

Message No: AR013
Series: Appearance and Reality
Section: People
Subsection: Joseph
Date preached: 11 Jan 87
Date edited: 08 Jul 08 (revised 07 Dec 09)

JOSEPH AS A SLAVE AND PRISONER

Introduction

Most of us are familiar with the story of Joseph. Since childhood, many of us have heard of his triumphs. When we think of him faring well, we tend to think of his success as the exalted ruler over all of Egypt. But what about the time when he was a slave, sold into the land of Egypt? And what about the time when he became a prisoner?

In this message, we seek to consider Joseph's experiences from two perspectives: First, what he seemed to be going through and second, the reality of his life experiences beyond the outward appearance.

Favourite son of Israel

The first few verses of Genesis 37 record the love of Israel (also known as Jacob) for Joseph. Israel's love for Joseph aroused the jealousy and hatred of Joseph's brothers towards him:

Genesis 37:3-4, 11

3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic.

4 His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

11 His brothers were jealous of him...

Joseph told his brothers about a dream he had in which his brothers' sheaves bowed down to his sheaf. He also told them another dream in which the sun and moon, and eleven stars were seen bowing down to him. His brothers knew the dreams implied that Joseph would one day be superior to them and rule over them (Gen. 37:5-10). This caused them to hate him even more (v. 5), and they hatched an evil plot against him.

Genesis 37:18-28

18 When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death.

19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer!

20 "Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!"

21 But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, "Let us not take his life."

22 Reuben further said to them, "Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father.

23 So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him;

24 and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it.

25 Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt.

26 Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood?"

27 "Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him.

28 Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt.

Joseph's brothers had initially planned to kill him. But the Lord did not permit this to happen. We see his brothers selling him to the Midianite traders instead, who then sold him to Potiphar, an Egyptian officer. And thus, Joseph became a slave in Egypt.

Genesis 37:36

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard.

Slave and prisoner in Egypt

Genesis 39 relates the story of Joseph's life as a slave in Egypt, and how he became a prisoner.

Genesis 39:1-20

1 Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there.

2 The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

3 Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand.

4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge.

5 It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the Lord's blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field.

6 So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

7 It came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me."

8 But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge.

9 "There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?"

10 As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her.

11 Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside.

12 She caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside.

13 When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside,

14 she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed.

15 "When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled and went outside."

16 So she left his garment beside her until his master came home.

17 Then she spoke to him with these words, "The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me;

18 and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside."

19 Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," his anger burned.

20 So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail.

Let us now consider what happened to Joseph from the two perspectives: (a) What he appeared to be going through and (b) The reality of what he was going through.

Appearance – what Joseph appeared to be going through

There are five related points I wish to make about this perspective:

a. Joseph appeared to fare badly as he was reduced from being a favourite son to a slave and then a prisoner.

From outward appearance, Joseph fared badly. From being the beloved son of his father Jacob, he became a slave in a foreign land – low in status, without any personal freedom, and having to do his master’s bidding.

And then he was further reduced from being a slave to a prisoner. Although innocent, he was treated as a criminal.

b. He appeared to be in a miserable state and condition, as he was unfairly and cruelly treated by his own brothers and then by his master’s wife.

Firstly, out of jealousy, his brothers treated him unfairly and cruelly.

Genesis 37:4, 11

4 His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers;
and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

11 His brothers were jealous of him...

They sold him to Egypt – far away from home, friends and familiar surroundings. As a slave in Egypt, he seemed to be in a miserable state and condition.

Secondly, when he refused to yield to the seduction of his master’s wife, she accused him of making sexual advances towards her. Because of her accusation, Joseph was thrown into prison. His life seemed to be getting worse – from being a slave to being a prisoner on a false charge.

Psalm 105 records his afflictions:

Psalm 105:16-18

16 And He called for a famine upon the land;
He broke the whole staff of bread.

17 He sent a man before them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

18 They afflicted his feet with fetters,
He himself was laid in irons;

The description in this psalm paints a seemingly pitiful picture of Joseph.

c. He appeared to be a helpless victim of circumstances and the evil schemes of other people.

Joseph’s own brothers sold him into slavery. As a slave he tried to live his life well and he found favour with his master. However, this favour was short-lived. Because of the false accusation by his master’s wife, his master relegated him to the position of a prisoner. As was the case when he was sold as a slave, Joseph was again unable to prevent himself from being unfairly treated.

Joseph appeared to be a helpless victim of circumstances, and of the evil schemes and designs of others.

d. The situation appeared very unfavourable and meaningless.

Joseph's master Potiphar initially favoured him.

Genesis 39:3-4

3 Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand.

4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge.

However, Potiphar later believed his wife's accusation and threw Joseph into prison.

Genesis 39:19-20

19 Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," his anger burned.

20 So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail.

Joseph seemed to have been put into the jail for an indefinite period of time. Such a prospect could be very discouraging for Joseph, especially when he was thrown into prison for being faithful to God, for refusing to yield to temptation and sin. He was wronged, yet powerless to defend himself.

Subsequently, God helped Joseph to interpret the dreams for the cupbearer and the baker, his fellow prisoners. Joseph told the cupbearer that Pharaoh would reinstate him. Joseph then requested the cupbearer to help him get out of prison after his reinstatement. However, even this glimmer of hope for release appeared dashed because the cupbearer forgot all about Joseph's plight and failed to speak to Pharaoh about his wrongful imprisonment.

Genesis 40:14-15

14 "Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house.

15 "For I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon."

Genesis 40:23

Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Days and months passed, and Joseph remained locked up in prison – for another two full years (Gen. 41:1).

Life may seem meaningless when a person suffers injustice, and efforts to change circumstances prove futile, with no hope in view.

e. His life as a slave and a prisoner appeared to be outside of God's will and purposes.

It is not easy to fare well in the midst of prolonged pain and suffering. If we know that the pain and suffering are associated with effective service for God, we may find them easier to bear. But if we cannot see any obvious relationship with effective service, enduring them can be much more difficult. Such suffering may appear to be pointless, outside of God's will, and not contributing to the fulfilling of God's purposes. This is especially so when the situation seems to be getting from bad to worse, like in Joseph's case – from suffering as a slave to suffering as a prisoner. The suffering that Joseph went through seemed to be meaningless.

When we go through similar situations – though often less severe than Joseph's – we may easily become discouraged, and think that these are terrible situations to be in.

Reality – what Joseph was actually going through

What, indeed, is the reality? How does God view what Joseph went through? What is the true perspective? What is it that counts?

There are two points I wish to make: (1) The Lord was with Joseph and (2) Joseph's moral and spiritual response was positive.

As we reflect on these two major points, we will see that what appears to be when we view things from the natural and temporal perspective can be very different from the reality when viewed from the spiritual and eternal perspective.

1. The Lord was with Joseph

Throughout the trials, the Lord was with Joseph, watching over him, undertaking for him and helping him. This is a crucial point.

Let us look at the remarkable statement in the Scriptures which introduces the beginning of Joseph's life as a slave in Egypt.

Genesis 39:2

The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

In the margin of the NASB, it says "successful" can also be translated as "prosperous". In the midst of the difficult circumstances, even while Joseph was still a slave, the Lord was with him, and he became a successful or prosperous man!

We read again that when Joseph was thrown into jail by his master, God was with him and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper.

Genesis 39:21, 23

21 But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer.

23 The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper.

Note the two statements – “the Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man” (39:2) and “the Lord was with him; whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper” (39:23) – were made at the beginning of Joseph's life in Egypt, when he was a slave and then a prisoner.

When we want to understand how a person is faring, what do we look at? The circumstances and events that the person is going through? The way that person is being treated? How does the Lord look at how a person is faring? What is the biblical perspective?

The Scriptures teaches us that it did not really matter whether Joseph was a slave or a prisoner. What really mattered was that the Lord was with him. This is what truly counts.

Notice also the way it is written in the Scriptures. It says: “The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man”. The word, “so”, tells us how Joseph became a successful man. And it also points us towards the basis of true success – the Lord's presence with Joseph.

The thinking of the world is very different. The world would never regard someone as successful and prospering who had been sold as a slave in a foreign land and then thrown into prison on a false charge. Instead, they would view him as pitiful and in a miserable state.

The Lord wants us to learn to view things with the right perspective. This requires the renewal of the mind – learning to understand issues from the biblical perspective.

Genesis 39:20 tells us Joseph was thrown into jail. His situation appeared to be getting from bad to worse. But verse 21 tells us this was not so. It reads: “But the Lord was with Joseph”. The “but” here tells us the reality of the situation was different from how things appeared. The Lord was with Joseph and this was what mattered.

Let us reflect on the reality and consider how it was closely linked with the Lord being with Joseph. There are five related points I wish to make. These points are in

contrast with the earlier five points considered under the perspective of what Joseph appeared to be going through.

a. While Joseph appeared to fare badly, in reality, he was faring well.

Genesis 39:2

The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

The truth is that he became a successful and a prosperous man in the eyes of the Lord. The Lord's presence with Joseph was much more critical to how he fared than the negative circumstances of his life.

b. Joseph was not in a miserable state or condition.

How could Joseph be in a miserable state or condition when the Lord was with him? God is the source of light, comfort, joy and peace, and the One who brings meaning into our lives. You cannot be in a miserable state if the almighty God is with you, watching over you and undertaking all matters.

Genesis 39:21 tells us that the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him and gave him favour in the sight of the chief jailer. Verse 3 states that his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper.

Clearly Joseph was not in a miserable state.

c. Joseph was not a helpless victim of circumstances or schemes of people.

Although Joseph suffered much from the negative conduct of others, he was not a helpless victim. This was because the Lord was watching over him, undertaking for him and regulating the actions of men.

While the Lord is watching over and undertaking for a person, nothing can happen to him and no one, neither the evil one nor evil men, can do anything to him which God does not permit. The situations he goes through will have meaning and purpose. If he responds well, they will form a meaningful part of the fulfilment of God's purposes for his life.

For example, we saw that Joseph's brothers failed in their plans to kill him, for the Lord did not permit it to take place. But the Lord did allow him to be sold into Egypt as a slave, and be thrown into prison. There was reason for this. It formed a part of God's plan for him to attain to an exalted position in Egypt. As Joseph continued to trust God, he grew in stature as a man of faith. What he went through would have helped him become more understanding towards others in difficult circumstances. This experience would enable him to fulfil his responsibilities better when he became second-in-command over Egypt.

When God allows people to mistreat us or difficult situations to come our way, we will find them unpleasant. But we are not helpless victims in these situations. The almighty God watches over those He loves, those who are walking with Him.

d. There was purpose and meaning in what Joseph went through.

The Lord's presence with Joseph gave meaning and purpose to his life, and whatever he went through, he need not be discouraged. If the Lord is with us, and is pleased with our lives, He will give us meaning and purpose in life too. This is a crucial truth for us to grasp.

It is God, not circumstances or people, who gives us ultimate meaning and purpose. Whatever we go through, there will always be meaning, direction and purpose as we walk with God. We lose these only when we become discouraged and choose to disobey the Lord. But if we continually walk with God, trust Him and are faithful to Him, He will always lead us in the path of meaning and purpose.

The Lord Jesus tells us that He gives His peace to us, and He wants us to have fullness of joy in Him (John 14:27; 15:11). Peace and joy come from the Lord, and circumstances cannot take them away. If we maintain our faith and trust in God, we can have unshakeable peace and joy.

e. Joseph's life as a slave and prisoner was within God's will and purposes.

God saw it fit for Joseph to be sold as a slave into Egypt and then thrown into prison. When Joseph was subsequently in the exalted position of second-in-command over Egypt, he wisely administered the affairs of the land and was able to feed many, including his own family, during the years of famine. Joseph recognised that it was God who sent him to Egypt for this purpose.

Genesis 45:4-8

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

5 "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

6 "For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting.

7 "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

8 "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

All this was part of the outworking of God's purposes. Bound up with it was God's intention for Israel to go down to Egypt.

Genesis 46:2-4

2 God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here I am."

3 He said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there.

4 "I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will close your eyes."

God had made known to Abraham many years earlier that this would take place.

Genesis 15:13-16

13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.

14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.

15 "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.

16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

God told Abraham that his descendants would go to a foreign land where they would be oppressed and enslaved for four hundred years. After that they would come out of the land with many possessions and return to Canaan. This prophecy was fulfilled when God led Israel out of Egypt to return to Canaan with many possessions, after four hundred years of slavery in Egypt.

And the Lord said that "in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete". God had intended for the Israelites to eventually settle in the land of Canaan. But it was not time yet. They first had to go to Egypt until the time was right for them to return.

God sent Joseph to Egypt and allowed him to become a slave and be imprisoned. All these events were moving in the direction of the fulfilment of God's plan and purposes for Israel.

Psalms 105:16-19

16 And He called for a famine upon the land;
He broke the whole staff of bread.

17 He sent a man before them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

18 They afflicted his feet with fetters,
He himself was laid in irons;

19 Until the time that his word came to pass,
The word of the Lord tested him.

It is not clear how much Joseph understood of the meaning of his plight as a slave and prisoner. He might have been rather puzzled then. However, the important thing is: The Lord was with Joseph and was pleased with him. God had a plan and purpose for his life although he might not have discerned its full implications. As Joseph concentrated on being faithful to the Lord, he could be certain that there was meaning and purpose in what he was going through.

Likewise, what is crucial for us is our faithfulness to God. Let us ensure that we are walking with Him and obedient to Him. Then we can be assured that His hand will be upon us and there will be meaning and purpose in our lives. While it can be helpful to understand what we are going through in the midst of a difficult situation, such understanding is of secondary importance.

For Joseph, although the outward circumstances pointed otherwise, he was in reality in the centre of God's plan and purposes for his life. God had an important role for Joseph to fulfil in the outworking of His purposes, and it was very important that Joseph maintained his faith in God in the midst of the difficult circumstances.

This brings us to the second major point: Joseph's posture in life.

2. Joseph's moral and spiritual response was positive

Let us consider what we can learn from Joseph's attitudes and ways.

a. Joseph rejected evil and would not sin against God.

When the wife of Joseph's master kept trying to seduce him, Joseph resisted her advances. A young man in Joseph's situation could easily have given in to the temptation. But Joseph was prepared to take a firm stand, even though he would have been aware that rejecting his master's wife could result in her becoming hostile towards him.

Genesis 39:9

"There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?"

To Joseph, this was a moral issue. He knew he would have done an evil deed if he had yielded to the temptation.

When his master's wife caught him by his garment, Joseph abandoned the garment and fled from her presence.

Some may think that it is cowardice to flee. But it is not the case here. It takes courage of conviction for someone to walk away from a tempting situation. At times, the right thing to do is to move away from the scene as quickly as we can. This was what Joseph did. He took a stand for the truth by fleeing from temptation.

This incident is a helpful illustration of the principle of fleeing immorality Paul emphasises in 1 Corinthians 6:18.

1 Corinthians 6:18

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.

Joseph chose to be morally upright; he chose to be faithful to God rather than to indulge in fleshly pleasures. He said: "How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" Although Joseph knew he would be betraying his master's trust if he were to give in to the advances of his master's wife, he was more conscious about not sinning against God than not sinning against his master.

Often, what stops us from sinning is the fear of punishment, of sanctions from others, of damage to our reputation, and of the adverse consequences and pain that may come upon us. But these were not Joseph's primary concerns. He was more concerned about the moral meaning of his conduct, his obedience to God and his bearing a good testimony for God before men.

b. Joseph did not seek his own glory but the glory of God.

While Joseph was in prison, Pharaoh had a dream which no one could interpret. When he heard that Joseph could, he told Joseph his dream.

Genesis 41:15-16

15 Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

16 Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

Pharaoh told him: "I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it". Notice the emphasis on "you" – "you can interpret it". This would have been a great opportunity for Joseph to impress Pharaoh. Perhaps, he could win Pharaoh's favour and obtain his release from prison.

While Pharaoh focused on Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, Joseph directed Pharaoh's attention to God instead, saying: "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer". He wanted Pharaoh to have the correct understanding and focus and he wanted the glory to go to God, not to himself. He exalted the Lord, not himself, in full view of others.

Joseph again drew Pharaoh's attention to God in verses 25 and 32.

Genesis 41:25

Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do.

Genesis 41:32

"Now as for the repeating of the dream to Pharaoh twice, it means that the matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about.

Again and again, instead of projecting himself, Joseph honoured, exalted and glorified God.

Two years before Pharaoh's dream, when Joseph was talking to the cupbearer and the baker who were imprisoned together with him, Joseph manifested this same attitude.

Genesis 40:8

Then they said to him, "We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please."

He started with "Do not interpretations belong to God?" before proceeding further. In saying this, he glorified the Lord instead of glorifying himself.

When Joseph later became ruler over Egypt, he recounted before his brothers what he had gone through.

Genesis 45:4-8

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

5 "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

6 "For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting.

7 "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

8 "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

In his account of what he had gone through, Joseph did not claim any credit for himself. Nothing was mentioned about his ability to interpret dreams and how it led to recognition from Pharaoh. Instead, he referred to the sovereignty of God and God's purposes at work. He emphasised that God was the One who made him a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

So we see that at all times, whether in prison or before Pharaoh, or when exalted as ruler over Egypt, his attitude and approach was not to exalt himself, but to live for God's glory.

c. Joseph was not revengeful or vindictive but was forgiving, kind and caring.

Genesis 45:1-3

1 Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me." So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

2 He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it.

3 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

This was Joseph, the exalted ruler over Egypt, before his frightened brothers. They were dismayed. But what was Joseph's attitude towards his brothers who had been cruel to him and had sold him as a slave to Egypt? When the tide turned and they were at his mercy, how did he treat them?

In Genesis 45:4-8, which we referred to in point 2b, we see that far from being retaliatory, Joseph showed kindness in words and actions towards his brothers. He forgave them and showed them love and care. He spoke tenderly to them, saying: "Please come closer to me", and "I am your brother Joseph". However, he did not condone their actions. He reminded them of their wrongdoing in selling him into Egypt. And then he comforted them: "Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life".

Joseph wanted them to see that something meaningful was taking place: He was sent to preserve the descendants of Jacob, to keep them alive during the famine. He was made ruler over Egypt so he could take care of them.

Genesis 45:10-11

10 "You shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children and your flocks and your herds and all that you have.

11 "There I will also provide for you, for there are still five years of famine to come, and you and your household and all that you have would be impoverished." '

Joseph showed practical concern by arranging for his brothers to live near him. He not only forgave them, but also returned good for evil, showing kindness and gentleness, concern and care to those who had ill-treated him.

He responded to his brothers in like manner after his father's death.

Genesis 50:15-17

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!"

16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying,

17 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, "Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong." ' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

Joseph's brothers were still apprehensive that Joseph might do them harm now that their father had passed away. Joseph wept when he heard the words of his brothers. The verses that follow and other scriptural passages (e.g. Gen. 45:1-8) suggest that the tears expressed his compassion, understanding and tender feelings towards his brothers. There could also be a tinge of sadness over how his brothers felt about him, their fear of him and their failure to understand his attitude towards them.

Genesis 50:18-21

18 Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants."

19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place?"

20 "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

21 "So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

In verse 19, Joseph said to them: "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place?" He would not judge his brothers but would leave the judgement of his brothers' actions to God.

Although he did not condone his brothers' sins, he was not revengeful. There was no bitterness towards them, but appreciation of God and His sovereignty. God had brought about good (from the unkind deeds of his brothers) when He led Joseph to be ruler of Egypt so as to preserve many lives, including those of Jacob's descendants.

Joseph again comforted them and assured them that he had forgiven them. He even promised to provide for them and their children (v. 21). We see manifested here the positive qualities of love and kindness in the heart of Joseph.

d. Joseph was able to perceive God's hand at work.

Genesis 45:4-5

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

5 "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

Genesis 45:8

"Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God...

Joseph could perceive the spiritual reality beyond the outward circumstances. As Joseph focused on God, he could see the ultimate meaning behind what he was going through. Although his brothers sold him into Egypt, he knew that God was at work behind the scene, using him to preserve many lives.

Here is an important principle: We should continually seek to understand what God is doing in our lives beyond the visible and the obvious. Instead of allowing ourselves to be negatively affected by difficult and adverse circumstances, we should concentrate on what God is doing and learn the lessons God desires to teach us in the situations of life.

Because Joseph focused on God, he was able to help his brothers recognise the hand of God at work. Joseph was also sensitive to God's presence and His hand at work when he responded to Pharaoh regarding his dreams.

Genesis 41:16

..."It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

Genesis 41:25

Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do.

Although he was a mere prisoner appearing before a mighty ruler of the world, he remained spiritually focused – on what God had to say and on His intentions in the situation. He knew that God would give Pharaoh the answer to his dreams.

These passages show us that Joseph walked closely with God and was seeking to discern God's will and God's hand in all that he was going through, so that he could fulfil the part God desired of him.

If we are to go through situations well, we need to walk close to God, have the correct perspective, and be spiritually sensitive to Him.

e. Joseph exercised faith in God.

Genesis 50:24-26

24 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob."

25 Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here."

26 So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

When Joseph came to the end of his life, what was uppermost in his mind? What instructions did he give his brothers? What were his main concerns? What attitude did he reflect?

Although he was the exalted ruler of Egypt, he was not preoccupied with material things or his position in life. Instead he said: "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham".

His brothers might have been fearful of a future without Joseph. But Joseph wanted them to trust God and His promises. He reminded them of God's promise and expressed confidence in its fulfilment since God had said so.

Joseph also gave instruction about his bones (v. 25). Although stated in a matter-of-fact way, his instruction to his brothers about his bones shows his great faith in God. It is interesting to note that when the writer to the Hebrews referred to Joseph as a man of faith, it was this aspect of Joseph's life that was highlighted.

Hebrews 11:22

By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.

Why was Joseph's instruction about his bones an act of faith? It shows that Joseph believed God would do as He had promised, long before its fulfilment. He believed that God would bring them out of Egypt into the Promised Land. He knew that he had a part in God's plan and he pointed his brothers to it so that they too could have a part in it.

We see here, Joseph, a man of faith, focusing on God's purposes and promises and on what counts in eternity, instead of focusing on the glory of this world.

Similarly, we know that God has promised the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. This will certainly come to pass. Do we then live our lives consistent with this truth?

True faith is not simply acknowledging what God has said is true, but also faithfully living out a life consistent with the implications of the truths we have come to understand.

God Himself was faithful. He brought the Israelites into the Promised Land, just as He had promised. All that Joseph told his brothers about God bringing the Israelites out of Egypt into the Promised Land and the carrying of his bones to Canaan came to pass.

Joshua 24:32

Now they buried the bones of Joseph, which the sons of Israel brought up from Egypt, at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of Joseph's sons.

f. Joseph was deeply conscious of God.

We observe deep consciousness of God in Joseph's life. When faced with temptation, he was conscious that he must not sin against God. When he appeared before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, he pointed Pharaoh to God instead of claiming credit for himself, for he recognised the hand of God in that situation and God's message for Pharaoh. When he spoke to his brothers in their fear and dismay, he comforted them and directed them to God and His purposes. He pronounced God's sovereignty and the great things God was doing through his life. Even on his deathbed, we see this same consciousness of God when he pointed his brothers to the promises of God for Israel and expressed his confidence that God would fulfil what He had promised.

We have considered the two major points: (1) The Lord being with Joseph and (2) Joseph's positive response. These two major points bear a positive relationship with and reinforce each other. The Lord being with Joseph encouraged and enabled him to respond well morally and spiritually, and in turn, his positive response strengthened the quality and meaning of the Lord being with him. The Lord being with Joseph and his positive response, together with what he could learn from the situations he went through, form part of the total picture of the fulfilment of God's purposes in and through his life.

Concluding remarks

In this message, we saw how Joseph as a slave and prisoner seemed to be a miserable victim of circumstances. His situation appeared meaningless and discouraging. But in reality, Joseph was not a helpless victim. The Lord was with him, helping him and granting him success. No one could do anything to him without God's permission. Although Joseph might not have fully understood or appreciated all that had happened when he was going through them, he trusted God and found meaning and purpose in his life. There is much that we can learn from Joseph as an outstanding man of faith.

Joseph responded to life's situations positively. He was careful about his moral conduct and viewed things from the spiritual perspective. When faced with temptations, he did not entertain them. When given a chance to raise his personal profile, he gave honour and glory to God instead. When others tried to harm him, he returned good for evil instead of seeking revenge. When faced with adversity, he exercised faith, recognising God's sovereignty and mighty hand at work.

Joseph's character was marked by deep consciousness of God. He had good moral and spiritual values. How others treated him was of secondary importance. To him, what was more important was to maintain moral purity and to be true to God. Because of that, God was pleased to be with him and to help him. And that changed the whole complexion of things. The reality of what Joseph went through was thus vastly different from what appeared to be. He was neither a victim of circumstances nor in a miserable state. He was faring well and very much in God's will.

Likewise, what we should be concerned about is the Lord's approval of our lives and His presence with us. Whether the situations we go through are easy or difficult, or whether others are for or against us, all these should be of secondary importance.

Let us make sure that our lives are right before God and that He is pleased with us. Let us draw our confidence from the fact that God cares for us and is undertaking for our lives because He is our heavenly Father and we are His children. As we respond positively to Him, our lives will have meaning, purpose and direction. We will not be victims of circumstances, and we need not feel helpless or hopeless.

Let us learn from Joseph's example and reflect over our own lives. Are we preoccupied with what is happening to us, with the situation we are going through, or are we concentrating on what God is doing in the situation and what He wants us to learn? What is our attitude and conduct? Do we take a stand on moral issues, or do we shrink back out of self-preservation? Are we men and women of faith? Do we live by sight or by faith? Do we choose based on that which is temporal and fleeting, or on that which endures through eternity?

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