

“The Early Life Of Joseph”  
Br. Ted Smith

The study of the early life of Joseph is very interesting. As Christians, our chief profit from such a study is the noting of the lessons in character development. We cannot help admiring the character of Joseph, and we deeply desire to emulate his characteristics. As we study into the Scripture record, we see that we are dealing with the history of a family--a family of giants--giants in faith. Joseph's great-grandfather was no less than Abraham himself. Abraham was called the "father of the faithful" and surely he deserved such an epithet. His manifestations of faith are unsurpassed by anyone in the Scriptures, unless we except our Lord Jesus Himself.

And Joseph's father was also a giant in faith toward God. He was willing to pay a heavy price in natural things to live a life of faith toward God. To be an heir of the promises of God was worth more to him than anything else in life. Paul in speaking of Timothy, said that he called "to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also." (2 Tim. 1:5) So we see the same thing in the case of Joseph--he inherited the strong faith of his great-grandfather Abraham, and also the strong faith of his father, Jacob.

We call to mind the marvelous faith of great-grandfather Abraham. We find that Abraham was from the line of Shem, one of the sons of Noah, of Noah's ark fame. Abraham was the ninth generation from the family line of Shem. There appeared to be a 352 year spread of time from the time Shem came from the ark until the time Abram was born. (Berean notes on Gen. 11:26)

We read now about the faith of great-grandfather Abraham, quoting from Gen. 12:1-4, "Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house unto a land that I will shew thee; and I will make of thee a great nation. . . and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him; and Abram was 75 years old when he departed out of Haran." Another evidence of the faith of great grand-father Abram is recorded in Gen. 15:5, 6, "And God brought Abram forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them; and God said unto Abram, So shall thy seed be. And Abram believed in the Lord; and God counted it to him for righteousness."

When Abram was 99 years old, God appeared to him and said (Gen. 17:5), "neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many

nations have I made thee." In the margin of the Bible we find that the name Abraham means "Father of a great multitude." So Joseph, in speaking of his great-grandfather would literally say, "Father of a great multitude." He would not use the word Abraham as we do. At this time in the life of Abraham, God made a covenant with him, that every child should be circumcised." (Gen. 17:9-14) At this time, too, God gave the promise to Abraham that his wife Sarah would bear him a son, even though Abraham was 100 years old and his wife 90 years old. Sarai's name was changed to Sarah, meaning "Princess," and it was promised that "she shall be the mother of nations." (Gen. 17:16) "And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac; and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him." The name Isaac means "he will laugh." Abraham took immediate steps to fulfill the covenant of circumcision proposed to him by God. Gen. 17: 26, 27.

At the time prophesied, great-grandfather Abraham had a son and he was named Isaac. (Gen. 21:1-3) Here was the heir, the promised son and dearly beloved by his 100-year old father, and his 90-year old mother. "Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me." (Gen. 21:6) Now came the most crucial test of the faith of great-grandfather Abraham, and he showed himself to be a giant in faith. In Gen. 22:2 we read, "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of." Did Abraham falter and take time to think this thing over? Not at all; for the 3rd verse goes on to say, "And Abraham rose up early in the morning," and he was on his way. Arriving at the proper place, Abraham built an altar, placed wood in order on the altar and bound Isaac and placed him upon the altar, "And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son." The crucial moment had arrived for God to intervene—"And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven. . . Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him; for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me." Did not God know what Abraham would do? Did God need proof of Abraham's faith? We think not--all this was for Abraham's sake; for in the carrying out of the command of God, Abraham's faith became stronger than ever--Abraham knew that he had supreme faith in God, for had he not offered the heir of the promise in whom was centered all his hopes for the fulfillment of the promises God had made to him? Could there be any doubt in his own mind that he truly believed in God's power and wisdom? So this gives us a little clue to the trust in God that was manifested by Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham. Apparently Joseph inherited his great-grandfather's complete trust in God.

Another admirable trait of great-grandfather Abraham was shown in his concern that his son should have a suitable wife. He didn't want Isaac to marry any daughter of the

Canaanites; and he sent his servant to his native land to find a wife for Isaac. Rebecca was found and "she said, I will go." (Gen. 24:58) Apparently Rebecca was the daughter of Isaac's cousin. So we see how much of all this is the history of a family. (Gen. 24:15) So at great expense and effort, great-grandfather Abraham found a wife for his son so he would not be influenced to evil by marrying a woman of the Canaanites.

Joseph's father was also a giant in faith and so Jacob indeed had a good inheritance of faith. We remember how his father Jacob was a twin of his brother Esau. Esau was a man that cared nothing for the promise made to Abraham; but it was the very reverse in the case of father Jacob. For a mess of pottage, uncle Esau sold his birthright to father Jacob; and Grandmother Rebecca maneuvered in such a way that his father got the blessing of the firstborn from his Grandfather Isaac. Jacob had to pay a stiff price for his faith in the promises of God, but he seemed more than willing to pay. He had to flee for his life, and Grandfather Isaac and Grandmother Rebecca sent Jacob to the native land of Grand-mother Rebecca, not only for his own personal protection from the wrath of Esau, but also to put him in touch with the family of his Grandmother so he would be able to find a suitable wife. From the wording of Gen. 28:1 and 3, I think it reasonable to think that Isaac was satisfied that his son, Jacob had the blessing of the firstborn. Here is how these verses read, "And Isaac called Jacob, and blessed him, and charged him, and said unto him, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise go to Padanaram, to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father; and take thee a wife from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother. And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful. . ."

I think we are all more or less familiar with the experiences of Joseph's father--the twenty years that he had served Laban, the father of his two wives. During that time Leah bore Jacob six sons, Rachel's handmaid bore two sons to Jacob, and Leah's handmaid also bore two sons to Jacob. Finally, as stated by Gen. 30 beginning with verse 22, "God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb. And she conceived and bare a son; and said, God hath taken away my reproach; and she called his name Joseph." Shortly after this, Joseph's father had the urge to return to his homeland. Laban however was not at all pleased to lose the service of his son-in-law who had been so profitable to him. However we read in Gen. 31:3 that "the Lord said unto Jacob, Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and I will be with thee."

Joseph's father showed a fine spirit toward his brother Esau when he returned to his native land. Instead of showing a bitter spirit toward Esau, he endeavored to be reconciled to him and gave him valuable gifts to show that he held no animosity toward him for Esau's

past hatred. May it not be entirely possible that Joseph inherited this fine trait from his father?

After his father had become reestablished in his homeland, Benjamin was born, the only full brother that Joseph had. His mother lost her life when Benjamin was born and she apparently had time to name the second son, and called him Benoni, the "son of my sorrow. Jacob however, renamed him Benjamin, "The Son of the right hand." Benjamin's birth took place a short distance from Bethlehem. (Smith's Bible Dictionary)

And now we come to the direct story of Joseph's early life. It starts in the 37th chapter of Genesis. His father, "Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan." (V. 1) At the opening of our narrative proper, we find Joseph was 17 years old. He was feeding the flock with his brethren, and he was with his four half-brothers, the two sons of the handmaid of Leah, and the two sons of the handmaid of Rachel. Apparently these two half-brothers were doing things that were wrong, and Joseph reported whatever it was to his father. according to the 3rd verse, "Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, and he made him a coat of many colours, or of many pieces. This particular type of coat was worn by royalty and indicated how Jacob felt toward this son, born of his beloved Rachel. Verse 4 is a slice of fallen human nature--"And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him." Very likely this would suggest that they spoke to him sarcastically and bitterly. Instead of having sympathy for their father who loved the boy dearly, they felt jealous of him and treated him in a spiteful manner.

Joseph was apparently entirely guileless in his youth and thought possibly that his brethren would be interested in a dream he had. He related his

(Over)

dream, and his brethren "hated him yet the more." (V. 5) Joseph had to learn the hard way to keep such things to himself. Can you visualize Joseph telling his dream to his ten half-brothers?--"Hear I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed; for, 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." His brothers caught the point, and said, "shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words." But Joseph had another dream and tried again to tell his brethren," Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me. And he told it to his father, and to his brethren; and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth? And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the sayings." Could it be possible that Joseph inherited his peaceful nature from his father? We do not find any indication that Joseph resented the treatment his brethren gave him or offered any resistance to their hateful treatment. We remember his father did not attempt to "get even" with Esau, but was peaceable in nature.

Now we come to the episode in Joseph's life which gave his brethren an opportunity to vent their hatred upon him, away from the protection of his loving father. The setting for this episode is given us in the 37th chapter of Genesis, beginning with verse 12. Joseph's brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. Israel told Joseph that he would like to have him see how his brethren were getting along and how the flocks were doing. Apparently Joseph's father had confidence in his self reliance and sent him forth to find his brethren. He went out of the valley of Hebron and came to Shechem, but he had no success in locating his brethren. A certain man discovered Joseph wandering in a field and asked him what he was trying to do. Joseph told the man that he was seeking his brethren. The man seemed to know about these brethren and where they had gone, so he told Joseph to go to Dothan and he would find his brethren there.

His brethren spotted him when he was a long way off and they conspired against him to kill him. They showed their contempt and bitterness for Joseph by saying to one another, "Behold this dreamer cometh. (Gen. 37:18, 19) Apparently these dreams of Joseph were still rankling in their minds, and now they thought they would get rid of him for good. "Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him; and we shall see what will become of his dreams." (V. 20) It was the dreams that Joseph had that bothered them--they didn't like the idea of

their younger brother ruling over them some time in the future, so they thought they would destroy him and his dreams along with him.

One half-brother was not in harmony with their murderous plans--this was Reuben. Now Reuben was the firstborn son of Jacob--his mother was Leah. Reuben delivered Joseph from his brethren and he said unto them, "Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him. Secretly he had in mind to deliver Joseph from the pit a little later and send him back to his father again. When Joseph had come to his brethren, they had stripped him of his coat, for this coat represented their father's special love for Joseph, and these brethren were envious, and they wanted to take the coat away from Joseph and destroy every mark of superiority that was accorded to Joseph by his father. They then cast him into a pit where there was no water. Apparently Reuben left the scene for a time and the brethren sat down to eat bread, very likely the food that Joseph brought to them from their father. While they were eating Joseph was in anguish of soul and pleaded with them and besought them to do him no harm, but they ignored his cries in their hardness of heart. Gen. 42:21.

Before they were done eating they saw a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt." An idea sprang into the mind of Judah (Judah was the fourth son of Leah)--"What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content. Gen. 37:26, 27.

We find an interesting comment about this turn of events--this change of sentiment suggested by Judah's proposal, "Judah's motive was apparently a double one--first, to ease his conscience by choosing the lesser of two evils, avoiding to incur the guilt of his brother's blood, and yet desirous to accomplish the purpose of getting rid of him, and that at a slight profit to themselves. Then, in common with the other eight brothers, he was willing to lie to his father and to make believe that Joseph was dead. Judah's choice of the lesser of two evils he may have regarded as a species of virtue, as the suggestion from 'Let us slay our brother,' to 'Let us sell our brother,' presents a strong contrast. Thus men are often deceived by comparing a great with a lesser evil, or themselves one with another, and especially with those of meaner disposition, instead of with the perfect standards of virtue and true holiness set forth in the Scriptures. (1639-4) I am sure we all agree to this principle and are careful to see to it that we do not stoop to do evil even in the slightest. The human heart is tricky and we as new creatures, must resist and reject any suggestions that may do an evil simply because something else is more evil.

The sale of Joseph to the Ishmaelites was consummated while Reuben was still absent. The price was twenty pieces of silver. When Reuben returned and found that Joseph was not in the pit, he was terribly agitated "and he rent his clothes" in consternation." (Gen. 37:29, 30) Joseph's brethren took his coat and dipped it in the blood of a kid of the goats which they killed for the purpose. They returned to their father and showed him the coat saturated with blood, and they made believe that they found the coat and wondered if their father would recognize it. The effect upon Jacob was like a bolt of lightning—"And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. And Jacob rent his clothes and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him. (Gen. 37:33-35) These words are eloquent in expressing the tragedy of the deceit of the sons of Jacob, and the sorrow of Jacob for his son that he thought was dead.

Getting back now to Joseph. When he was drawn up from the pit, we may be able to fairly approximate the shock to his mind--here he was now, rudely handled by nine of his half brother, all of them much older than himself. He was stripped of his many colored coat--this was a precious evidence of his father's tender love for him--now it was gone. He was utterly helpless in the hands of his half-brothers, who he knew for sure now, that they hated him. No longer was he a father's darling, but a hated half-brother to be gotten rid of. When the merchants passed the twenty pieces of silver to the brothers, no doubt Joseph was somehow put in secure restraint so he could not escape. He was now in the company of strangers, who doubtless used a different language and all they cared for him was to keep him in custody until they reached Egypt to sell him on the slave market. The actual sentiments of Joseph under these circumstances are not recorded, but there is nothing to indicate that he was bitter or hard to handle by his captors. With his strong native faith toward God and remembering the strong faith of his father, we may be justified in assuming that he derived strength from on high to buoy him up in this strange turn of events. It could even be possible that he remembered the two dreams he had, and was confident that these were from God and that his life and his future were assured. Would it not be reasonable to assume that his beloved father had told him of his experiences with God--the ladder dream, the message from God directing him to return to his native land with his family; the night of wrestling with the heavenly messenger when his name was changed from Jacob to Israel—"a prince with God?" Perhaps as Joseph trudged along or rode on a camel, his mind was occupied with his belief in the sure promises of God. I think it is very reasonable to think that this was the case with Joseph. We can be certain that he was a giant in faith even under these tragic circumstance.

Genesis 39 continues the narrative, starting with verse 1, "And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the hands of the Ishmaelites, which had brought him down thither." How strange all this must have been to Joseph--only 17 years old, rudely torn away from his loving father's home, sold by strangers who cared nothing for him; in a strange city having sights and sounds that were all new to him. And he was now a slave, utterly subject to the will of a master, having no liberties and he would have to take any treatment that was given him or else suffer dire consequences. He would be clothed by his master and have to eat what was set before him, and have to learn a new language, and be obedient to every command of Potiphar, an important officer of the Pharaoh of Egypt.

The life Joseph lived must have been outstanding, for we read "the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man." (V. 2) Potiphar noted all this and concluded that he had a most unusual and valuable slave. Consequently Potiphar made Joseph overseer over all that he had, and "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." "And Joseph was a goodly person, and well favored." From this language of the record we conclude that Joseph was outstanding in his conduct of practical wisdom and courteous manner. If the Lord was with him, as the record says, then we may be sure that he lived a life of righteousness and reverence toward God and was in constant touch with God through prayer. Joseph did not mope or chafe in this new life molded by the providences of God, but put his mind to practical affairs and living a useful and righteous life. What a lesson this is to us--if the providences of God direct our lives in a certain channel, then we are to give ourselves wholly over to doing what is right and practical in view of all the circumstances at the moment. All the experiences of Joseph were meant as training him in character so that he would become strong in a balanced way and useful in responsible positions. So with us, we too have checkered experiences, our "ups and downs" and these are for the purpose of training us for future service, either in this life or in the life to come. And like Joseph, we are to have our minds raised to view matters from God's standpoint and become strong in faith.

But Joseph was in for another crucial experience--another "down" so to speak. It was quite possible Joseph was a handsome man, and he was indeed in a responsible and favored position in the household of Potiphar, and his conduct was such as to excite the admiration of others. But whatever was the true situation, Potiphar's wife had designs on Joseph.. It was the usual appeal of women of low moral standard. The temptation could be a powerful one to someone of a lower caliber than Joseph--admiration of a woman who was the wife of a prominent officer in the service of Pharaoh; the possibility for advancement into the company of the elite at the time; and even the possibility of being



released from slavery. But Joseph's reaction was a firm refusal to fall for the charms of this woman and the appeal of all the favors that might come to him if he did what Potiphar's wife wanted him to do. We note the words of Joseph in Gen. 39:8, "But he refused, and said unto his master's wife, Behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; there is none greater in this house than I: neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

But Potiphar's wife was a determined and persistent woman. One day there was none of the men in the house and Potiphar's wife thought that now was her chance to win Joseph over. She caught him by his garment and Joseph pulled himself from her grasp, and in doing so he left his garment in her hands. She was furious and her feelings toward Joseph were turned to intense hatred and she now determined to get even with him for refusing her advances. She lied to her husband when he returned, showing him the garment of Joseph as her proof that she had saved herself from the attempt of Joseph to molest her. Potiphar was furious "And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were bound." (Gen. 39:20)

Again Joseph was helpless as he was when his half-brothers sold him to the merchants on the way to Egypt. Being in prison at that time was a terrible experience as prisons in that day were horrible places. We can easily imagine the feelings of shame that would naturally be felt by a man as noble as Joseph. Doubtless the story would be circulated about, that the slave Joseph was cast into prison because he tried to molest the wife of his master. This would be hard to endure as he knew how hard he had tried to steer clear of Potiphar's wife, and how persistent she was to force him to fall in line with her immoral desires.

But the faith and character of Joseph were constant things and he did not falter to live a life that was commendable to God and to man. We note the words of Gen. 39:21-23, "But the Lord was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And 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." It seems to me these words, that "the Lord was with him," suggests that Joseph lived a life of faith in God, no matter what happened to him, and he lived righteously no matter what were his outward circumstances. What an example of faith and righteousness was Joseph! We can benefit greatly in our Christian life by studying carefully the life of Joseph and try to do as he did in all the changing experiences of life. We are favored in every way above

Joseph in knowledge of the purposes of God, and surely there is every reason why we should live lives that will commend them to God and to man, just as Joseph did.

After a time two royal prisoners were confined to the same prison that Joseph was in. It seems that Pharaoh became displeased with the chief of the butlers and against the chief of the bakers. What they did, the record does not say, but Pharaoh had autocratic power and if he was displeased with any conduct of his servants, he could cast them into prison.

The kind of character Joseph had showed up in his treatment of these two royal prisoners. It is a delight to read about this man Joseph as his character was on such a high plane. When he was in prison having authority from the keeper of the prison, he did not use his authority to mistreat the prisoners, but he was considerate of their comforts. One morning he came into the presence of these two royal prisoners and he noticed that they seemed dejected. Now most keepers would not be concerned as to how any of the prisoners felt--they were not going anywhere anyway, the keeper could reason, so what difference would it make how any prisoner felt? But it was different with Joseph--he was truly a sympathetic man. So he asked the prisoners what was troubling them. "And they said unto him, We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, Do not interpretations belong unto God? tell me them, I pray you." Gen. 40:8.

The butler related his dream and Joseph gave the interpretation--in "three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head, and restore thee unto thy place; and thou shalt deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou was his butler. But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house. For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon." (Gen. 40:13-15) It is interesting to note that Joseph did not go into a long explanation for the reasons for his plight or explain the misdeeds of those who were responsible for his crucial experiences. So we can take a lesson from this and refrain from indulging in evil tirades against those who are responsible for our unhappy experiences. If God permits things to happen over which we have no control, then we are to accept them with good grace and not indulge in running others down for their misdeeds. There are times when it is proper and necessary to explain facts, but we as Christians are to refrain from all unnecessary evil accounts, even in our own defense. This is not an easy assignment, but Joseph performed well and we are to do likewise.

Joseph interpreted the dream of the chief of the bakers too, but his dream indicated a tragic end--in three days he was to be executed and his body was to be subjected to extreme indignities.

The Lord saw fit to keep Joseph in the prison for another two years--for the butler forgot all about Joseph, and said nothing to Pharaoh. Not a word of complaint is recorded on the part of Joseph--what a man of faith! What a man of righteousness! Could we perform as Joseph did? He set us a fine example of complete trust in God.

Finally Pharaoh had two dreams and none of the magicians or wise men could interpret the dreams. It was then that the chief butler remembered the request of Joseph to speak to Pharaoh in his behalf. That must have been a long wait for Joseph, but God had future designs for

Joseph, and when the time was just right, then he was delivered from the prison. Here is how the matter is expressed in Gen. 41, beginning with the 9th verse, "Then spake the chief butler unto Pharaoh, saying, I do remember my faults this day; Pharaoh was wroth with his servants, and put me in ward in the captain of the guard's house, both me and the chief baker; and we dreamed a dream in one night, I and he; we dreamed each man according to the interpretation of his dream. And there was there with us a young man, an Hebrew, servant to the captain of the guard; and we told him, and he interpreted to us our dreams; to each man according to his dream he did interpret. And it came to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was; me he restored unto mine office, and him he hanged. Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon; and he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh.