

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father of all, You do not stand at a distance from us, but You care for us and long to help us. In the midst of our varied and complicated problems, You see everything clearly; You understand what we do not, even things which seem insignificant to us. Sustain us by Your Spirit, we pray, and build us up in confidence and faith, so that we live at peace with ourselves, with others, and with You: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Television

Pray for some of the moral and ethical issues surrounding the use of television by children and young people. Pray for effective safeguards against inappropriate broadcasting.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for young people in prison and for those who seek to help them*
- *Pray about how children are taught about our world and God's creation*
- *Give thanks for those things of beauty God has placed around you*

Meditation

Where is the heart of faith today?
The will to live according to the Gospel,
To pay the price for being named 'Christ';
And bear the world's rejection without fear?

Where is the stomach to do what's right,
The guts to grasp the truth, and never let it go?
To accept that the price Christ paid for resurrection
Was losing all to win a crown more glorious?

Where is the wit, the mind and intellect
To search through faith and never hesitate
Because the facts are not convenient;
But hold to what is given because of the Giver?

Now, He will come, and when He comes,
He'll know what we have done with what we have.
He'll know our hearts and minds and feelings.
Will He find faith and love unbound within all three?

Bible Study - Genesis 39:1-6

¹ Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and he was purchased from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there by an Egyptian man named Potiphar. He was one of Pharaoh's officials who was the captain of the body guard. ² The LORD was with Joseph, he prospered and was assigned to the house of his Egyptian master. ³ His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD made him successful in everything he did. ⁴ Joseph found himself favoured and became Potiphar's personal attendant; and he put him in charge of his household, and of everything he had. ⁵ From the time that he made him master of his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house because of Joseph; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. ⁶ So he left everything he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he was not worried about anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking.

Review

In this series of studies we have omitted the difficult and unpleasant narrative of Judah and Tamar in the previous chapter 38. It has an important place in the story of Genesis, and if you wish to read it, then please access the list of available Bible studies on this site.

Today, we take up the story of what happened to Joseph after he was sold to a group of Ishmaelite traders travelling to Egypt. We discover quite quickly that God was working in an unexpected way; Joseph was sold as a slave to an Egyptian man of influence, and his circumstances changed for the better. The young man had been an arrogant young teenager when at home, but after being attacked by his brothers and sold into slavery, everything went well for him, and he began to prosper. Clearly, there was something special about Joseph, and his move to Egypt was the beginning of an immensely important story in the life of God's people. Eventually, the whole family of Jacob (the descendants of Jacob, Isaac and Abraham) would move to Egypt and grow into a nation.

But we should not read through the scriptures too quickly! The story line appears very straightforward, but this is because today, we like quick story lines. Scripture, however, places great importance on individual words, and as we look carefully at the words used in these six verses, some interesting things emerge that will help us make sense of the whole story of Joseph. In the field of literature, this great saga in Genesis has often been likened to ancient Egyptian and Sumerian stories and myths, but none of these compare with the complex and fascinating way in which our remarkable story fits into the theological structure of the whole of Genesis.

Some of the most significant words in this passage are 'the Lord' (39:3,5) and 'bless', or 'blessing' (39:5). In the story of Joseph, God's Holy Name 'the Lord' (the special Hebrew name of God written JHWH) only appears here and at the end of the story (49:18). All other uses of the term 'lord' in Genesis 39-50 mean 'master' in a general sense (e.g. when Joseph's brothers meet him to buy grain, and not recognising him, call him 'my lord' – see 42:10 etc.). The sacred name of God therefore marks the beginning and ending of this important story, which describes how Israel was saved from assimilation into the Canaanite culture of the 'Promised Land' (as nearly happened with Judah in Genesis 38). Through Joseph, Jacob's family were brought to Egypt, and grew into a nation with a distinct identity.

God's plan was greater than this, of course, and our passage today says 'the Lord was with Joseph' (see 39:2, and this is also implied in verse 5). Now, this great promise of the Lord's presence was an essential feature of God's Covenant relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These words of blessing tells us that Joseph, out of all the sons of Jacob, was the one God was now using to pursue His Covenant purposes. If we go back to look at the various key revelations of the Covenant in Genesis, we find that not only was God's presence a key feature, but the purpose of the Covenant was always to bless other people and nations through God's people (see 12:3 for example). This is what happens here in our passage today, because Joseph's work becomes a source of blessing to Potiphar's household.

This small section of the story of Joseph reminds us that in the midst of strange or difficult circumstances, God can use His people to be a blessing to others, and this can be very important. Joseph's work as a servant to Potiphar must have lasted many years but it laid the foundation for what happened next, and it gave Joseph an understanding of Egyptian life and culture; something he would need later on in life. None of us can tell how God will use our experience of life to build the foundations of what He wants from us in the future.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The reason for Joseph's servitude in Egypt
- What happened when Joseph joined Potiphar's household
- Joseph's growth in skill and grace

Going Deeper

Egypt has a special place in the life of God's people, and it is important to understand the way that God uses it. From this point of view, the story of Joseph is very important, as it is the beginning of the story. Secondly, whilst the rise of Joseph's importance within Potiphar's household gives us important signals for the future, within the wider story, they are a 'false start' to Joseph's rise to fame. God had far greater things for him than being the master of a house!

The reason for Joseph's servitude in Egypt

The first thing to notice is that Joseph was taken to Egypt, and was sold there as a slave. We normally accept and note this fact, and move on. However, if we pause to reflect for a moment, we will remember that Egypt played an important role in the story of the great forefathers in Genesis, and in the whole life of God's people through the centuries. Abraham was not entirely obedient to God's command to travel to Canaan when in chapter 12 he travelled straight through and on to Egypt because of a drought, thereby exposing his wife Sarah to the dangers of being taken into Pharaoh's harem (12:10f.). Later on, Isaac avoided the same mistake and stayed in Canaan at a time of drought (26:2) and his faith justified him, for God protected Isaac's family and they were successful in digging wells to find water, thus surviving a drought which was clearly severe.

Now, here we are with Joseph going down to Egypt, but with the strong implication that this is now God's will, in stark contrast to the previous stories of Abraham and Isaac in which God's people were warned not to 'go down to Egypt'. What was happening was that God intended to use Egypt as the place where His people would grow as a nation, but there was a right time and place for this in His plan. It was not right in the time of Abraham and Isaac, and each of these great men had to exercise faith in following the Lord's demands on them. Now, Joseph had to show faith in his God whilst being taken there against his will, but for purposes far beyond his own understanding.

The relationship of God's people with Egypt is not always what it seems in the Old Testament. Clearly, the people of Israel grew into a large nation whilst they were there, yet they became subject to appalling oppression from which they had to escape under the leadership of Moses. This was the most formative experience of the nation of Israel, and the 'Exodus' from Egypt, as we call it, has always been seen as a key example of God's salvation and deliverance. But it was God who took them there for a purpose in the first place. This is an important perspective on the whole story of God's salvation, as it teaches us that without faith in God, we can easily misunderstand the way that He is in control of what happens to us as His people.

What happened when Joseph joined Potiphar's household.

We read in the first part of the story of Joseph (Gen 37) that he had dreams in which his own sheaf of corn 'stood up' above those of his brothers, and later, how the sun, moon and stars 'bowed down' to him. Now we begin to find out about the real capabilities of this largely unknown young man. Clearly, he had qualities of leadership which became apparent as soon as he was put to work in the household of the man to whom he was sold as a slave. The whole of today's story is a combination of acts of God which placed Joseph in a favourable position, and evidence of Joseph's qualities which enabled him to take advantage of what God was doing.

Potiphar is described as a high official of Pharaoh, using a word in Hebrew normally used for a 'eunuch'; but this is hardly the case in view of the fact that Potiphar had a wife! There is no clear understanding of his role, but it seems most probably that he was in charge of Pharaoh's bodyguard. But the role may not have been a military one, as we might imagine. In ancient times, kings and Pharaohs needed to defend themselves from all manner of personal attack, and poisoning was a common means for assassination of a nation's leader. For this reason, in ancient times (and even today), some who might be called 'bodyguards' were responsible for tasting and eating some of the food to be given to Pharaoh. The reason why this might have been Potiphar's role is that in verse 6, we are told that Joseph ran Potiphar's house so well that the man did not have anything to worry about 'except the food he ate'! Now, we would imagine that if Joseph truly was the accomplished manager of the household he was portrayed as being, then he would have organised good food for his master. Now, he may have done this, in which case, the reason for this odd phrase in verse 6 must surely be due to the nature of Potiphar's 'bodyguard' role in which he daily ate food, in order to test that it was not poisoned!

Joseph's growth in skill and grace

There are some small indications in the Hebrew words of our text which add to our understanding of Joseph's increasing skills and development. In verse 2, it says that 'the Lord was with Joseph, he prospered and was assigned to the house ...' There were two general forms of labour a slave would perform; firstly, and most laboriously, in the fields; and secondly, in the master's house. This verse indicates to us that by a combination of the Lord's favour and guidance and his own skills, Joseph was quickly noticed by Potiphar and assigned to the house, a place where someone with skills could make personal progress, and this is what happened. Verse 3 says 'His master saw that the Lord was with Him and ... made him successful'. There are two parts to this affirmation. Firstly, the skills showed by Joseph which merited his own climbing through the ranks of service to a high position, but also the fact that Potiphar ascribed Joseph's ability and gifts to 'the Lord'. The fact that Potiphar noticed Joseph was obviously advantageous, but the fact that he accredited this to 'the Lord' was astonishing because this fulfilled one of the fundamental parts of God's Covenant with His people. The Covenant God made with Abraham said that his ancestors would be a blessing to others, and this is exactly what was happening now with Joseph! He was being a blessing to others in a visible way which enabled others to recognise God through what they did! Is this one of the earliest examples in the Bible of what we might call evangelism?

The story line is setting us up for what we know will be a fall, which we will read about in tomorrow's passage. Nevertheless, it is important to know that the young man Joseph is accomplished, and has learned quickly and well how to rise through the ranks from slave to master. But Joseph was not yet free, and his position could be compromised.

Application

God's plans move forward with genuine speed and we become fulfilled, when we know God's presence and blessing and respond with a desire to do His will with all care and skill. It is interesting to note that in the case of Joseph this happened in a domestic setting. He managed a household and developed skills that many societies often identify with women as well as men. Some might say that these skills are not

significant in today's world of work, indeed, few 'domestic' skills are taught because the emphasis is on leading people towards gainful employment. However, in the providence of God and in a significant number of Biblical stories, what happens in the home is indicative of greater things. In the household of Potiphar Joseph learned the combination of management, faith and discernment that would enable him to command an Empire for Pharaoh during critical years of famine. Clearly, Joseph had more to learn and many more things to experience before God could use him to bless Egypt as well as reconcile his own family, but he made a promising start!

We are not given any insight into Joseph's state of mind or his own perception of his faith. How we would love to know more! Yet it is typical of Genesis to say little about the feelings and thoughts of the forefathers. If we did know more, we might try to make too much of a model out of what we find in the Scriptures. However, it is the Lord's intention that we should grow in faith in order to follow Him whatever the circumstances. Certainly, we must be prepared to follow Him even to places that seem as far away to us from the purposes of God and our own interests as Egypt did to Joseph.

Though little is said in this short passage that could give us a spiritual guide, we have the impression of a man willing to do what was right in whatever circumstances he found himself, a quality reflected upon later in Scripture by the great apostle Paul (Phil 4:11). Surely, this attitude is something to which we should aspire, and much good can come from all of God's people who are willing to sustain a high quality of work and commitment in whatever circumstances they find themselves.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways can the story of Joseph inspire people, perhaps young people today, even from this short text?
2. Where in this text can you see evidence of the Covenant of God with the forefathers, such as God's people blessing the nations?
3. Is it important to be gifted, or does God work equally with those who are gifted and those who are not?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I think it would be true to say that I can see how God has used most of my past experiences in order to build the life I have today. However, I reckon that just like most people, I have a rather selective memory, and can tend to blank out the difficult experiences in favour of those things that were good. From time to time, I recall some of these more taxing experiences and wonder how they have really affected me. I find it best to commit these memories to the Lord and ask Him to reveal anything that I should do or say to deal with them properly rather than just forget them.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Do you feel that there are times in your life when you have been loser to what the Lord wants of you than others? Do you look back on your life and feel bad about some things that have happened, or are you able to see how God has used everything to help you? If you have difficulty with anything in your past, then talk about it with others.*
- *Pray for the people with whom you have had a difficult relationship in the past, and ask the Lord to give you opportunities to make amends for anything that has gone wrong, or anything you have said that has been unwise.*

Final Prayer

We praise You, Lord God, for ministers, priests, deacons, church workers and all other saints of God, both ordinary and special, who guide Your people through today's troubled times. Bless them with love, patience, resoluteness and courage in the face of the evils of this world, and grant them peace. AMEN
