

"THE STORY OF JOSEPH"

INTRODUCTION

Of all the biographies in the Old Testament, there is none more exciting than the story of Joseph. ~~Here are a mystery story, a rags-to-riches story, and a story about a man's spiritual growth, all wrapped up in one. I do not know where in all of literature you will find a story charged with more interest and appeal than the story of Joseph in the last fourteen chapters of the Book of Genesis.~~

DEVELOPMENT

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. For 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?" And there was the matter of the dreams. "By the way" he would say when he was sure all the brothers were within hearing, "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". Do you wonder that the brothers decided that they needed 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 characters without a spark of understanding or imagination. The only possibility that occurred to them was to get rid of the annoyance that was their younger brother, 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. Did it occur to them, as the caravan faded into distance, that they hadn't really solved anything? Now 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 does one sin invite another to keep it company.

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 so much more mature in character and judgment and faith. You remember that the story of Joseph in Egypt is a veritable Horatio Alger story. The youth found himself an servant in the home of a high-ranking official of the Egyptian government, and Joseph, who was quick and capable, soon was entrusted with increasing responsibilities. Everything was going along well for him until his master's wife took a romantic interest in him. 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 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.

It 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 them. 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 tell Pharaoh about you" - a promise which the butler promptly 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 followed by seven years of famine, and he advised Pharoah to make provision in the years of plenty for the years of want.

Pharoah was so impressed by this young Hebrew that he promptly made him second in command to himself - a position of 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 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.

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 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 hom again to tell the father of the almost incredible word, and then they took the very old man from his home on what would have been a hazardous trip except for the wellspring of joy and gratitude which sustained him. I do not think there are any more touching scenes in the Bible than that description of the meeting 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 overprotective father and by some overjealous brothers. But when he became a man, he put away childish things, and there is practically nothing that blemishes the record of Joseph in Egypt. Through all of the record you see how great a part God played in his life. It goes without saying that God never forgot Joseph, but it need 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 rock-like dependability that will result. Notice now some of the ways in which Joseph revealed the consequences of his faith and his relationship with God.

STEADY IN THE TIME OF TEMPTATION

In the first place, Joseph was steady in the time of temptation. There are two major kinds of sin - sins of the flesh (which include lust and drunkenness and thievery and murder) and sins of the spirit (which include vengeance and pride and jealousy and petulance). 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. He had the moral reserves that were required in a time of testing.

Later on, the sins of the spirit tried to ambush him. He had every 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 too - 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. In the final analysis Joseph was good because he was godly. His morals were related to his religion. "How can I sin against God?" he asked in his dilemma. He lived close enough to God to understand that his life and his relationship to other lives should and could be something more than selfish animalism.

But some people 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 and disagreeable and gossipy and petty and vindictive. So Joseph stands in judgment on us there too. He had ever reason, if reason were the ultimate appeal, to strike back at his brothers, who betrayed him; at Potiphar's wife, whose hurt pride landed him in jail; at the royal butler, who forgot his promise to help Joseph 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 that a person is a "man of God" what qualities do we have most in mind? Not brilliance, necessarily. Not facilities with lofty, righteous words, necessarily. Not persistent devotion to duty, even. Is it 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".

STEADY IN THE TIME OF TROUBLE

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 disappointments and blasted hopes. His brothers sent him into exile in Egypt. A scheming woman had him imprisoned on false charges. A royal butler who might have helped him forgot him. If you or I had been Joseph, would we not tend to become cynical and complaining at the massive injustice of it all. Why should this happen to us. Why, indeed? But it seems that Joseph was not so intent upon asking questions as he was upon affirming faith that there was 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".

Now for the Old Testament, that comes remarkably close to the New Testament faith which Paul declared: "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 - the sickness that lays low a promising, vital life, a war that involves a 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 of it is our own ignorance - and some of it is just plain mystery. But

some of us would affirm with Paul that in everything that happens to us, God can work for good. Joseph was edging up to this New Testament view that trouble is a trust, not to be explained, not to be resented, but to be redeemed. So Jesus was handed the cross as a disgrace, but when God in Christ finished with the cross, it moved out on to a million altars, a shining triumph.

All about us today, trouble is doing different things to different people. With some it cracks faith and leads to cynicism and despair, while with others it ennobles faith and leads to steadiness and strength. The word that is a hint in Joseph 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 faith and life that would never be there otherwise.

STEADY IN THE TIME OF TRIUMPH And now will you notice that Joseph was 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". When Joseph made himself known to his brothers, he sent this message to his father, "God has made me Lord of all Egypt". Nor were these just sanctimonious words. They were the 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 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 entrusted with new responsibility, in either his school or his work, his community or his church, he grows or he swells. When anyone comes upon new advantage, new opportunities, new success, either he grows or he 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, and trouble, and triumph - and treat those three impostors just the same. Yes, one did - even Jesus - and because of his life and death and resurrection, we are under orders and under grace to follow in his steps.

LET US PRAY We are thankful, O God, for the spirit that was in thy servant Joseph, a spirit that was manifest in all of its fullness in Christ Jesus. May something of that spirit now be in us as we depart from this place, that we, too, in our lives may remain steady in times of temptation, times of trouble, and in times of triumph. Amen

The story of Joseph is the story of a man who long ago remained steady - steady in the time of temptation, trouble and triumph.