

## "JOSEPH - AWAY FROM HOME"

### INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday morning we began the story of Joseph, and followed it along to the point where the eleven jealous brothers of Joseph sold him to a band of Ishmaelite traders. Before they did this, however, they stripped him of his coat of many colors - that coat that was the outward symbol of their intense, inner hatred of young Joseph, dipped the coat in the blood of an animal and told Jacob, their father, that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. Their father believed them, and the curtain went down on a dark and tragic scene. Jacob's heart was broken.

You'll recall that we looked into some of the causes that produced this family tragedy. We saw only one ray of light, and that came at the end of the chapter; namely this, that whereas Jacob thought he had come to the end of the story of Joseph, he had in reality only come to the end of the chapter.

### CHAPTER TWO

On to the next episode in this story. The second chapter might well be entitled, "Joseph Away From Home". This is the account of Joseph in Egypt. The Ishmaelites, to whom Joseph was sold, were on their way to Egypt. And soon after arriving there, they sold Joseph to a man whose name was Potiphar. Potiphar was a man of considerable wealth and prominence. He liked Joseph and took to him immediately. Potiphar was an intelligent man and recognized Joseph's abilities and qualities of character. His talents were appreciated and certainly one of the most encouraging things that can happen to any of us is to be appreciated.

Potiphar made Joseph his personal attendant and when he saw that Joseph was reliable and dependable, he gave him more and more responsibility. Soon he became the head of the household staff. It was a good arrangement. Potiphar didn't have to worry about anything, and things were going well for Joseph.

Yes, Potiphar liked Joseph. So did Potiphar's wife. Here the plot begins to thicken. Joseph was young, good looking, virile, handsome. He was also a slave and a slave, you'll recall, was supposed to do everything he was told to do. He was a stranger on the scene, and a face that is not familiar sometimes has a fascination that the old, familiar faces do not have.

To put it as delicately as I can, Potiphar's wife began to play around and started making improper advances to Joseph. And she did this, not subtly in a way that Joseph might not understand. She did it directly, in a way, that Joseph could not possibly misunderstand. And she did it not once, but the story tells us - she did it day after day! What was Joseph to do?

### MEANING FOR US

Now, suppose we pause in the story at this point, and as we do I come to a statement that I have put in my notes, and I hesitate to make it and do so with some reservation. This is the statement: I think that 50% of the young men in this country, placed in the same situation that Joseph found himself in would accept the invitation. It may be on the conservative side. What do you think. Perhaps the percentage is too low. I have no way of knowing, but I do know this that the people of today do not live under anything like the restraints that their ancestors lived under one hundred years ago.

If a young man accepted the invitation of a woman like Potiphar's wife, he would probably reason it out like this: first - he would enjoy it, for there's no

reason why a person shouldn't enjoy himself. Second - it would satisfy his normal, natural desires, and such desires have been given to us in order to be satisfied. Third - it would harm no one, and no one need know about it. And, he might add, lending even greater weight to his decision, he could do such things in North Africa that he might not be able to do in his hometown.

Joseph, on the other hand, refused the invitation - decisively and persistently. He said to her:

"My master has kept nothing from me except yourself, for you are his wife. How then can I commit this great crime, and sin against God".

In other words, Joseph refused because he believed himself to be in a position of trust. Potiphar had trusted Joseph with everything that he had, and before God he would not violate that trust. He refused to accept her invitation because he refused to violate the human relationship and the personal dignity that he felt for himself and for the man who was her husband and his master.

This area of self-restraint is one of the confusing and troublesome areas in the life of people today. I do not propose to deal with it now; I'd merely like to launch it in your own private thoughts. I think we are living in a time when people are reacting against a restraint that was often unhealthy and insincere, and they are priding themselves on the fact that they are free personalities....to do what they wish to do without considering the consequences...trust relationships.

Two comments at this point and they are made as guideposts for whatever thought you may wish to give to this. First, the person who is free or feels free to do anything that he wants to do is never a completely happy person. I believe there is no real happiness until a person is bound to some great loyalties that come to him from above, from beyond himself. And then the other comment is this: if we are to recover the kind of restraint that people feel must be exercised in this area of life, it will be found - not so much in civil laws, or in the religious taboos which make it a crime or sin - but rather in the recovery of the integrity and dignity of personal relationships, of which this particular activity is a basic part. And this dignity and integrity of personal relationships will be recovered only when we stand once again before the Giver of all Life - from whom we all come and because of whom we dare not violate our relationships with any of his creatures.

BACK TO JOSEPH But getting back to Joseph, we find that Joseph's fortunes soon took a turn for the worse. Potiphar's wife had a trump card. In all of this she was not in an especially pleasant state of mind toward Joseph.

One day she found Joseph working in the house by himself. She went over to him, and made the same proposal that she had made a hundred times and as she did she caught his robe. Joseph once again refused to go along and pulled away from her, but as he did, his robe was left in her hand. She then hurriedly called in some of the other servants and in an excited tone of voice said,

"The Hebrew slave that has come into our house came into my apartment to insult me, and when I screamed for help, he fled and left his robe. Here it is."

And then when her husband came home, she told him what happened, and Potiphar,

because this touched a very delicate spot in him, as it would in any man, burned in anger and had Joseph thrown into prison.

I feel I cannot pass by this episode without offering some comment about the decisions that you and I often make in moments of anger. You know as well as I do that such decisions are not likely to be good ones. All of us are tempted to get excited about something that touches us deeply and we often fly off the handle without considering the issues involved and the people we are dealing with. We make snap judgments, decisions in moments of wrath and then when it's all over and we've cooled off, we're sorry.

At any rate, the next time we see Joseph, he's back in prison. It must have been tough to take. Here he was being punished for something he hadn't done. But prison didn't turn out to be quite as bad as it could have been. The jailer fortunately recognized some of Joseph's good qualities, and soon he was putting responsibility into his hands. Before long he is one of the officials within the prison.

Remember how the opportunity arose for him to use his wits to interpret two dreams that two of the men in the prison had been troubled by. I'm not going into the content of those dreams, but the fact is that Joseph interpreted them correctly and in three days the men were released. Joseph himself stayed on in prison for another two years. According to the story, Pharoah himself had a dream. He dreamed that he was standing beside a river and there came out of this river seven fat, well-fed cows. And then there came seven lean, ugly, ill-fed cows and the lean cows proceeded to eat up the well-fed cows. Nobody could understand what it all meant. The Pharoah learned of Joseph's reputation for interpreting dreams and he had him brought out of prison to the palace. Joseph stood before Pharoah and when he heard the dream, he said:

"This is what it means. There will be in this land seven years of plenty represented by the seven well-fed cows, followed by seven years of famine."

He then went on to make the suggestion that Pharoah appoint some intelligent man to gather the wheat and grain while it was in abundance and store it into barns so that when the famine came the people would have enough food and to spare. The Pharoah got the point, and he looked at Joseph and said, "You're my man. You shall be my Prime Minister - my Number Two Man in the Palace". There he was - Prime Minister - 30 years old; thirteen years after he had been sold by his brothers to a passing band of merchant men, considered dead by his father, Jacob. In less than fifteen years, he had risen from less than nothing to be Prime Minister of the greatest Empire in the world.

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prepare now

#### CLOSING SECTION / REFLECTIONS

And so, as we bring this section of this second chapter to a close, one thing strikes us about this story and it is this. Wherever Joseph went, he always went to the top. When he went to Potiphar's house, he was soon put in charge of the entire household. When he went to prison, he was soon after made one of the prison keepers; and then when he went to Pharoah's palace, he was soon made part of the inner circle ruling Egypt. Every set back seemed to move him forward a little more and more. And we ask ourselves: why? How is this? How do you explain this amazing rise from rags to riches? - from the prison to the palace?

Some will say he was just one of the lucky ones. The breaks came his way. He was there at the right moment - just happened that way. He "happened" to be sold

to a man who appreciated his abilities. He "happened" to come in contact with a jailer who gave him the benefit of every opportunity. He "happened" to find himself in a situation - geographically and politically in which he could be made a Prime Minister. You may say he was just one of those persons who led a "charmed life". Luck and chance played a big part.

But, others may say "no" - it wasn't that way at all. It was Joseph himself. He made it to the top on his own. He used his head, behaved himself, made the most of every situation. He was ready when the opportunity presented itself. His own abilities, his own efforts...these are what took him to the top.

However, you'll notice that the writer of this story had a different answer to it all. To him, it wasn't luck nor was it all Joseph's doings. He put it this way, "The Lord was with Joseph. The Lord made all that he did to prosper." In other words, the writer of this story reads the whole course of human events as the movement of God in the midst of men and history, and he sees in this remarkable rise of Joseph one of God's major moves on the checkerboard of human events.

FINAL QUESTION      And so this brings us to this question. How do you explain the "ups" and the "downs" of life - your own life, the life of the world. Do you say, "just a matter of luck and chance". "My luck is rotten". "I never got the breaks, but he did!" "I got caught".

Or, do you say, "Luck doesn't play a part....it all depends on me, on myself". If you're going down instead of up, is it because you haven't given it your very best effort?

Or, as you review the matter, do you say something like this. "Far be it from me to explain this or to understand it completely - yet, somehow or other, I see the movement of God in all this pattern or tapestry of events. Things happen that I can't fully understand or explain, but somehow each chapter leads into another chapter, and the story goes on and there is through it all a thread of divine planning".

If you answer it the third way, you have a kind of security in life that other people do not have. But nobody can answer this for you, you have to do it yourself. In the next and final chapter of Joseph's story that we shall consider next Sunday, you may have some help and guidance in the answer to that greatest of all questions regarding life:

Is it an accident? - blind chance at work?  
Does it all depend on human effort?

Or, is there Someone else, Something else in the act?  
Do all things - all things - somehow work together - "for good to them that love God".      As Paul said centuries after Joseph

PRAYER      O God, who dost often lead us by way of the wilderness toward uncertain futures of which we cannot always be sure, help us to trust always in thy guiding purpose and in the plan that does rule our lives. As we face the future, give courage and strength to go forward knowing that the strength we need is the strength we will be given. Amen