

Truth for Today

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For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Ian Britton

Lessons on the Life of Joseph: Joseph in Pharaoh's Palace

We live in a day of specialisation. When I was a small boy a bike was simply a bike. There might have been a few different varieties, but they all did pretty much the same job, whether the bike in question was a battered old Raleigh three speed or a shiny new Chopper - you used them for riding around the local roads. Now I do a little mountain biking and the different types of bikes are amazing! Carbon lightweights for cross country, full suspension monsters for downhill racing, bikes without saddles for dirt jumps; the list goes on and on. It is the same story in the world of employment. People become specialised in smaller fields of work all the time. We sometimes get the impression that anybody, or anything, that tries to be good at more than one task, is bound to be making compromises. We call them 'jack of all trades and master of none'. Every so often though, we see an exception. As I write this, Roger Federer has just won his fifteenth tennis grand slam tournament. Many commentators are hailing him as the best tennis player ever, and explaining how every element of his game is close to perfection. He serves, returns, volleys, smashes and moves about the court better than anybody else. This makes him the world's best tennis player on grass, clay and hard courts; the ultimate all rounder.

All this reminds me of Joseph, whose story we conclude this week. We've followed him from his father's home to Potiphar's house and then on to prison. Today we will see him in Pharaoh's palace. These are all very different environments but he served and loved the Lord faithfully in each one. In fact, we might call him the ultimate all rounder of his day. Joseph reminds me of Paul's statement to the Philippians in Philippians 4:12-13, "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." We have seen Joseph mostly being abased, being hungry and suffering need in the past three weeks. Today we will see him abounding and being full. Before we plunge into the story let me briefly outline how we will approach our subject this morning.

In our first major section we will look at the practical lessons for ourselves from how Joseph behaved in the palace. We will break that down into two things that Joseph **didn't** do and three things that he **did** do.

In our second major section we will look at some of the ways that Joseph is a type, or picture, of the Lord Jesus Christ during this stage of his life. We will see four ways that he represents Christ.

Practical Lessons

Joseph arrives in the palace of Pharaoh. He has made it at last. Made it out of prison; made it into the palace; made it to the most senior position in the world's only superpower – second only to Pharaoh himself. In short, he had made it to one of the most difficult places to serve God faithfully. At the age of thirty he had everything that he could possibly aspire to. You might have thought that life would now be easy, and serving God would be far simpler than during all those trials. Perhaps you are dreaming of a day when life will be less of a struggle and you will be able to serve God more comfortably; a day when you will have time, money and leisure to do more for Him. Be warned that time, money and leisure bring lots of new temptations with them, and unless you have learned to be faithful in small ways you will not be ready to be faithful in large ways!

We need to notice two things that Joseph did **not** do when he was so remarkably promoted from the prison to the palace:

- Joseph did not take revenge
- Joseph did not become selfish and proud

a. Joseph did not take revenge

Joseph had been very badly treated by some people in his earlier life. Potiphar's wife had told lies that had destroyed his reputation and put him in jail. In fact, it is rather surprising that Potiphar didn't have him killed. Now Joseph had a chance to settle the score. It didn't have to be as ugly as simple revenge. He could perhaps arrange a trial for perjury, and follow due legal process. What could be wrong with correcting a miscarriage of justice? But this was not the way that Joseph had learned to follow God. Joseph was content to let God judge matters, in a time and way of God's

choosing. We often lament the way that people in our society seem to sue and take people to court over almost every issue. Are we prepared to suffer wrong and not seek justice? When I read Hebrews 10:34 which says, "For you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven", I wonder if I could act in the same way. It is so far from the culture that I live in, and so contrary to my natural response, that I will need to truly understand and value that "enduring possession in heaven" if I am ever going to respond like that. Of course we are talking about the attitude of Christ, "Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" 1 Peter 2:23.

Pharaoh's butler had reason to be nervous too. He had perhaps redeemed himself by being the one to tell Pharaoh about Joseph and thus lead to his promotion. However, he had forgotten Joseph for years, and left him languishing in jail, despite Joseph's request to be remembered. The butler was not exactly an enemy, more a less than faithful friend. Sometimes it is harder to forgive our friends than our enemies. After all, friends are in a position where they can hurt us much more deeply. We don't read about any attempt by Joseph to settle matters with the butler. We need the generous attitude towards our friends that Paul expressed to the troublesome Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 12:15, "I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved."

Chief among the guilty parties were Joseph's brothers, but we shall consider them when we come to the positive things that Joseph *did* do a little later.

b. Joseph did not become selfish and proud

There is a great temptation when we have any level of success to think that we have earned it. We might talk piously about thanking God for our blessings, but deep inside we feel we have got what we deserved. This will quickly lead us to look down on other people and feel a little superior. Worst of all it will feed the pride that we all have in our hearts. I think we underestimate how seriously God takes pride. In Luke chapters 14 and 18 Jesus repeats, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled". Both James and Peter quote from Proverbs 3:34 and say "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble". God clearly does not like pride, and sets His face very firmly against it. If we want to avoid putting ourselves on a collision course with God, then we need to have a Joseph-like attitude to any success that we may have. Speaking about his exalted position, in Genesis 45:8, Joseph says, "**God**... has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt". The same faith that kept Joseph trusting in God in the middle of suffering, kept him humble when he was promoted. Joseph knew that he didn't deserve the glory for his promotion any more than he had deserved to be put in prison. God was the author of both situations.

It is time we moved on to what Joseph *did* do...

- Joseph worked hard
- Joseph forgave his brothers
- Joseph brought blessing to his whole family

a. Joseph worked hard

The later verses of Genesis 41 give some hints of the hard work that Joseph expended on behalf of Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. Verse 46, "And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt." Verse 48, "So he gathered up all the food of the seven years which were in the land of Egypt, and laid up the food in the cities; he laid up in every city the food of the fields which surrounded them." Clearly Joseph did not personally reap all the crops, build the barns and manage their maintenance! What he did do was travel the land, making all the plans and managing this vast program of work. Where did Joseph acquire the skills needed for such a huge enterprise? One answer is that God obviously gave Joseph a natural aptitude for planning and management. Another answer is that God put him in Potiphar's house, and the prison house, so that he could learn some of the skills he would need to manage all of Egypt's food supplies. Both answers are correct. God gave the natural gifts and God arranged circumstances to allow Joseph to practise and hone those gifts, so that he would be ready to do the great job God had planned for him. We need to be patient while God teaches us lessons and develops our skills and character, otherwise He may never be able to use us.

b. Joseph forgave his brothers

Joseph's brothers had treated him disgracefully. They had only refrained from murdering him because it was more profitable to sell him as a slave! In mistreating Joseph they had also caused enormous heartache to his father, Jacob. Now that Joseph's dreams about his brothers bowing down to him had been fulfilled, he was in a position to pay them back. Instead Joseph chose to forgive them. However that forgiveness was not immediate and it did not absolve them of blame. Interestingly the story of Joseph meeting with, and finally forgiving, his brothers covers four chapters! A very

full description is given. Joseph doesn't fail to forgive his brothers sooner because he is still angry with them. Joseph weeps for his brothers as early as 42:24, but it is chapter 45 before he makes himself known to them. Joseph patiently teaches them to see their own sins for themselves. He uses questions and sometimes harsh treatment to stir up their consciences, until they are ready to confess their guilt. It is only when they recognise their guilt that they are in a position where they can accept Joseph's forgiveness. In verse twenty of chapter fifty Joseph expresses his understanding of his brothers' guilt and God's sovereign control when he says, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive." Joseph is quite clear that his brothers had evil intentions and this made them guilty. He has forgiven them and they are reconciled to him, but they had done wrong and were responsible for the wrong they had done. He also says that God had planned this same event for good. Joseph does **not** say that God stepped in to a problem created by the brothers, and brought good out of it. He maintains that God planned the whole thing in advance. Neither does he absolve his brothers on the grounds that they were only doing what God directed them to do. They planned evil and that made them guilty. The way that Joseph balanced together the sovereign plans of God and the sinful acts of his brothers meant that he was able to maintain a stable faith in an all powerful God. Joseph trusted a God whose control and plans extended even to his persecution. At the same time Joseph didn't lose sight of his brothers' guilt for that persecution, and so he could make them ready to accept his forgiveness. He saw God as the **primary** cause of everything and trusted in Him, but did not let this blind him to the responsibility of others as **secondary** causes.

c. Joseph brought blessing to his whole family

Joseph's faith had a positive impact beyond his own life. Without Joseph's management of the food supplies in Egypt, Jacob and the rest of his family might well have died in the seven year famine. But Joseph did not just send food parcels to his family in Canaan; he brought them all together in Egypt, and provided them with choice pasture land for their flocks. He reunited the family after the treachery of his brothers had threatened to tear it apart. The blessing that Jacob pronounced on Joseph begins, "Joseph is a fruitful bough". He was certainly fruitful within his family circle. He also raised two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who were later numbered among the twelve tribes of Israel. For a man torn from home at the age of seventeen, whom his father thought he would never see again, he certainly brought lots of good to his whole family! Each of us needs to consider what we contribute to our families. Some of us enjoy Christian families, and have been taught to love God and read His word from being tiny. We are instructed in the New Testament to pass on those blessings to our own children. "Do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord", Ephesians 6:4. We are also responsible for the care of our parents as they grow older and need our support. Any provision that the welfare state may make does not remove our responsibility, stated in 1 Timothy 5:4, to "Repay their parents, for this is good and acceptable before God." Not every home is a Christian one, or a happy one. If your home has difficulties and divisions, then the history of Joseph has lessons for you. Whatever your family problems, it is unlikely that your own brothers have plotted your murder and sold you as a slave! Joseph managed to forgive, and to bring unity and blessing to his family. How can you emulate Joseph?

Joseph as a Type of Christ

Wherever we open our Bibles we should expect to find things that relate to the Lord Jesus. The Lord Himself exhorted the Pharisees to "Search the scriptures ... these are they which testify of Me", John 5:39. It is no surprise then that Joseph in Pharaoh's palace turns out to represent Christ in at least four ways.

- Joseph receives a bride
- Joseph is the only approach to Pharaoh
- All bow down to Joseph
- Joseph is the saviour of the world

a. Joseph receives a bride

In Genesis 41:45 we read, "And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-Paaneah. And he gave him as a wife Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On." Two things are significant about Joseph's marriage. One – he marries whilst he is still estranged from his brothers. Two – his wife is a foreigner, not a Hebrew. Here we have a picture of Christ receiving His bride, the church. Christ receives His bride before His national people, the Israelites, have accepted Him as their Saviour. Just as it is around nine years after Joseph marries Asenath before Joseph is reconciled to his brothers, so it is only after Christ has gathered in all those that will make up His church that He will reconcile Israel to Himself nationally. Joseph marrying a Gentile is especially striking when we remember what lengths Abraham went to to ensure that Isaac married somebody from within Abraham's own family. You can read the account in Genesis 24. God was providing a little picture of how Christ's bride would be predominantly made up of Gentiles.

b. Joseph is the only approach to Pharaoh

In Genesis 41:55 we read, "So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Then Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, 'Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, do.'" There was no direct approach allowed to Pharaoh for food, neither was there a range of officers that the Egyptians could approach for aid. The command was, "Go to Joseph". So today we read in 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus". In Acts 4:12 Peter preached, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved". Today the only possible approach to God is by Jesus Christ His Son. No access to God the Father is possible without Christ and no other mediator is acceptable. "Go to Joseph" is replaced by "Go to Jesus Christ".

c. All bow down to Joseph

Back in chapter 37 Joseph's brothers were contemptuous of the idea that they would bow to Joseph. "Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?" they asked in verse 8. In the account that follows, his brothers bow down to him on five separate occasions! But it is not just his brothers who have to kneel before him; Joseph is exalted over all the land. Pharaoh says of him in Genesis 41:44, "Without your consent no man may lift his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." In his exaltation, Joseph is a type of Christ, before whom Israel, and all the nations, must bow as absolute Lord.

d. Joseph is the saviour of the world

If God had not put Joseph in place, very large numbers of people would have starved to death. In the days before long life foods and transcontinental food movements, a seven year famine would have been devastating. Most of the population in the area would have died, and the descendants of Abraham would have been wiped out long before the Messiah could be born. It is no exaggeration to say that Joseph saved the world. Of course, this is just a picture of the One who is truly the Saviour of the world. Jesus Christ provides more than food, and a temporary extension of life in this world. He gives eternal life and a home in heaven to all those who come to Him.

Conclusion

In Joseph we have followed the life of a man who was at home everywhere and always learning to be like his God. He is a worthwhile example and a fitting type of Christ in His rejection, betrayal, suffering and glory. Let's conclude the story by reading the whole of Jacob's blessing of his well loved son, from Genesis 49:22-26. "Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well; his branches run over the wall. The archers have bitterly grieved him, shot at him and hated him. But his bow remained in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), by the God of your Father who will help you, and by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. The blessings of your father have excelled the blessings of my ancestors, up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills. They shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers."

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