

"TALL MAN ABOVE THE FOG....JOSEPH"

INTRODUCTION Of all the biographies in the Old Testament, there is none more exciting than the story of Joseph. Here one finds a bit of a mystery story, a rags to riches story, and an interesting account of a man's spiritual growth - all wrapped up in one. The story of Joseph as it is found in the last fourteen Chapters of Genesis is one of our favorites; it has great appeal. Let's review it together this morning...and see what lessons it has.

EARLY YEARS From our Sunday School days some of us have always felt a certain pity for this 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 and his sons, we should not have felt as kindly toward the seventeen year old who was Joseph. According to the record, Joseph was his father's favorite and he knew it. You can almost picture him as a self-satisfied youth, strutting around with the coat which his father had made for him and for him only, and showing it off to the brothers with a lofty, "See what our father made for me. Don't you wish you had one, too?" And there was the matter of the dreams. "By the way" he would say when he was sure all the brothers were within hearing distance, "I had a strange dream last night. It looks as if great things were ahead for me, and one of these days you'll recognize greatness when you see it!" It's no wonder that his brothers felt compelled to bring Joseph down to size.

But if the Joseph of the opening scene appears immature, his brothers appear even more so. They were stodgy...without a spark of understanding or imagination. The only possibility that occurred to them was to get rid of this young annoyance and when they saw the opportunity, they seized him and threw him into a wayside pit. One or two of them raised their voices against outright murder and so when some foreign traders came along an opportunity presented itself and the brothers sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver. I wondered - as I read the story again - did it occur to them as the caravan faded into the distance that they really hadn't solved anything. What would they tell Jacob? After thinking it over, they concocted the lie about a wild beast who had torn Joseph to pieces. So readily in life does one sin invite another to keep it company. Deceit and cover-up lead easily to more deceit and more cover-up.

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 so much older in months and years, but he is more mature in his character and judgement and faith. Joseph in Egypt is a veritable Horatio Alger story. The young man found himself a servant in the home of a high-ranking government official and Joseph - quick and capable - was soon entrusted with added responsibility. Everything was going along well for him until his master's wife took a bit of a romantic interest in him. And here the plot begins to thicken. Potiphar's wife one day 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 he 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. He resisted the temptation to mess around with Potiphar's wife.

It was in prison that he developed his reputation for deciphering the dreams of people. There were his fellow prisoners - the royal baker and royal butler, and he correctly interpreted their dreams for them. For the 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 will tell the Pharoah about you" - a promise he soon forgot.

Forgot, that is, until two years later when Pharoah himself was plagued with some dreams that neither he nor anyone else in the kingdom 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, Pharoah sent for Joseph in prison. And Joseph interpreted the ruler's dreams as meaning that there would be seven years of plenty in Egypt and seven years of famine, and he advised the Pharoah to make provision in the years of plenty for the years of want.

Now the Pharoah was so impressed by this young Hebrew that he promptly made him the number two man in the land - a position of great trust in which Joseph readily demonstrated his ability. It was his task in the plentiful years to build up some national reserves of food, and then it was his job in the lean years to distribute the reserves. He grew to be a powerful world figure, and through it all he kept his perspective, his faith, his character, his equilibrium.

REUNION 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 long lost brother. What a setting for revenge, if Joseph had been so-minded. But he was bigger and better than that. The brothers had matured some in the interval, too, for no longer deceit and trickery marked their dealings but honesty and humility. The day came when Joseph could keep his secret no longer. And so we read, "And Joseph said to his brother, 'I am Joseph; is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence."

As quickly as they could, the brothers went home again to tell the father of this incredible thing, and then they took the old man from his home on what would have been a hazardous trip except for the wellspring of joy and of gratitude which sustained him. That is a deeply moving and touching scene between the father who had given up his son for dead and the son who had never forgotten a father's love. What satisfaction there must have been in that valedictory message of Jacob. "Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive".

Joseph was a great man - more consistent in his greatness by our standards than Abraham, or Issac, or Jacob. He had some trouble growing up, partly because he was surrounded by an over-protective father and by some over-jealous brothers. But when he became a man, he put away childish things, and there's practically nothing that blemishes the record of Joseph in Egypt. Through all of the record you see how great a part God was playing in his life. It goes without saying that God never forgot Joseph, but it needs to be said that Joseph seldom forgot God. And when a man is consistently responsive to the guidance of the most high, there is a sure steadiness and a rock-like dependability that will result. Let's consider some of the ways in which Joseph revealed the consequences of his faith and his relationship with God. Three ways....touch on each briefly.

TEMPTATION / STEADY In the first place, he was steady in the time of temptation. There are two major kinds of sin - sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit - and Joseph had his bouts with both.

The temptation to enter into an alliance with Potiphar's wife must have been intense....not only because of the bid to the passions of the body, but also for the help that this woman might have given him in advancing his own ambitions in Egypt. But if ever a young man stood by his ideals, it was Joseph. In a time of testing and great temptation, his moral reserves were strong.

And later on, the sins of the spirit tried to ambush him. He had opportunity to eke out his revenge on his brothers who had pushed him around. A lesser person would have gloated in torturing the brothers who had tortured him. But again, there was God - and the spirit of God was so much in Joseph that bitterness and littleness could not get inside the door and do their work.

Now the kinds of temptations that Joseph faced are as old as he is and yet as modern as we are. Potiphar's wife is found in the most respectable places. "Let yourself go" is the slogan of her cult. "Express yourself. Have done with the old restraints" is the underlying emphasis ~~of the new morality~~. And yet, after all these years there is still Joseph - that young person or that adult who knows at least enough of God to sense that self-discipline is of a higher order than self-indulgence. His morals were related to his religious faith. "How can I sin against God" asked Joseph in his dilemma. He lived close enough to God to understand that his life and his relationships to others should and could be something more than selfish animalism.

But some who will applaud Joseph for his chastity will completely miss the point of his charity. For some, who get along fairly well in withstanding the sins of the flesh become the worst offenders in the sins of the spirit. Respectable people can become mean, disagreeable, petty, gossipy and vindictive. So Joseph stands in judgment on us there, too. He had reason, if reason were the ultimate appeal, to strike back at his brothers, who had betrayed him; at Potiphar's wife, whose hurt pride landed him in jail; at the royal butler, who forgot his promise to help Joseph get out of jail. But in his restraint and gentleness, he foreshadowed another who "when He was reviled, He did not revile in return".

Joseph stands out as a man of God. When we say "man of God" what qualities do we have in mind? Not brilliance, necessarily. Not facilities with lofty, righteous words, and not even persistent devotion to duty. ~~It is~~ not more a quality of the spirit for which a person is most remembered....a patience and a persistence in loving people that is but an imperfect miniature of the love of God for us? In the time of testing, Joseph lived close enough to the Great Original he knew, and others knew - "whose he was and whom he served".

TROUBLE - STEADY

Again, see that Joseph was steady in the time of trouble. For a while it must have seemed to Joseph that he was to major in spoiled dreams and thwarted hopes. His brothers sent him into exile in Egypt. A scheming, treacherous woman had him imprisoned on false charges. A royal butler might have helped him, but forget. Chances are - in his shoes - we would have become somewhat cynical and complaining. Oh, the injustice of it all. Why should this happen to us. But it seems that Joseph was not so intent upon asking questions as he was upon affirming faith that there was a purpose and good in it all.

Remember what he said to his brothers near the very end of his life when they were still asking him for forgiveness. "As for you" he said, "you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good". It comes close to what Paul was to say in other times and in other pages, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him".

Some of us would find it impossible to affirm that everything that happens to us in itself is good - a sickness that lays low a promising life, a war that involves the world. Some of us would find it impossible to affirm that everything that happens to us is in itself the direct will of God. Some of it is our own fault, some due to human ignorance, some just a plain mystery. But I believe that all of us would affirm with Paul that in everything that happens to us, God can work for good. Joseph, you see, was edging up to this New Testament view that trouble is a trust - not to be explained, not to be re-sented, but with God's help - to be redeemed.

Trouble does different things to different people. With some it cracks faith and leads to despair and cynicism. With others it ennobles faith and leads to steadiness and strength. This word that is a hint in Joseph's story became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus, and we Christians should know better than Joseph ever could that trouble, rightly met, can add a dimension to life and faith that would never be there otherwise.

TRIUMPH - STEADY In the third place, notice that Joseph was steady in the time of triumph. When Pharaoh paid Joseph a compliment on his ability to interpret dreams, he answered quite casually, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer". When Joseph made himself known to his brothers, he sent this message to his father, "God has made me Lord of all Egypt. It was a sincere expression of an inner conviction that God had given him whatever ability he had, and that whatever success might come to him was not to his glory, but to the glory of God.

Someone made this observation: "When a man is elected bishop, he never remains the same. Either he grows or he swells". The description holds good for more than a bishop. When anyone is entrusted with new responsibility, in his school or work, church or community, he either grows or swells.

Kipling expressed a high, almost impossible ideal in his words that some of us learned in our youth:

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

Our Lord did it. On Palm Sunday He could hear the cheers without its turning his head. On Good Friday He could hear the jeers without its turning his soul. If you can meet with temptation, with trouble, with triumph - and treat those three impostors just the same. Yes - one did - even Jesus - and because of His life, death and resurrection, we are under orders and under grace to follow in His steps.

Joseph - the tall man above the fog. Steady - in time of temptation, in time of trouble, in time of triumph. A great story and a great example even to us today.

LET US PRAY Thankful we are, O God, for this great spirit that was in thy servant Joseph - a spirit that was manifest in all of its fullness in Jesus. May something of that spirit be in each of us that we too may remain steady as we face trouble, temptation, triumph. Amen.