards Benjamin. Upon their return, Jacob did not initially believe that Joseph was alive but was convinced by the brothers and he vowed to go to Joseph before he died.

22 years had elapsed since Joseph was sold into slavery and he had endured many hardships during that time. David Guzik pointed out that all of Joseph’s sorrows were for a purpose. Guzik quoted from a book written by Rabbi Harold Kushner titled “When Bad Things Happen to Good People”. The point of Kushner’s book was God is all loving but not all powerful; that God is good, but not sovereign. So when bad things happen to good people, it is because events are out of God’s control. Kushner advised his readers to “learn to love [God] and forgive him despite his limitations.” Guzik wrote “Whatever Kushner described, it was not the God of the Bible, the God displayed in Joseph’s life.”

I chose to include the scripture about Elijah because of a point that Pritchard made in his sermon. He said that Joseph could see God everywhere, “He had such a profound sense of God’s presence that he understood that every event in his life must somehow be ascribed to the hand of God working behind the scenes.” God was with Joseph not just during critical times in his life but always. Pritchard wrote that when we understand this we can look at things with the following perspective:

We know that our troubles did not happen by accident. It is far better to understand that our enemies (who often are our closest friends) are actually instruments in God’s hands. They are his rod to correct us and to shape us into the image of Jesus Christ.

We can see good where others can only see evil. Joseph understood that God used everything that happened in his life to accomplish a larger purpose.

We have a reason to forgive those who hurt us. We can’t really forget because the memories are with us forever. But we can forgive even when we can’t forget. To forgive means to choose not to remember. To pardon means to clear the record so that we no longer cling to the hurts of the past.

We have a new admiration for God’s wisdom in all things. We live this way by faith. We choose to believe that God is at work in everything that happens to us. We choose to believe that even when we see nothing at all that makes sense to us.

One final thought about Joseph’s brothers. They expected much worse treatment than they actually received. I am reminded of the parable about the prodigal son who returned to his father fully expecting to become a slave but instead having his full rights as a son restored. The brothers not only received forgiveness, all the needs of them and their families would be provided. Joseph’s attitude towards his brothers gives us a picture of God’s grace. To borrow an expression from Steve, it’s just like Jesus to give us much more than we would expect.