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Sent Before Them

"Moreover he called for a famine upon the land: he brake the whole staff of bread. He sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold for a servant: whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron: until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him. The king sent and loosed him; even the ruler of the people, and let him go free. He made him lord of his house, and ruler of all his substance." — Psalm 105:16–21

Summary:

God's providence is evident in both the famine and the provision prepared beforehand. Joseph's brothers acted wickedly, yet God sent him ahead to preserve life. His usefulness came through servitude, false accusation, fetters, and delay, as God's promise tested his faith before raising him to authority. Joseph therefore encourages trust in God's care and points beyond himself to Christ, who was rejected, took the form of a servant, suffered death, and was highly exalted. Because all saving fullness dwells in Christ, guilty and needy people may approach him with confidence for grace.

Outline:

1. **God rules calamity as well as comfort**
    - The famine obeyed his call; no human resource could resist.
2. **Provision was prepared before the need appeared**
    - Joseph was sent ahead to preserve life in the coming distress.
3. **Providence worked through human wrongdoing**
    - His brothers were guilty, yet God directed the outcome for good.
4. **The promise tested Joseph before it raised him**
    - Delay and imprisonment tested his faith, patience, and submission.
5. **Joseph points believers to Christ**
    - The rejected and humbled Saviour is now exalted for his people.

Text

God promised the patriarchs more than he fulfilled in this life. His covenant with them necessarily involved a future state, but he also cared for them here. The preceding words show how he protected them in danger when they were few and strangers in Canaan; these show how he sustained them in distress. They endured a grievous judgment: famine broke the whole staff of bread, ravaged the land and neighbouring countries, and lasted seven years. Yet the Lord called for it.

This expression reminds us that both adversity and prosperity are under the Lord's rule, and that he brings them with sovereign ease. All calamities obey his word. Practical unbelief often accompanies a profession of faith. Nations boast of inexhaustible resources and invincible forces, yet no wisdom, understanding, or counsel can prevail against the Lord.

If God calls for an enemy, that enemy prospers; if he calls for rain, precious grain perishes. Sunshine can do the same. Those who built fine houses while God's house lay waste learned this when he sent drought on the land, mountains, crops, people, cattle, and their work. Yet before famine struck, God had prepared relief: Joseph was sent to help and deliver them. His brothers seemed to control events through hatred and envy, but the Lord's hand guided the whole course.

Joseph acknowledged this when he revealed himself: "I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life." God sent him to preserve a posterity and save lives through great deliverance: "So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God." Though his brothers sold him, God sent him. They were instruments; God was the supreme agent. They acted wickedly, but God remained righteous and directed events for good.

How was Joseph sent to bring deliverance—not as an ambassador or supply officer, but as a servant? His brothers sold him to the Ishmaelites, never imagining he would become the saviour of Egypt and Canaan. The Ishmaelites sold him to Potiphar, who could not imagine he would one day bow before the man he had purchased.

When Joseph rejected his mistress's sinful demand, she falsely accused him, and he was imprisoned. Scripture adds a detail omitted from Genesis: "Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron." Shackled in the dungeon, could he ever stand before Pharaoh, ride in the kingdom's second chariot, and govern Egypt? It seemed impossible.

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He remained there for years, with no sign his prophetic dreams would come true—"until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him." God had promised his advancement, but fulfilment was delayed as his circumstances worsened. His confidence, patience, and submission were tested.

As we test God's word, it tests us. Happy are we if we emerge as gold, our tested faith more precious than perishable gold. Joseph's appointed purpose sustained him; the merciful work planned for him required not only release but elevation. The king freed him and made him lord of his house and ruler of all his substance—a remarkable reversal.

We may view this providence in two ways. First, it reveals God's wonder-working care for his people: "Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy." Those who rely on his care need not despair; the world and all it contains are his. Ravens fed Elijah, and the widow's oil and meal never ran out.

We should not expect such miracles, but the God who performed them remains near and powerful. All nature would change before one of his promises failed.

Second, Joseph represents the Saviour's grace toward our spiritual need. Christ was appointed for this need from eternity. In time, he came to his own, who rejected him. Despised, rejected, and sold for thirty pieces of silver, he was nevertheless delivered by God's determined counsel and foreknowledge.

He humbled himself as a servant and died on a cross; therefore God exalted him. Joseph's elevation pales beside Christ's: Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth. Though Joseph's advancement benefited many, it chiefly saved his father's household. Christ is Saviour of all, especially believers, and head over all things for his body, the Church.

It pleased the Father for all fullness to dwell in Christ. Let us go to him and receive grace upon grace from his fullness. Joseph's brothers did not know he ruled Egypt and controlled its grain; otherwise, they would have sought him sooner. Their guilt may have held them back: how could they face him? But knowing he had forgiven and would embrace them, they would have come confidently.

So let us approach Christ, remembering who and where he is. In every distress, his living authority encourages us: "Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death."

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, Morning and Evening Exercises (January 30, Evening), first published in 1854.