

Joseph and His Brethren

“Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours.”

—Genesis 37:3

THE PATRIARCH JACOB

had twelve sons, of whom Reuben was the eldest, and Benjamin the youngest. The others were Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher and Joseph. When, toward the close of his life, Jacob

pronounced his parental blessing upon these twelve, God’s promise of a coming ruler, the one who would be the Messiah and channel of blessing to all the families of the earth, was narrowed down to the descendants of Judah.—Gen. 49:8-12

Of all these sons of Jacob, the Bible record deals more particularly with Joseph. He was the first-born of Rachel, the wife for whom Jacob served his father-in-law fourteen years. (Gen. 29:20,30) The account of Joseph’s experiences begins with the explanation found in our opening Scripture that Jacob, whose name had been changed to Israel, loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was

the son of his old age. The next verse says that when Joseph's brothers "saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him."—Gen. 37:4

"Jealousy is cruel as the grave," the Scriptures declare. (Song of Sol. 8:6) This became clearly demonstrated in the attitude of Joseph's brothers toward him. Their jealousy and hate were increased when Joseph related a dream about which he said, "Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf." Joseph's brethren saw in this dream a suggestion that Joseph expected one day to be ruler over them.—Gen. 37:5-8

Joseph "dreamed yet another dream, and told it to his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me." His brothers envied him even more after hearing this dream, and his father rebuked Joseph for relating it, asking, "Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?"—vss. 9,10

Although Jacob rebuked Joseph for relating these dreams, the record is that he "observed the saying." (vs. 11) We recall similar circumstances many centuries later, when it is said that Mary "pondered ... in her heart" the marvelous things which occurred when Jesus was born, and as he grew toward adulthood. (Luke 2:19,51) Jacob seemed to sense that God was dealing with Joseph in some special manner and that he was to be a man of destiny, even as later proved to be true.

Some time after Joseph had related his dreams, his brothers departed from home to go to Shechem to seek pasture for their flocks. Joseph, being quite young, remained at home with his father. Thus far, Joseph's brothers had given no outward evidence of a desire to injure him, despite their jealousy. Therefore, Jacob, wishing to know how his sons were getting along, asked his beloved Joseph to go to Shechem and bring back a report. Joseph was quite willing to render this service to his father, saying, "Here am I."—Gen. 37:12-14

Arriving in Shechem, Joseph learned that his brothers had moved on to Dothan, so he continued his journey and finally found them there. This afforded them the opportunity for which they had apparently been waiting, to manifest outwardly their hatred toward Joseph, and do so in the absence of their father. The account says that "when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh."—vss. 15-19

Their first plan was to murder Joseph, cast him into a pit, and then report to their father that his beloved boy had been slain by a wild beast. They said, "We shall see what will become of his dreams." However, Reuben, the oldest brother, while disliking Joseph, could not bring himself to participate in a plot to murder him. He suggested that, instead, they cast the lad into a pit and there leave him to die without actively shedding his blood. Reuben secretly planned, unknown to his brethren, to return to the pit, rescue Joseph and return him to his father.—vss. 20-22

The brothers agreed, and Joseph was cast into a pit. Before leaving the area, however, the brothers noticed a band of Ishmaelites who were passing nearby on their way to Egypt. Judah suggested that rather than abandoning Joseph in a pit, they instead sell him as a slave to the Ishmaelites. They reasoned that thus the object of their hate would be out of sight and out of their way, and yet they would not be guilty of murder. All agreed to this plan except Reuben, who was apparently not with the others when they sold Joseph. When he returned to the pit to rescue his brother and discovered that Joseph was not there, Reuben “rent his clothes. And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child is not; and I, whither shall I go?” —Gen. 37:23-30

JACOB’S DEEP SORROW

One crime often leads to another. Having disposed of their brother Joseph, it was necessary to offer some plausible explanation for his disappearance to their father, Jacob. They killed “a kid of the goats” and dipped Joseph’s coat in its blood to make it appear that he had been killed by a wild beast. Upon returning home, they presented this “evidence” to Jacob, who at once reached the conclusion that his beloved son was dead. He said, “It is my son’s coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces.”—vss. 31-33

Jacob’s entire family endeavored to comfort him, “but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning.” (vss. 34,35) It is interesting to note that the

Hebrew word here translated “grave” is *sheol*. It is the first time it appears in the Bible, and is the only Hebrew word which, throughout the Old Testament, is translated “hell.” The word *sheol* appears sixty-five times, and is translated “hell” thirty-one times, “grave” thirty-one times, and “pit” three times. Simply stated, it refers to the condition of death into which both the righteous and the unrighteous go when they die, there to await the resurrection. It is not a place of eternal torture or torment.

JOSEPH IN EGYPT

Ishmaelites and Midianites are both mentioned in connection with the selling of Joseph by his brethren, and his being taken into Egypt. The Ishmaelites were descendants of Abraham, through his bondmaid, Hagar. The Midianites were Abraham’s descendants through his wife, Keturah, whom the Scriptures mention following the death of Sarah. Evidently, therefore, the group to which Joseph was sold was mixed, hence the reference to them sometimes as Ishmaelites and sometimes as Midianites. Interestingly, then, all three groups—the Ishmaelites, Midianites, and Jacob and his family—were descendants of Abraham.

Arriving in Egypt, the Ishmaelites sold Joseph to Potiphar, “an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian. ... And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.” (Gen. 39:1,2) The statement, “the Lord was with Joseph,” is a brief summation of the marvelous series of events which would now take place in his life, and

the manner in which they would finally lead to his being reunited with his father and brethren.

Joseph knew that the Lord was with him, and his faith in this fact helped him to both endure trial, and to remain humble in prosperity. No matter how severely he was tested, his faith in the overruling providences of God remained firm. Regardless of how much honor was bestowed upon him, he gave all the credit to the Lord. Doubtless he often thought about the dreams which, when he related them to his brothers, caused them to hate him and to sell him as a slave. He probably wondered just how they were to be fulfilled, yet his faith that these had come from God was an assurance that all his experiences were being overruled by divine providence. Thus, regardless of surrounding circumstances, he made the best of them, ever looking to God for guidance and help.

The hand of God in Joseph's experiences was so apparent that even Potiphar, his Egyptian master, noticed it: "His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD made all that he did to prosper in his hand." (Gen. 39:3) This, together with Joseph's integrity and wisdom, gave his master confidence in him, "and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand." (vs. 4) Not only did the Lord bless Joseph personally, but for his sake he blessed Potiphar's household, concerning which he had been made overseer: "The LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was upon all that he had in the house, and in the field."—vs. 5

JOSEPH BETRAYED

Joseph's favorable position, however, did not continue long. Because he was a "goodly person, and well favoured," Potiphar's wife became enamored of him. When he refused her advances, she reported to her husband that his trusted servant Joseph had mocked her, and that when she lifted up her voice in a cry of alarm, he had fled, leaving his garment with her. Potiphar accepted this story and, without investigation, ordered that Joseph be put into prison.—vss. 6-20

"But the LORD was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison." (vs. 21) Though Joseph was permitted to be imprisoned, yet the statement is that the Lord was with him. God's people in that ancient time, even as now, found it necessary to walk by faith. It is not so difficult to believe that the Heavenly Father is with us when all the circumstances of life are to our liking. However, when things go wrong, when calamity strikes, when friends forsake us, or when we are persecuted for righteousness' sake, it requires a living faith in the wisdom and love of God to believe that he is still with us.

Such was the case with Joseph. The fact that he was misrepresented and put into prison did not mean that the Lord was not still with him. Joseph, though enduring hardness as a prisoner, did not despair, but maintained his faith in the God of his fathers. Few of the personalities of the Bible have this assurance recorded concerning them as frequently as we find it said of Joseph. Because the Lord was with him, even in prison, "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."—Gen. 39:22,23

Thus we see that God was preparing for greater events in Joseph's life. Shortly after he had been given this trustworthy position in the prison, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, became offended by his chief butler and chief baker. They were put into prison and Joseph was assigned to attend to them. In due course, both of these men had dreams which disturbed them, and when Joseph came in to serve them in the morning, he noticed that "they were sad."—Gen. 40:1-6

He inquired concerning the cause of their sadness, and they told him of their dreams. Joseph, by God's help, correctly interpreted these dreams to mean that within three days the butler would be restored to his former position of honor in Pharaoh's house, and that at the close of three days the baker would be taken from prison and hanged.—vss. 7-23

When interpreting the butler's dream, Joseph asked that when he was reinstated as Pharaoh's chief butler, he speak a kind word for him, suggesting that he be released from prison. The butler's release from prison occurred on Pharaoh's birthday, and in the excitement of the occasion he forgot about Joseph and failed to mention his request to the king. As a result, Joseph languished in prison for two more years, which was a further test of his faith in and devotion to God.

At the end of two years God's providences again began to operate on behalf of Joseph. Pharaoh had two dreams. In these dreams "he stood by the river. And, behold there came up out of the river seven well favoured kine [cows] and fatfleshed; and they fed in a meadow. And, behold, seven other kine came up after them out of the river, ill favoured and leanfleshed; and stood by the other kine upon the brink of the river. And the ill favoured and leanfleshed kine did eat up the seven well favoured and fat kine. So Pharaoh awoke."—Gen. 41:1-4

Then Pharaoh fell asleep and dreamed "the second time: and, behold, seven ears of corn came up upon one stalk, rank and good. And, behold, seven thin ears and blasted with the east wind sprung up after them. And the seven thin ears devoured the seven rank and full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and, behold, it was a dream."—vss. 5-7

These dreams greatly disturbed Pharaoh, especially since none of the wise men of Egypt could interpret them for him. The chief butler, because of his close personal association with Pharaoh, would know of these circumstances, and by them he was reminded of Joseph. He was chagrined to realize that he had forgotten to speak to Pharaoh concerning Joseph, but even this the Lord had overruled, for now had come a most favorable opportunity to do so.

The chief butler remembered Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, and he told Pharaoh about him. The king of Egypt sent for Joseph at once. "They brought him hastily out of the dungeon," the record states, "and he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh." Asked by

Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, Joseph, with humility said, "It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace."—Gen. 41:9-16

Pharaoh then related his dreams to Joseph, to whom God gave the interpretation. Joseph explained that both dreams in reality represented the same thing: "The seven good kine are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one." He also explained that the seven ill-favored and lean kine, along with the seven empty ears "blasted with the east wind," were to be another seven years, and that these would constitute years of famine.—vss. 25-27

Joseph explained further that what God had revealed through Pharaoh's dreams was that there were to be seven years of plenty in Egypt, followed by seven years of drought and famine. That the Lord gave two dreams meaning the same thing, Joseph explained, was "because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass." Joseph then advised Pharaoh to select a wise administrator over the affairs of Egypt, that the best advantage might be taken of the seven years of plenty in preparation for the seven years of famine to follow.—vss. 28-36

JOSEPH EXALTED

Pharaoh was greatly impressed and also realized the wisdom of Joseph's recommendation. He said to Joseph, "Forasmuch as God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art: Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou."—vss. 39,40

Surely the Lord was again with Joseph, not altogether for his own sake, but, as it later developed, for the salvation of his people, the natural descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and his father, Jacob. Joseph proved to be a wise food administrator, and although given extra dictatorial powers, he did not abuse them, nor did he use his high position to undermine the confidence of the Egyptians in their Pharaoh. One given such power and authority can be a great blessing if he is wise, unselfish, and humble, and Joseph possessed all these qualities.

Under his leadership, which began when he was thirty years of age, the Egyptians stored enormous quantities of food during the foretold seven years of plenty. Then began the seven years of famine, which was felt not only throughout Egypt but in neighboring countries as well, reaching even to Canaan, where Joseph's father, brothers, and their families resided. It is this that sets the stage for the climactic events which we will consider in Part 2 of this article, to appear in next month's issue of *The Dawn*. How blessed we are to know of these dramatic series of circumstances in the life of the young man who had been sold into slavery in Egypt. ■