

THE FAITH OF JOSEPH

"By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones" (Hebrews 11:22).

Jacob had twelve sons, ten of whom were away in the fields, so one day he sent Joseph, his eleventh son, to inquire about them. When Joseph had reached the age of seventeen, Jacob had shown his favoritism by giving him a coat of many colors, but this gift of affection, reward of merit, and badge of office caused his older brothers to be very jealous of him. When the brothers beheld Joseph approaching them, their long-standing jealousy came to a head. They conspired against him and resolved to kill him, but, at the suggestion of Reuben, they decided to cast him into a pit instead. They stripped him of his coat, took him by force, threw him into a pit, and seated themselves nearby to enjoy the dainties he had brought from home.

While they were eating, a caravan of Egyptian traders from Damascus came along on their way to Egypt. At the suggestion of Judah, they sold Joseph to these traders for twenty pieces of silver, not thinking about how he might be treated. Their excuse for their evil deed was their father's favoritism, but the reason for it was their own wickedness. Early in life Joseph had taken a stand for righteousness and refused to join his brothers in doing things which they knew their father would condemn. This, of course, angered the brothers and turned them against Joseph. Naturally it made it difficult for him as it will today for anyone who will live by godly principles. God thwarted their evil designs and brought Joseph to the place of mighty power. If we will do what Joseph did, God will do for us what He did for him.

It is never popular to oppose evil, to condemn sin, or to live a godly life. If you live in conformity to the will of God, you may expect opposition instead of applause. Rectitude always makes evildoers uncomfortable. Those who live and do right are a constant reminder of the evil doings of those who do not and therefore engender their hatred.

Joseph, this young man of great personal character and strength, stood alone in the hardest place in the world -- in the midst of his own family. He, like all others, revealed in youth what he was going to be in maturity. There is a certain mellowing by age and maturity by experience, but youth is always an accurate gauge of how high we will climb and how far we will go. It was so in Joseph's case. He yielded and surrendered to the molding influences of God. God was at work in the young man. That is the most glorious thing that can be said of any person. The happiest discovery you can ever make is God at work in your life. What a thrill! What an honor! What a prospect!

Perhaps it was from the back of a camel that Joseph saw the land of his fathers fade away on the horizon like the sunset of hope, and in all probability he was perplexed as to the purpose and plan of God. When they arrived in Egypt these traders sold Joseph to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Joseph was determined that he would not worry and brood over the wrongs which were committed against him, but that he would be the best slave possible. Bravely he endured his injuries, forgave his brothers, and refused to be discouraged.

Potiphar took Joseph into his palatial home. He soon recognized his ability and dependability and gave him charge of his entire house. By virtue of his character and on account of the favor of God, he rose to a place of dignity and honor. God was with him and blessed him. God honors those who honor Him.

Potiphar's wife admired Joseph and became infatuated with him. She attempted to seduce him, but he refused her amorous advances and solicitations and said, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" Because of his honorable repulse Joseph was falsely accused of attempted adultery, even though he had fled from the temptation. When he fled he lost his reputation but not his character. He knew that it was better to leave his coat than his virtue, his liberty than his honor. Due to her false accusation, Joseph was imprisoned for the noblest deed of his life.

What a shock to this young idealist that he should be imprisoned because he retained his purity! Perhaps he was tempted to become bitter, but the record shows that he did not yield to the temptation. Had he not known God, it might have appeared to him that it pays to sin. The secret of his victorious living and endurance was repeatedly and beautifully expressed in the statement, "The Lord was with him."

A turn in the fortune of Joseph came when Pharaoh, the king, had a dream which no one could interpret. The butler informed Pharaoh of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, whereupon he had him brought to him. Impressed by Joseph's modesty and ability, and hearing that there would soon be a famine in the land, Pharaoh wanted someone with exceptional wisdom to take matters in hand, so he exalted Joseph to the position of Prime Minister of Egypt, which office was second only to his own. For Joseph adversity was not a penalty for wrongdoing or a method of discipline, but the way to triumphant living. Men may be slow to notice and to reward faithfulness, but God never fails to do so.

Joseph's faith had remained the same through bad and good fortune. As he looked back over the strange road which he had traveled, Joseph could see that his troubles had been stepping stones to a higher and richer life. Whatever adversity or blessing came into his life Joseph went all the way with God. He remained faithful and submissive to Him. He did not complain or rebel against God. He adjusted as best he could to his situation, and did everything that was required of him to the very best of his ability. Once again the scriptural principle had been fulfilled -- "them that honor me I will honor." God was remembering Joseph because Joseph remembered God. God was making much of Joseph because Joseph had made much of God.

One day Joseph's brothers appeared before him for the purpose of obtaining grain. At first he did not disclose his identity, but on a later trip for additional supplies he said, "I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? Adn his brethren could not answer him for they were troubled at his presence." They thought that Joseph would wreak vengeance on them for selling him when he was a lad. When they whined for kind treatment Joseph said, "Now be not grieved nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life." So far as he was concerned the past was forgiven freely and willingly. -Aware of God's overruling, he refused to be resentful toward those who had injured him.

We must never cease to believe in the goodness of God because we cannot see how what is happening to us at any given time is going to be for our ultimate good. The divine purpose may not appear on the surface at once. Joseph had to wait for years before God's meaning was made clear to him. When it was clear to him, Joseph made this statement to his brothers: "Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good." God is always master of the situation. Whatever happens, hold fast to these words, "God meant it for good."

I. The Story.

The story is recorded in Genesis 50:22-26 and Exodus 13:17-19.

After the burial of Jacob in the land of Canaan, Joseph and his brethren returned to Egypt and dwelt there. "And Joseph lived an hundred and ten years and saw his sons' children of three generations.

The interesting and fascinating things recorded about Joseph were coming to an end, and before long he would be finished with earthly affairs and would pass on into the mysterious life beyond the grave. What would Joseph do when he was approaching death? In the end of his long and memorable career his thoughts were not occupied with what God had wrought for him, but rather with what God had purposed unto his people. In other words, Joseph did not dwell upon the past, but was concerned with that which was future.

When the time came for him to die, "Joseph said unto his brethren, I die; and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he sware to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence. So Joseph died, being an hundred and ten years old: and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt" (Genesis 50:24-26).

"And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt: But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red sea: and the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the land of Egypt. And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him" (Exodus 13:17-19).

II. The Significance.

Joseph's experience was one of faith.

1. By faith Joseph remembered Israel's Exodus.

"By faith, Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel." Even in the hour of his death Joseph remembered the promise of God to give the land of Canaan to the seed of Abraham. Remembering God's promise to his fathers, Joseph took Him at His word. He never saw the exodus of Israel with his physical eyes, but by faith he saw it as assuredly as if it were already existent.

2. By faith Joseph enjoined Israel's concern.

"By faith, Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment to carry his bones." Joseph was talking about the departing of the children of Israel from Egypt, and he gave the commandment that, when they departed, his bones were to be carried with them.

III. The Sequel.

The sequel of Joseph's experience is striking.

1. Joseph was a contented dying man.

Joseph's faith lifted his eyes from a captive land and to a place of promise. He was content to die in Egypt, "but he was an Israelite at heart." He knew that God would not leave the Israelites in Egypt.

As Joseph lay dying he looked beyond death. He knew full well that death would not end all. Even though he was a dying man Joseph saw a living Lord and believed His word of promise. He knew that the living God would carry out His word. Joseph's death was not a gloomy defeat because he had the glorious light of faith.

2. Joseph comforted a captive people.

The Israelites were a captive people in Egypt. For their patriarchs -- Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob -- had gone. Hundreds of years would pass before they would near their end of bondage and leave Egypt. Joseph knew that he would not be there when they actually left Egypt and went back to Canaan. He did not have any knowledge when they would go, but he knew he would not be there to accompany them. Although he would not go in person into the land of Canaan, he wanted his bones carried thither.

It was the activity of his outward and onward faith that caused him to give that commandment concerning his bones. Joseph was not looking at circumstances, he seemed to know them, but all his activities show how alive he was to the facts in the midst of which they were living. In the soul of Joseph burned the assurance that one day God's purpose would be fulfilled, regardless of how unreasonable it appeared at the moment. This great statesman took in the sweep of the ages, and the divine purpose, and said: When you march, carry my bones with you. Let them be a symbol of my relationship with the movement.

3. Joseph cheered a wandering people.

After centuries of waiting the Israelites set out from Egypt on their way to the Promised Land "and Moses took the bones of Joseph with him."

Everywhere the Israelites went the coffin was carried with them. That was a cheerless companion for a journey in the eyes of the

world, but it was a cheering companion for fellows in faith who could see more than dry bones in a coffin. Those dry bones symbolized and emphasized a living faith and a holy heritage and a divine promise.

4. Joseph changed the center of interest.

The world's center of interest is in the present. Joseph's feat of faith changed the center of interest from the present to the future. Joseph's dying words expressed his living hope. His home was not where he was. Favored as had been his lot in Egypt, he longed for a better place, a promised land.

Joseph's feat of faith brings a needed message to our faithless world. It tells us where faith functions and what it does. True faith blesses in life and in death. It cheers men while they live and gives them contentment when they come to die. It lightens the loads of life and dispels the darkness of death. True faith comforts in the captivity of life and changes the center of interest from the present to the future, from the present of sorrow to the future of promise, from an earthly tent to the heavenly home. True faith does not stop short of God's word, fully realized in Christ and Christian promise and Christian hope.

If this is faith -- in functioning and feat -- how much faith have we? God give us the faith that functions as Joseph's did -- the faith that is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen -- the faith that overcomes the world.