

Joseph and His Brethren

“Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life.”
—Genesis 45:4,5

IN LAST MONTH’S ISSUE, we considered the first thirty years of Joseph’s most interesting life. After many varied experiences, Joseph had now been promoted by Pharaoh to oversee all affairs in the kingdom of Egypt. Under his leadership, the Egyptians stored enormous quantities of food during the foretold seven years of plenty. Then began the seven years of famine, which were felt not only throughout Egypt but in neighboring countries as well,

reaching even to Canaan, where Joseph’s seeking father, brothers, and their families resided.—Gen. 41:28-44,57

While years had passed since Joseph had been sold into Egypt by his brothers, his father Jacob was still living. The whole family, however, was feeling

the effect of the famine. Jacob, having heard that there was corn in Egypt, said to his sons, "Get you down thither, and buy for us from thence; that we may live, and not die. And Joseph's ten brethren went down to buy corn in Egypt."—Gen. 42:1-3

Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin, was not allowed to go with the others, in case, as the father explained, "peradventure mischief befall him." (vs. 4) Benjamin was very dear to his father, not only as his youngest son, but also because his beloved Rachel, Benjamin's mother, had died giving birth to him. With Joseph, his only other son by Rachel, supposed dead, Benjamin would be the last living tie the father had to link him with his cherished wife.

Thus the ten brothers proceeded to Egypt. Arriving there and making known their mission, it was necessary that they appear before Joseph, since only upon his word could corn be sold to anyone. They did not recognize this young Egyptian prince as their brother Joseph, but he recognized them. Joseph made a pretense of accusing them of being spies, which they fervently denied, explaining that they were all the sons of one man, and that they had two other brothers, one of whom "is not," and the other remained at home with their father.—vss. 5-13

Joseph, of course, knew that his brethren were not spies. However, he had decided on a way to discover whether or not they had acquired a change of heart since they had first thought to kill him because of their jealousy, and subsequently sold him as a slave. Joseph continued to insist that they were spies. However, he proposed that in order for them to prove the truthfulness of their story, he would

hold nine of them prisoners while one returned to Canaan to bring their brother Benjamin down to Egypt for him to see.

Joseph imprisoned his brothers for three days, after which he changed his ruling, deciding to keep only one of them, while the nine returned home with food. Simeon was the one chosen to remain a prisoner in Egypt until Benjamin was brought from Canaan. Confronted with these hardships, the brothers were reminded of the wrong they had done to Joseph, and their consciences pricked them. They discussed the matter among themselves, not realizing that the great ruler before whom they were appearing could understand their language, which undoubtedly was Hebrew. It was perhaps this evidence of their repentance which caused Joseph to relent and allow all but Simeon to return to Canaan.—vss. 15-24

He not only allowed the nine to return to Canaan and commanded that their sacks be filled with the corn for which they had paid, but also directed his servants to replace their money in each sack. Later, as one of them opened his sack to get feed for his donkey, he discovered that his money was there also. They were all afraid, supposing that they would then be accused of theft.—vss. 25-28

Upon their arrival home they explained to their father, Jacob, what had occurred, and why Simeon was not with them, but he refused to allow them to take Benjamin into Egypt. He said, “My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he is left alone: if mischief befall him by the way in which ye go, then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.”—vs. 38

Here the word “grave” is a translation of the Hebrew word *sheol*, the only word in the Old Testament which is also translated “hell.” It is evident that Jacob expected to go to *sheol* when he died, which indicates clearly that *sheol*, the Old Testament hell, is not a place of torment but, as the Scriptures teach, the condition of death, from which there is to be a resurrection.

FAMINE CONTINUES

While Jacob was adamant that Benjamin must not be taken to Egypt, as the famine continued and the family’s food supply dwindled, something had to be done. He directed that his other sons make another trip to Egypt for food. Then Judah intervened and reaffirmed their situation, insisting that Egypt’s ruler really meant what he said about their brother Benjamin, and that it would be useless to return to Egypt for food unless they complied with his conditions.—Gen. 43:1-5

Finally, after Judah had promised faithfully to be personally responsible for Benjamin, Jacob relented. He instructed his sons to go to Egypt, and, with the thought of presenting as favorable an impression upon the ruler as possible, he said to them, “Take of the best fruits in the land in your vessels, and carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and almonds: And take double money in your hand; and the money that was brought again in the mouth of your sacks, carry it again in your hand; peradventure it was an oversight: Take also your brother, and arise, go again unto the man.”—vss. 11-13

While suggesting that his sons take every precaution and do all they could to win favor with Egypt's ruler, Jacob knew that only Jehovah could really protect them and Benjamin. He said, "God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may send away your other brother, and Benjamin." (vs. 14) The brethren did as instructed by their father, and in due time they arrived in Egypt and were presented to Joseph, whom they still did not know.

Joseph directed the ruler of his house to make ready, for he would have these Hebrews dine with him that day. Naturally, they at once became suspicious. Having themselves practiced treachery upon their brother, Joseph, they feared what might befall them. While Joseph was out, they approached the steward of his house and offered as full an explanation as possible concerning the money they had found in their sacks and told him that they had brought this money back with them, and more besides. Then the steward said, "Peace be to you, fear not: your God, and the God of your father, hath given you treasure in your sacks: I had your money. And he brought Simeon out unto them."—vss. 15-23

What more could he say to assure the men that the ruler had no evil intentions toward them! He had talked to them in their own language, speaking of their God, and the God of their father. We might gather from this that Joseph did not fail to witness to his Egyptian servants concerning Jehovah, the true God. Certainly, he had never hesitated to credit God for his ability to interpret dreams. All in Egypt who knew of Joseph's past realized that he was a Hebrew, and that the God he

worshiped was the God of the Hebrews, and therefore was the God of Jacob and of his sons, who had now come the second time to buy corn.

Finally, Joseph returned home, and it was time for dinner. He inquired after their father—if he was alive, and well. They assured him that he was, for which Joseph was glad. Seeing Benjamin again, he could not refrain from weeping for joy, but concealed himself in his “chamber” while doing so, for it was not yet time to reveal himself to his brethren.—Gen. 43:24-31

At last, they sat down to eat. Joseph sat alone, for it was considered an abomination for Egyptians to eat with Hebrews, and he still wanted his brothers to believe that he was an Egyptian. They marveled, though, that according to the directions of Joseph, they had been seated in accordance with their ages. How did this Egyptian know their ages, and why, as the account records, was Benjamin given five times as much as the others? They no doubt pondered these things in their hearts. Nevertheless, “they drank, and were merry.”—vss. 32-34

When the time came for his brothers to start on their homeward journey, Joseph commanded his steward to fill their sacks with corn, and again to replace the money they had paid, “every man’s money in his sack’s mouth.” In addition, the steward was instructed to put Joseph’s special silver cup in the mouth of Benjamin’s sack. The next morning they started for Canaan, and for home, happy in the thought, no doubt, of the joy they would soon bring to their aged father.—Gen. 44:1-3

However, a new trial was in store for them. Joseph directed his steward to overtake them and

accuse them of the theft of the silver cup. They were certain, of course, that they had not stolen the cup, and readily agreed that if the steward found it in any of their sacks, the one to whom the sack belonged should become the servant of the ruler and not return to Canaan.—vss. 4-10

Joseph's brethren were shocked to see that the silver cup was found in Benjamin's sack. They "rent their clothes, and laded every man his ass, and returned to the city." (vs. 13) It was a dark time for them, for now it seemed certain that Benjamin would be detained in Egypt, and they would have to return to Canaan and break the sad news to their father.

Judah, however, did not give up. Having promised his father that he would be personally responsible for the safe return of Benjamin, he pleaded with Joseph for his release. He explained all the circumstances to Joseph, and appealed to his sense of kindness and mercy by emphasizing that if Benjamin were retained in Egypt, it would probably break their father's heart. He said, "When I come to thy servant my father, and the lad be not with us; seeing that his life is bound up in the lad's life; It shall come to pass, when he seeth that the lad is not with us, that he will die: and thy servants shall bring down the gray hairs of thy servant our father with sorrow to the grave."—vss. 18-31

Then, explaining to Joseph that he had personally made himself responsible for Benjamin's safety, Judah offered to remain in Egypt as a prisoner in his place: "Let thy servant abide instead of the lad a bondman to my lord; and let the lad go up with his brethren. For how shall I go up to my father,

and the lad be not with me? lest peradventure I see the evil that shall come on my father.”—Gen. 44:32-34

Joseph could endure no more. He was convinced now that his brethren had experienced a change of heart since they had sold him as a slave. He ordered all except his brothers to leave his presence. Then he said to them, “I am Joseph; doth my father yet live?”—Gen. 45:1-3

The record says that Joseph’s brethren were troubled in his presence. The *Rotherham Emphasized Bible* says they were “terrified,” and well they might be, from their standpoint. Here was the one whom they so grievously injured and supposed dead. Now he was before them as a powerful ruler in Egypt, and they were at his mercy.

From Joseph’s standpoint, however, there was no need to fear, because he had already forgiven them. He asked them to come near to him, and he repeated, as noted in our opening text, that he was their brother and that God had sent him to Egypt “to preserve life.” In the 7th and 8th verses, Joseph again stated that it was God who had overruled all these matters, the purpose being to “preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

The Biblical account of Joseph and his brethren shows the marvelous manner in which Jehovah preserved the natural seed of Abraham. It is also an outstanding example of how the Heavenly Father is able to cause the wrath of men to praise him. If it be his will, God can protect his people against any and all attacks which might be made against them by their enemies.

In the New Testament, we see some interesting comparisons between the life of Jesus and that of Joseph. Driven to jealousy and hatred by their religious leaders, the Jewish nation put Jesus, a fellow Israelite, to death, even as Joseph's brethren endeavored to dispose of him.—Matt. 26:59; 27:1

From prison, Joseph was exalted to rulership, occupying the position of life-giver to his brethren, to the Egyptians, and to surrounding nations. Likewise Jesus, cast off by his brethren, and cast into the great prison house of death, was called forth and exalted to the right hand of God and will be life-giver to the whole world of mankind during the thousand years of his kingdom.—Acts 2:22-24; 3:13-26; Rev. 20:6

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from the experiences of Joseph is the manner in which he received them. His faith in God never wavered. He never complained. While he had every reason to be resentful of his brothers and, when the opportunity came to punish them severely, he did not permit his heart to become bitter toward them. Instead, he was ready to forgive and to bless.

Joseph possessed a noble character, which was based upon his faith in God. He knew that the Lord's hand was overruling in his experiences. Thus, he had no reason to resent whatever God permitted, nor to be bitter against those who mistreated him. It is important for all the Lord's people thus to accept what they cannot change, and to realize that if the Heavenly Father wanted it otherwise, he is abundantly able to accomplish his purposes.

JACOB MOVES TO EGYPT

After revealing himself to his brethren, Joseph's next step was to send for his father and the remainder of the family. He explained to his brothers that there were to be five more years of famine, and that this move into Egypt was a necessity if their lives were to be saved. Pharaoh concurred in this, and the land of Goshen was set aside for the newcomers.—Gen. 45:6-16

Lavish arrangements were made for the return to Canaan for their father and their families. Changes of raiment were provided for the ten brothers, five changes of raiment for Benjamin. He also was given three hundred pieces of silver. Twenty asses were sent to the father, "laden with corn and bread and meat." Joseph said to his brothers, "See that ye fall not out by the way." Benjamin had been favored above the others, and Joseph did not want them to become jealous over him. He knew their weakness.—vss. 17-25

Jacob was overjoyed when he was finally convinced that his beloved son Joseph was still alive and was a ruler in Egypt. He accepted Joseph's invitation, and in due course the entire family arrived in Goshen. (vss. 26-28) The list of those who went to Egypt is given in chapter 46 of Genesis. The total, including the two sons born to Joseph in Egypt, was seventy. They were given a royal welcome, both by Joseph and by Pharaoh. There they "grew, and multiplied exceedingly."—Gen. 47:27

By now Jacob was very old. He called Joseph and obtained a promise from him that when he died his body would be taken back to Canaan for burial. Before his death he pronounced a blessing upon Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and upon

his deathbed he blessed all twelve of his sons. It was here that the Messianic promise of a coming ruler was made to the tribe of Judah.—Gen. 49:8-10

“When Jacob had finished this charge to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and joined his ancestors in death.” (Gen. 49:33, *New Living Translation*) In harmony with his request he was taken to Canaan for burial. There he was laid away in the cave of Machpelah, in the field which Abraham bought as a burial place for his wife Sarah and himself. It was also where Isaac, his wife Rebekah, and Jacob’s wife Leah were buried. (Gen. 23:1-20; 49:28-31) Jacob’s funeral procession was probably one of the greatest of all time, consisting of “all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, And all the house of Joseph, and his brethren, and his father’s house: ... And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen: and it was a very great company.”—Gen. 50:7-9

After Jacob died, Joseph’s brethren again became apprehensive of what his attitude toward them might now be. When they spoke with him to find out, Joseph assured them that they had no cause for fear, explaining again that God had overruled all the circumstances of his life for his own good, and also for theirs. “Now therefore fear ye not,” he said. “I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them.”—vs. 21

Joseph additionally assured his brothers that God would surely visit them in due time and restore them to the land which he had promised to Abraham. Being assured of this, he gave instructions that upon his death, his body should be embalmed, and when they would return to the land of promise,

it should be taken with them. (Gen. 50:24,25) Commenting on this, Paul wrote, “By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.”—Heb. 11:22

Joseph was one hundred and ten years old when he died, having served as a ruler in Egypt for eighty years. (Gen. 50:22,26) His dreams in which he saw, in symbol, his father and his brothers bowing down to him had been marvelously fulfilled. However, he did not take advantage of the circumstances to punish them. He did not even remind them of his dreams. In exaltation, he remained humble and kind and was an instrument of blessing to his brethren, to the Egyptians, and to other nations. What a noble example for God’s people now to follow! ■