

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 23 August 2009

No. T0587

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Lessons on the Life of Joseph: Joseph in Prison

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today* where we are continuing our series on Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob, whom we read about in the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible. As this is the third talk in the series, we have already learned quite a lot about Joseph and his brothers. Can I remind you that previously we have spoken about Joseph's dreams, when he wore his special coat at home with his brothers, while last week we considered some verses from Genesis 39, when Joseph was sold as a slave into Potiphar's house where, owing to no fault of his own, he ended up in prison? This is where we find him as we start this week's study. If you are tracing the story in your Bible you will need to have it open at Chapter 39, though, as usual, we shall be referring to other places in Scripture, besides the book of Genesis.

As we look at these passages together I wish, eventually, to pursue two aspects: firstly we shall see how Joseph behaved, despite having been unjustly imprisoned and then, for a few minutes, towards the end of our study, to consider Joseph as a figure of the Lord Jesus. If you are not used to using Scripture to see figures and truth within the stories, then I trust that you will still continue to listen because I am convinced that such a method can illustrate, in a very clear way, some of the glories and greatness of the Lord Jesus.

Let us now turn to Genesis 39:20 to 23. I am reading from the King James Authorised Version: "And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were bound: and he was there in prison. But the LORD was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it. The keeper of the prison looked not to any thing that was under his hand: because the LORD was with him, and that which he did, the LORD made it to prosper."

From this rather long quotation, I wish to highlight the fact that God was with Joseph, even in these desperate circumstances. Twice this is repeated in the passage we have just quoted. Joseph had now reached an extremely low status compared with his life in Canaan. One would have thought that he couldn't reach a lower depth than being sold as a slave, yet being falsely accused and thrown into prison, with no prospect of release, is surely a worse fate than a house slave for Potiphar. We shall see that there seemed no prospect of him ever enjoying the light of day again, so he could have sunk lower and lower into one long bout of depression and lethargy.

Instead, as we have read, God was with Joseph, even in such a place, which, surely, is a pointer for hope to each one of us this morning. Though we might sometimes consider ourselves alone and forgotten of God, if we are true believers then the famous text from Hebrews 13:5, must assure us of God's presence. To refresh your memory I will repeat this short Scripture: "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

It requires faith to utter such words when circumstances seem to combine against us. We must, however, always remember that the Christian life is a life of faith. God has promised the believer His presence, so we have to take God at His word. As the LORD was with Joseph, so the Lord Jesus will be with us all the days of our life.

We might think that the young man from Canaan who, at one time, seemed to have so much going for him, could not suffer any further blows. If we did, the next chapter of the story will soon disillusion us of such a view. Joseph, as we heard last week, had been betrayed by his brothers and sold to slave traders. Then, after obtaining a position of trust as a house slave, his world came crashing down again when he was unjustly incarcerated in the king's prison. Now Joseph has to learn that a companion in the gaol, whom he had befriended, did not lift a finger to secure his release, when he himself was restored to the position of influence and prestige, in Pharaoh's palace. The butler's forgetfulness meant Joseph languishing, for a further two years, in the dank hole called the king's prison.

In Psalm 105:17-19, the writer makes some interesting and instructive remarks about Joseph's time in the jailhouse: "He sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold as a servant, whose feet they hurt with fetters; he was laid in iron, until the time that his word came; the word of the LORD tested him. The king sent and loosed him, even the ruler of the people, and let him go free."

Such verses make clear that this experience severely tested Joseph's confidence in the message of the dreams he had when a mere lad; dreams that prophesied a day would dawn when his brothers would bow down before him, in acknowledgement of his greatness. His faith in the word of the LORD was tried to the uttermost, while confined in the gloom of that Egyptian dungeon. Never let us think that such men, as Joseph, never wondered how their prayers would be answered. How easy it is to be a believer when everything is working out to our advantage! Joseph and the other warriors for the faith are examples that surround us for our encouragement, as the Hebrews 11 makes plain.

As the details of Joseph's imprisonment are recounted in Genesis 40, and the story is too long for us to read all of it, I must condense it to its bare bones. Amongst Joseph's fellow inmates were two former employees of Pharaoh's household, namely a butler and a baker. One morning Joseph noticed that they were both more dejected than usual. On enquiring for the reason, he was told that they had both been dreaming and could not fathom any meaning from the details of their night visions. As from an early age Joseph had been able to interpret dreams, he felt competent to help the unhappy men, though for one of them it only meant more depression, as he was told that he would be executed in three days time.

The words of the Bible tell the reaction of the other man to Joseph's explanation of the features of his dream, which concerned a vine with three branches holding grapes being pressed into a cup. The following account is contained in Genesis 40:12-15: "And Joseph said unto him, This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days: yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head, and restore thee unto thy place: and thou shalt deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou wast his butler. But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house: for indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews: and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon."

Notice that Joseph did not utter recriminations against his brothers, or rail violently against Potiphar's wife. He simply said that he had been stolen away from the land of the Hebrews and had not done anything that they should place him in gaol. One of my favourite writers commented on this incident in the following words: "In all the discipline of life it is of the utmost importance to see but one ordaining overruling will. It is hard to suffer wrong at the hands of man ... but there is a truer and more restful view, to consider all things under the law and rule of God; so that though events come to us through the spite of our fellows yet they have had to pass through the Divine Presence that has transformed them into His own sweet will for us."

So, like Joseph, we must not be surprised if dark times prove to be our lot, either in our outward life or inner experience. We must also remember that Joseph was suffering because of his moral excellence, when he fled from Potiphar's wife as she tried to tempt him to sin. Discomfort and distress, brought on by our own sinful or foolish behaviour, cannot be equated as suffering for the testimony of the Lord, as experienced by Paul and the other apostles.

Questions are sometimes asked as to why the features of the dreams are given with so much precise detail. Obviously, as we shall see later, the skill of Joseph in discerning the meaning of the dreams is recalled by the butler when Pharaoh was in need of such help. There is, I am convinced, a deeper more pertinent reason that the dreams are portrayed in such detail. Joseph is the one person who on every occasion, when others are baffled, is able to give a complete answer. Genesis 40:8 helps us to understand how Joseph was able to do this: "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."

Joseph demonstrates his God-given ability in the darkest of places and under the most depressing of circumstances. One only has to count the number of chapters devoted to the story of Joseph, in the book of Genesis, to realise that we are being introduced to an important person in Scripture. The features added to his portrait in the chapters we have before us this morning have Pharaoh tracing the source of Joseph's discernment back to its source, as we can read in Genesis 41:38-39: "And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is? And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, Forasmuch as God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art."

And there we have it. Joseph stands as an archetypal, or prototype, leader of the people of God having wisdom, discretion and the Spirit of God.

At this point, we may well ask again about our part in all of this. What has it to do with me? I must emphasise, at this point, that I do not think that interpreting dreams is the normal occupation of a Christian today. What I do wish to emphasise for our learning is Joseph's consistent trust in God, even when things were very difficult and discouraging, along with his consistent use of his God given ability to interpret dreams. We live by faith, which should mean that we reach beyond the immediate, as the Apostle Peter writes 2 Peter 1:9, where he poses the possibility of some

Christians being blind and unable to see afar off. Secondly, I suggest that that we ought to use those gifts God has given to us in the same willing way that Joseph did.

I am reminded of an old man whom I met many years ago. I happened to be fishing in a canal, in the heart of the country, many miles from the nearest town. Suddenly, I was aware of a man, who looked to be in his eighties, walking along the path at the side of the canal talking to the occasional fisherman. Eventually, he reached me and after a few words about my success, or rather lack of it, after telling me a little about his early life and his conversion, he offered me a tract. On enquiring how he came to be on the canal-side, he said that he lived in a care home about two miles away. So great was his desire to serve the Lord, that he walked many miles a day to engage people in conversation about Christianity.

It might be claimed that this is service and not gift, but if you had met him you would have recognised that his open friendliness and ease of manner was not something that we all have. For myself, I think that if I live into my eighties, and move into a care-home, I doubt whether I would be motivated to walk the many miles that he did. He used his gift in the service of the Lord. May we all be as willing as that old man whose name I never learned! I do know, however, that by now he will be at home with the Lord he served so faithfully.

We must continue with the story of Joseph in prison, as time is passing quickly and, as I said earlier, I want to reserve the last few minutes to deal with Joseph as a figure of the Lord Jesus. Before I do, let us see how God answered Joseph's unswerving trust by bringing him out of the prison. When the butler returned to his duties in Pharaoh's palace, he forgot all about the Hebrew prisoner who had interpreted his dream, until the time when the Egyptian monarch railed against his wise men, when they were unable to explain unto him the meaning of his dreams. Telling Pharaoh how Joseph had so accurately foretold events from his, and the baker's dreams, meant that Joseph was quickly brought before the Egyptian king. On hearing the account of the seven fat cows being eaten by the seven thin cows, Joseph warned of an impending severe famine after seven years of good harvests.

Owing to this success, Joseph was freed permanently from prison to be promoted to second in the land, under Pharaoh. Next week you will hear how Joseph was given the task of organising a scheme of rationing, during the years of plenty, to enable food to be available when the famine arrived. Marriage, a home, riches and fame were part of his reward for faithfully following God. Later, his brothers came to dwell in Egypt, along with his father, meaning relationships broken many years before were restored. Again, I must emphasise that, whereas, I do not believe that faithfulness to the Lord will bring us fame and fortune in this world, I do maintain that we will enjoy His blessing and presence.

To conclude this section of our talk, this morning, I will quote what Luke the Apostle wrote in Acts 7:9-10: "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."

For God to be with us, as He was with Joseph, should be sufficient for us, though I admit that this is easier said than done.

In the few minutes that remain, I want to take up the second strand of our study today, to consider how Joseph reflects something of the greatness and glory of the Lord Jesus. No doubt, in previous weeks it has been pointed out that Joseph can stand as a figure, or type, of the Lord Jesus. To refresh your memory, I will use the summary in the Scofield Reference Bible: "...both were special objects of a father's love, both were hated by their brethren, the superior claims of both were rejected by their brethren, and the brethren of both conspired to slay them".

There are other similarities, but these will be dealt with next week in the final programme. The one point I wish to concentrate on, as we reach the conclusion of our study this morning, Genesis 40:14 and 23: "But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house... Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him."

If we use Joseph as a figure of the Lord then, just as he was forgotten and hidden away from view, we can consider that this is the Lord's position today. We believe that He is the Son of the Father, only begotten and loved in eternity. Scripture tells us that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. For many of us listening this morning He is, through grace, our Saviour. I stop here and ask the question of all in the sound of my voice: Is He your Saviour? If He is then you will admit that this One you know as Lord, and whom you worship and honour, is largely ignored and disregarded by the world at large. Any mention that you make regarding Him being God incarnate is usually greeted by stolid indifference and sometimes by hostility.

This, however, is not why I have just read verses 14 and 23 that spoke about Joseph's desire to be remembered when it was well with the butler. Sadly, the selfish response of the butler was to forget him. One of the last requests of the

Lord, before He was apprehended by the band of Temple guards, on the night He was betrayed, was to ask His disciples to remember Him when they broke bread and drank wine together. Christians call this remembrance the communion service, the Lord's Supper, or simply 'the Breaking of Bread'. Most fellowships, churches or assemblies, celebrate this event every week, but whatever the frequency, I now ask you another question: Do you gather with other Christians to remember the Lord's sufferings and death? We know that He is alive and victorious; we also know that He is hidden from the world's view, so when we break bread together, now that everything is well with us, we bear a testimony unto Him in the midst of an unbelieving world.

May each one of us, who truly believe in the Lord Jesus, reflect the same fortitude of faith and spiritual diligence that could be seen in Joseph. May we also, unlike the chief butler, remember the Lord together, in grateful thanks for all that He has accomplished, and for the wonder of the love of God that He brought into our midst.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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