

"THE MAN WHO REMAINED STEADY"

INTRODUCTION

One of the most exciting biographies in the Old Testament is the story of Joseph. Colorful, dramatic, and primitive - it has in it all of the elements of a Hitchcock mystery, all of the elements of a Horatio Alger rags to riches story. This morning we're going to be looking into the deep well of this particular story that has to do with a man's spiritual growth, and together we shall see what the reflections of this story have to tell us about ourselves, our times and the world in which we live.

JOSEPH: THE BOY

From our Sunday School days some of us have long felt a certain pity for this rather unsuspecting youth whose brothers tore away his brilliant coat of many colors and sold him to some traveling tradesmen. Chances are, however, that if we had lived as neighbors to the family of Jacob, we would not have felt as kindly toward this seventeen year old boy as we do. You'll remember that according to the record, Joseph was his father's favorite son, and he knew it. You can almost see him as the self-satisfied youth, strutting around with his coat which his father had made for him and for him only, and showing it off with a rather lofty air to his brothers. "See what our father made for me. Don't you wish you had one?" And then too there was this matter of dreams. He just couldn't keep his dreams to himself. "By the way" he would say when he was sure all of his brothers were within hearing distance, "By the way, I had a strange dream last night. It looks as if great things are ahead for me, and perhaps one of these days you'll recognize my greatness". In view of this then, it's not surprising to us then to discover that the brothers decided to take him down a peg or two.

But on the other hand, if the Joseph of these opening scenes appears to be somewhat immature, his brothers appear to be even more so. They were stodgy characters without a spark of understanding or imagination. The only possibility that occurred to them was to get rid of this annoyance that was their younger brother and when they saw an opportunity, they seized him and threw him into a wayside pit. One or two of them raised their voices in protest to an outright murder, and so when some foreign traders came along and an opportunity presented itself, they sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver.

JOSEPH IN EGYPT

Joseph traveled some distance between Canaan and Egypt, and he also traveled some distance from immaturity to maturity. The Joseph in Egypt is not a great deal older in terms of months and years, but he is a great deal older and a great deal more mature in terms of character and judgment and faith. You remember what happened in Egypt. The young man soon found himself as a servant in the home of a high ranking government official, and Joseph who was capable and alert, was soon entrusted with increasing responsibilities. Everything was going well for him until his master's wife took a romantic interest in him. And here the plot begins to thicken. To put it as delicately as I can, Potiphar's wife made some rather 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 this, not once, but the Bible tells us, she did it day after day. But Joseph stood firm and showed genuine strength of character and landed in prison as a result of his high-minded ideals.

It was while he was in prison that he developed his reputation for deciphering people's dreams. There were his fellow prisoners, the royal baker and the royal butler, and he correctly interpreted their dreams. For the royal butler it was a good interpretation, which meant early freedom. And the excited butler promised Joseph "I'll remember you when I get out of this place, and I'll tell Pharaoh all about you".....a promise which the butler promptly forgot.

That is, he forgot it until two years later when the Pharaoh himself was plagued with some dreams that neither he nor anyone else could understand - dreams about seven sleek cows and seven thin cows and seven plump ears of grain and seven blighted ears of grain. At the butler's suggestion Pharaoh sent for Joseph in prison. And Joseph interpreted the ruler's dreams as meaning that there would be seven years of plenty in Egypt followed by seven years of famine, and he advised Pharaoh to make provision in the years of plenty for the years of want.

Pharaoh was so impressed by this young Hebrew that he promptly made him second in command to himself - a position of trust in which Joseph demonstrated his ability. It was his task in the plentiful years to build up some national reserve of food, and then it was his task in the scarce years to distribute the resources. He came to be a powerful world figure and through it all he kept his perspective and his character and his faith.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

It was during the famine that Jacob and his sons, who were still in Canaan, began to feel the pinch. At Jacob's suggestion the sons, except Benjamin, set out for Egypt to see if they could buy some grain there. Of course they had to deal with Joseph who recognized them, although they had not the slightest idea in the world that this grain czar was their brother. It was a perfect setting for revenge if Joseph had been so minded, but he was bigger than that, and better than that. The brothers had grown some in the interval too - for no longer deceit and trickery, but honesty and humility marked their dealings with Joseph. The day came when Joseph could keep his secret no longer and Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph, your brother. If my father still alive?"

Upon recovering from the shock, the brothers went home again to tell the father of this incredible thing that had come to pass, and the father, Jacob, who by this time was quite old, with deep joy and gratitude in his heart, traveled to Egypt to see his son Joseph. I do not think there are many more tender scenes in the entire Bible than the meeting between the father who had given up his son for dead long ago and the son who had never forgotten his father's love.

Of course, there's a great deal more to the story than all of this. I've simply sketched it for you in the briefest way possible. Joseph was a great man, much more consistent, I think, in his greatness by our standards than Abraham, Isaac or Jacob. To be sure, he had some trouble in growing up, but what person doesn't. But when he became a man, he put away childish things, and there is practically nothing in the entire record of Joseph in Egypt that would tend to blemish his record. And this too, throughout the entire narrative, we see how great a part God played in his life. And it goes without saying that God never forgot Joseph, and this too - Joseph never forgot God. And when a man is consistently responsive to the guidance of the most high,

there is a sure steadiness and dependability that will result. Joseph remained steady. And in the time that we have left together here this morning, I should like to suggest to you the three different times when we managed to remain steady.

IN THE TIME OF TEMPTATION

In the first place, we notice that Joseph remained steady in the time of temptation. As you know, there are two major kinds of sin. There are the sins of the flesh which include lust and drunkenness and thievery and murder. And then too, there are the sins of the spirit which include pride, jealousy, greed, gossip - things of this nature. And Joseph had his bouts with both.

I suppose the temptation to enter into an alliance with Potiphar's wife must have been intense, not only because of the strong bid of the passions of the body, but also for the help that she might have given him in advancing his own ambitions in Egypt. But if ever a young man stood firm and steady by his ideals, it was Joseph. This brings me to a statement that I have put down in my notes. I hesitate to make it and I do so with some reservation. This is the comment: I think that 50% of the young men in this country, placed in the same situation that Joseph found himself in would probably have accepted the invitation. It may be an exaggeration. Perhaps the percentage is too high. 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 the people, shall we say, of one hundred years ago lived. And if a young man accepted the invitation of a woman like Potiphar's wife, he would probably reason it all out along these lines: 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 to be satisfied. And third - it would harm no one and no one need know about it, and besides (he might add), everyone's doing it and he can do things in New York City that he might not be so ready to do in his own hometown.

Not only did the sins of the flesh confront Joseph, but also the sins of the spirit. I'm sure he must have been tempted to get back at his brothers who had pushed him around; I'm sure he must have been tempted too to get back at Potiphar's wife whose hurt pride sent him to jail; I'm sure he must have been tempted to get back at the royal butler who promised to help him get out of jail, but who then proceeded to forget him for two long years. A lesser person would have gloated in torturing these people who had hurt him. But not Joseph. Not only do we admire him for his chastity, but we also admire him for his spirit of charity. In his restraint and gentleness, he foreshadowed another who "when he was reviled, he did not revile in return."

Let me just say this before we move on. These temptations that Joseph faced are as old as he is and yet as modern as we are. We find them in the most respectable places - not only the sins of the flesh, but also the sins of the spirit. Joseph stood steady in his time of temptation and because of this, he stands in judgment upon all of us. He was good because he was godly. "How can I sin against God?" asked Joseph. His morals were related to his religion. Are yours? He lived close enough to God to understand that his life and his relationship to other lives should and could be something more than pure and selfish animalism. Blessed is that person today who knows at least enough about God to sense that self-discipline is of a higher order than self-indulgence!

IN TIME OF TROUBLE

Not only was he steady in time of temptation, but he was also steady in the time of trouble. I suppose that for a while it must have seemed to Joseph that he was destined to major in disappointments and discouragements. His brothers sent him into exile. A scheming and selfish woman had him thrown into prison on false charges. A royal butler forgot all about him. But in it all and through it all, he managed to remain steady. Instead of becoming cynical and discouraged, he reaffirmed his faith that there was some purpose and good in it all. Remember what he said to his brothers near the end of the story when they were still asking for his forgiveness. "As for you" he said "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good". And here Joseph was slowly edging up to that marvellous statement declared by the Apostle Paul in later years, "And we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him!"

I'm sure there are times when we question this and perhaps find it difficult to believe, times when we actually wonder whether everything that happens is in itself good - a war, for instance, that involves a world, or an illness that lays low a promising and vital life. But at this point Joseph would offer us reassurance by telling us that in everything that happens to us, God can work for good. Jesus was handed a cross as a disgrace, but when God in Christ finished with the cross, it moved out onto a million altars, the living symbol of a shining and glorious truth and triumph. Joseph remained steady in his time of trouble, in his time of discouragement always believing that God would bring him through it. And he did!

IN TIME OF TRIUMPH

And so this prepares us then for the third and final point of this sermon. Not only did he remain steady in the time of trouble and in the time of temptation, but he also remained steady in the time of triumph. When Pharaoh paid Joseph a compliment on his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph answered quite casually, "It is not in me, God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer". He didn't take credit for what he did. He gave the credit to God. And then too when Joseph made himself known to his brothers, he sent this message with them back to his father, "God has made me Lord of it all in Egypt". Once again, he didn't take credit for it; he gave the credit to God. Nor were these just some sweet and sanctimonious words. They were the sincere expression of an inner conviction that God had given him whatever ability he had, and whatever successes might come to him was not due to his glory, but to the glory of God, the Father!

Someone recently made this observation "When a man is elected a Bishop, he never remains the same. Either he grows or he swells." The description holds good for more than a bishop. When anyone is given honors, when anyone is entrusted with new and greater responsibilities - in either his work, his church or his community, he either grows or he swells. It reminds me of a story about a young minister who was called to one of the prestige pulpits, a great church, in our nation's capital. He was quite proud of his attainment. His wife and his mother attended the installation service. The church was filled for the occasion. Picture the procession - the long and colorful procession that slowly began to move up the center aisle of this great church. The young minister brought up the rear. He happened to spot his wife sitting at the end of a pew. As he passed by, he reached out and pinched her arm and whispered in her ear, "How'm I doing, baby?" But then after he gotten by, he discovered to his great consternation that the woman he had pinched, wasn't his wife after all, but one of his new parishoners.

We smile at the story, and it reminds us that boastful vanity is always foreign to the Christian spirit. In reference to all attainments, the Christian remembers the spirit of Christ and is humbled by it.

Perhaps you remember that line from one of Kipling's poems, a line that expresses a high and lofty ideal, a line that we learned in the days of our youth:

"If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster,
And treat those two impostors just the same...."

I would like to broaden the line so as to make it include all three things that we've been thinking about here this morning. If you can meet with temptation, with trouble and with triumph, and treat those three impostors just the same.... Our Lord did. On Palm Sunday he could hear the cheers without its turning his head. And on Good Friday, he could hear the jeers without its turning his soul. And because of this, we are under orders to follow faithfully in his steps.

LET US PRAY

We are thankful for the spirit that was in thy servant Joseph, the spirit that was made manifest in all of its fullness in thy Son, Jesus. May that same spirit now be in us as we depart from this place to return to those busy places from whence we this day have come. Amen.