

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 18 January 2004

No. T0301

Speaker: Mr. Peter Ollerhead

Lessons from the life of Joseph: God is for us - Genesis 40 and 41

Welcome to this morning's talk and, if you don't think it's too late, may I wish all of you the Lord's richest blessing in this New Year. None of us know what the year will bring but may the peace of God dwell in your heart whatever the circumstances.

Our subject for today is especially pertinent because it is entitled, 'God is for us'. I have no doubt that there will be days or events this year, when at first sight such a statement will seem anything but true. Today's talk is the third one of six about the life of Joseph. The narrative can be read in Genesis 40-41, yet I would suggest that most of our fellow citizens know it best through listening and watching Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, '*Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*'. The school, where I was a teacher, performed it for an end of term concert some twenty years ago. I am still moved when I play a recording of it and listen to a scally of a boy aged about ten singing '*Any Dream Will Do*'.

Joseph was one of the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob. This made him a great grandson of Abraham, a man noted in Scripture for his great faith. This was a quality that Joseph needed, as we shall see, but it was something he had to own for himself. Neither he nor we, can inherit the faith of someone else. We might receive our looks, temperament and even wealth from our parents, but faith must be our own.

Last week we left Joseph in an Egyptian prison. He was incarcerated there through being falsely accused. What a catalogue of severe trials had invaded Joseph's pathway! Young man though he was, he had experienced the lies and betrayal of his brothers who willed his death, relenting at the last moment but only to sell him to some travelling slave traders. Nothing more than a piece of human merchandise, he was sold in the slave market to an officer of Pharaoh's guard. At this stage Joseph must have thought that things could go no worse. At first that might have seemed the case for, once ensconced in his new quarters, he was given responsibility for overseeing the household. Genesis 39:4 says it was because he found grace or favour in the eyes of his master.

Unfortunately for Joseph, things did get worse when the officer's wife falsely accused him. His subservient position in the household meant that he could not really defend himself, so he was thrown into the jailhouse not knowing when, or if, he would ever get out. 39:21 puts a slant on this that Joseph would have found hard to accept if he had lost his faith. I quote the verse from the Authorised, or King James, version of Scripture: "But the LORD was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison." Joseph could not know that God was with him other than by exercising faith. His immediate circumstances hardly informed him of that truth. The events of his past few years seemed to suggest anything but the fact that God was with him.

We have to take notice of the predicament that Joseph found himself in through no fault of his own. We, too, might suffer a series of catastrophic events. To explain why such things happen is, to my mind, impossible if we wish to equate them with justice or righteousness. The whole problem of human suffering and seemingly random actions inflicting pain or injustice upon people has puzzled the theologians and thinkers of this world for many, many years. I doubt if there is a perfectly acceptable answer that all people would accept. The man or woman of faith does not have an answer as Yancey points out in his book, '*Reaching for the Invisible God*', where he writes that one cannot learn from Jesus why bad things occur. Why an avalanche or flood decimates one town and not its neighbour? Why leukaemia strikes one child and not another? He goes on to write that we can learn how God feels about such tragedies. Look at how Jesus responds to the sisters of His good friend, Lazarus, or to a widow who has just lost her only son, or a leprosy victim standing friendless outside the town gates. Jesus gives God a face, and that face is streaked with tears.

After that digression, we must now return to Joseph to see how God being with him helped him in the prison. We can see from the closing verses of chapter 39 that Joseph was placed in a position of responsibility by the keeper of the prison. It is obvious that Joseph did not exhibit a mean or peevish spirit. Despite the injustice, he seems to have accepted his lot with good grace. Some might suggest that this was his natural temperament coming out, but compare his attitude in the prison with his privileged boyhood, where it could be said that he displayed features of a selfish, or at least an unthinking, attitude. He had learned patience and fortitude somewhere. As the prayer book version of

Psalm 105 puts it, these were the years when iron entered the soul of Joseph. He came out a different man than he went in.

This, I would suggest, is an area where the Christian can exclaim with confidence that suffering, when it happens to him or her, can be a positive experience. What can we learn of God and His grace as we go through the fire of suffering? A hymn writer of the nineteenth century wrote the following words, which I find helpful.

*In the desert God will teach thee
What the God that thou hast found,
Patient, gracious, powerful, holy;
All His grace shall there abound.*

What can we know of God as we journey through life? I believe that the greatest privilege granted to us is that we have the secret of God revealed to us whilst in mortal flesh. We can know God in a particular way as we journey, by faith, through the trials and general experiences of life. To know Him in this way is far different from the way that we shall know Him in the boundless ages of eternity. No one seeks sufferings and trials, but when they come, as come they will, to a greater or lesser degree, God will supply the needed grace if we will let Him. At such a time we shall know that we are never forgotten. All this is part of the life of faith.

The Israelite saw God's hand in his daily experience as much as anywhere. God revealed Himself to them in history, but they had to have the faith to see that. We must remember that Joseph had no Scriptures to guide or comfort him. He had the dreams of his early years when he saw himself as exalted, with his brethren, and even his father bowing down to him. This was God's promise for his future. It seems to me that Joseph was confident that one day the dreams would be fulfilled. This had been God informing him. However painful or humiliating the years of slavery and imprisonment were, they were but an interlude in his journey to fame and power.

Chapter 40 is concerned with the dreams of two fellow prisoners. The world of the pyramid builders was far more concerned with dreams than we are. It was evident from the faces of the two Egyptians imprisoned with Joseph that they were disturbed. Their whole demeanour betrayed their gloom and misery because they were not able to ascertain any meaning for these night visions. Joseph, on hearing the narrative of the dreams, was able to interpret to the delight of the butler and the dismay of the baker. One was restored to his former position whilst the other went to the scaffold. My point here is written for us in 40:8: "And they said unto him, We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me them, I pray you."

Again 41:15-16 follow the same thought: "And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it: and I have heard say of thee, that thou canst understand a dream to interpret it. And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace." In his dealings with the butler and the baker, Joseph would receive confirmation that God would equip him to interpret the dreams of others, however difficult it might seem at first glance. This is not to say that God usually works in such mysterious ways nowadays. We have the Spirit of God indwelling each believer and we have the Scriptures in our own tongue.

I have no doubt that God could touch the lives of people today in a variety of ways, yet I am firmly of the opinion that His complete and final revelation of Himself is in Christ. As the apostle John writes in John 16:13-15. "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you." This makes it plain that the primary work of the Spirit is to make Christ known to the believer. Some of the most inspiring words in Scripture echo this thought. They are found in Philippians 3. There he makes the awe-inspiring claim that he can know Christ. To my mind that is the most precious experience that a mortal can ever attain to. To know the eternal Son of the living God in the power of the endless life is beyond price. Paul claimed to have suffered the loss of all things, but the excellency of the knowledge of Christ made all things as nothing.

We have neglected our narrative somewhat, so we must return to it and concentrate upon chapter 41. Before we do so, however, please notice the closing verse of chapter 40. Here it says, "Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him."

The action, or non-action, of the butler left Joseph more bereft than ever. He must have hoped that the butler, being restored to the palace, was his way of escape. So it proved, but not for some considerable time. Let me remind you that our title for this morning's talk is 'God is for us'. Around thirteen years had passed since Joseph had been sold into slavery. At times it must have hung heavy upon Joseph, for he was conscious of the injustice of his situation. If anyone had the right to say that he was forgotten of God, then that person must be Joseph.

The wording of 41:1 seems to suggest that the time for Joseph's advancement had arrived. I quote the whole verse: "And it came to pass at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh dreamed: and, behold, he stood by the river." It is the phrase, 'two full years', that attracts my attention. We cannot rush God. He will work His purposes out as He wills. It was when the fullness of the time was come that God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. At least, that is what Paul wrote in Galatians 4:4-5.

The first inkling Joseph had, that his position was about to change was when those in charge of the prison brought him out for a shave and a change of clothes as they passed on the startling message that Pharaoh wanted to see him. If you ever went to Sunday School, then the rest of the story is well known to you. Joseph interpreted the two dreams of Pharaoh as well as suggesting the means whereby Egypt could be saved from the effects of a prolonged and severe famine.

For the whole of the seven years, when the harvests were good, he was placed in overall charge of ensuring that 20% of each year's harvest was stored safely. He had proposed that a discreet and wise man should be set over the whole land of Egypt. Joseph was that man for, as Pharaoh, with great perspicacity, remarked, they wanted, 'a man in whom the Spirit of God is.' This is noted for us in 41:38. Consequently, Joseph was elevated to second only to Pharaoh.

His boyhood dreams were now about to be realised, for back in Canaan his father and brothers needed grain. To cut the narrative to the bone, we can say that they came to Egypt to buy corn, and whilst doing so, bowed to the unrecognised Joseph. There is much in this story that calls out to the preacher to trace the figure of the Lord Jesus in the shadowy outline of Joseph. Unfortunately, much as I would desire to do this, I must stick to my title of 'God is for us.' Perhaps we shall have time to add a comment or two about Joseph as a picture of the Lord.

The chapter ends with Jacob and his sons, with their wives and offspring, journeying to Egypt to share in the fame and comfort that Joseph had secured. When the time arrived, in the lives of Joseph's brethren, for them to bow to Joseph, as his dream foretold, it did not bring humiliation as they had feared. Rather, as we have seen, did it bring a life free from famine and hunger.

In Acts 7:9-10, we can read a New Testament comment that summarises the life of Joseph: "And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him, and delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house." This mentions an important fact about the life of Joseph that we often miss. We are apt to think that God is only with us when good things happen to us. The passage, quoted above, points out that God was with Joseph during his years in Potiphar's house and in the prison house. It is not that God is absent from the life of the believer when calamity arrives and present in the good years. The Bible teaches us that God is for us at all times!

We know that ultimately we shall triumph, because Christ has triumphed over death and the grave, and has entered into heaven as the forerunner for all that believe in Him. More than that, we know that He has released the power of the endless life for His followers to enjoy here and now. We must never forget Paul's great shout of triumph, recorded for us in Philippians 1:21. "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." This is not deferred life, for he claims later in that letter that to know Christ is the greatest thing that has happened to him in the whole of his life.

Some might use the old phrase and say that this is 'pie in the sky when we die', but Paul would claim that the pie could be eaten and enjoyed now, as well as in a future life. Thus, I would suggest that in all of life's experiences we know that God is for us. This is not to say that every day is a barrel of laughs. We are subject to ill health, unemployment and accidents just the same as everyone else. We should not expect to be insulated from the tribulations of life, but I say again that we ought to be able to say with confidence that God is for us.

My reason for this is that God revealed Himself in Christ to show His love to the world. Whatever happens in my life that truth stands supreme. Nothing can alter the fact that God is a God of love. His love has proved supreme in the face of all odds. This ought to inform and strengthen our spiritual resolve. Bunyan touches on this in his great hymn.

*"Who so beset him round
With dismal stories,
Do but themselves confound
His strength the more is.
No foes shall stay his might,
Though he with giants fight:
He will make good his right
To be a pilgrim."*

I think that this verse states more succinctly just what I am trying to say.

I should now like, in the few minutes remaining to us, to use the narrative of Joseph's exaltation to remind us of the greater exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. His cry of abandonment from the cross seems to suggest that God was not for Him but had 'turned His face away' as a modern hymn puts it. The four Gospels do not end with the grave but with the resurrection! We can read in Psalm 16:10-11, "For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore." Peter used these verses in his highly charged sermon preached after the first Whitsun and applied them to the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus was not dead, but risen from amongst the dead, demonstrating for all time the power and victory of God over the grave. The New Testament is full of this truth along with the desire of the Lord for His followers to share the blessings of the new life. Never again ought we to think that God is not for us. Rather, we can say with Paul, that in all things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

I shall close this talk about God being for us, by quoting the rest of that passage in Romans 8:38-39: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

May we all know the reality of that in our everyday lives!

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.