

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 5. Brat to Braveheart.

We come to Genesis chapter 37 and see that Jacob settled in his father's country near Hebron in Canaan and organised his sons to look after his multitudinous flocks. Among them we meet the second-youngest, Joseph, at 17 a spoilt, tale-telling brat. The blame for this must be taken by his father, who apparently had not learnt from the past that favouritism is disastrous to family harmony. It is natural that, as Rachel's first son, Joseph should hold a special place in Jacob's heart, but verses 3 and 4 outline a tragedy waiting to happen. Israel (alias Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, and made him a richly ornamented coat that would symbolize his intention to make Joseph his primary heir. The other sons did not try to hide their hatred of daddy's pet.

The business-minded Jacob recognized that Joseph had a brilliant mind and outstanding administrative ability, and accordingly gave him a position of authority above his pastoral brothers. Joseph took advantage of this to become his father's confidante, bearing him tales of his brothers' misbehaviour. To make matters worse, Joseph tried to win their respect by recounting two of his dreams which seemed to indicate he would end up as their ruler. (verses 5-11.) Even Jacob was concerned at the inference that he too would bow down to his own son, and as for the sons, their simmering hatred was reaching boiling point.

It was at this point that these sons had taken the flocks as far as Shechem in search of good pasture and Jacob decided it was time to check up on them. His natural choice of an ambassador was Joseph. (verses 12-14.) Joseph, ever tactless, took this journey of 160 kilometres through rough country wearing the special robe his father had given him, either not knowing or not caring that this would be like a red rag to a bull.

His brothers saw him coming, and wearing the insignia of office. It was the last straw. Verses 19, 20 tell their reaction. "Come now, let's kill that dreamer and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." And so they betrayed not only their hatred towards Joseph but their complete disregard for the feelings of their father.

Reuben, the good-hearted but weak eldest son, tried to rescue Joseph from death and they compromised by throwing him alive into an empty well, first tearing from him the gorgeous coat. A measure of their callousness can be seen in verse 25 as they sat down to eat their meal right there, unheeding of Joseph's desperate cries (see 42:21). As they ate a camel caravan came by from Gilead, loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, on its way to Egypt. The next 2 verses show the business acumen of Judah – something that flourishes in his descendants to this day! – disguising it under concern for his little brother, and so Joseph was delivered from the pit and sold for 20 shekels of silver to the Midianite merchants. Then this caravan would have travelled through Joseph's homeland to get to Egypt, adding to his agony. It was an easy matter to kill a goat, dip the hated robe in its blood and bear a deceitful tale of woe to Jacob. The old man's heart was broken and he refused to be comforted. (It is interesting to note that the 2 brothers who rescued Joseph from death were both sons of Leah!)

This does not seem a promising situation for the family which was to establish a nation! How often in the midst of disaster, or maybe much later, we marvel at the hand of God who can work His will through the most impossible situation. In Joseph's life God was already at work.

We turn to chapter 39 and in Egypt Joseph, once top son and now a slave, was sold into the household of Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials and captain of the guard. It was a devastating situation - *except* for the significant words in verse 2, "The Lord was with Joseph." The fact is that he prospered, the Lord gave him success in everything he did, he found favour in the eyes of Potiphar and was quickly

promoted to be in charge of the entire household. His industriousness and organisational genius blessed the household to the extent that Potiphar could commit everything except his actual food to Joseph and sit back to enjoy life. The “brat” who was a constant taunt to his elder brothers was going through major discipline under the hand of God and was becoming steadfast in his faith and allegiance to his God.

In the story in verses 7-20 we stand in awe at the self-control of this “well-built and handsome” young man who resisted the temptation to comfort, escape from loneliness and the chance to wield a strong influence through Potiphar’s weak wife, all because he would not bring dishonour to the name of the God he so whole-heartedly served.

Alas, what was the reward for his virtue? The ugly slander of the rejected woman and removal to prison. Actually, it is quite possible that Potiphar was suspicious of his wife’s veracity in the account. Maybe her infatuation had surfaced before. The usual punishment for such a crime was instant death, yet Joseph’s punishment was surprisingly mild - imprisonment in a prison maybe less horrible because it housed the king’s prisoners. But can you imagine the state of his mind? He had served his father faithfully and landed in a pit. He had served Potiphar faithfully and landed in prison. Where was his God now? Joseph could have been angry, resentful, depressed, cynical.

The fact was that Joseph did not abandon his God, and his God did not abandon him. Under his hand Joseph still worked conscientiously and soon rose to a position of respect and authority in the prison. We see this in verses 21-23, with the opening phrase, “the Lord was with him.” The dross of his childhood was being burned away, allowing the gold of his true character to shine forth. For 2 whole years Joseph served and trusted.

We can fortify ourselves to endure just punishment, but it is incredibly hard to put up with injustice to ourselves. Joseph is a great example to us, but not so great as Jesus himself, who suffered so much unfairly in order to win our redemption. He may ask us to do the same for His sake; we must trust Him completely, just as He loves us completely.

In Chapter 40 we see a glimmer of hope. The two officials of Pharaoh confided their dreams to Joseph, no doubt a confidante of all the prisoners by this time, and he was able through the guidance of God to interpret their dreams correctly. Verse 14 shows Joseph’s very human attempt at escape by simply asking the butler to put in a good word for him to Pharaoh. But gratitude did not prompt the butler’s memory and a further 2 years passed with nothing happening. It must have been a sore trial for Joseph! But God was still at work. Chapter 41 reveals Pharaoh’s dreams that seemed significant enough for Pharaoh to search for an interpretation. None of his local wise men could rake up a meaning to satisfy him, and at that crucial moment the butler remembered his debt to Joseph and told Pharaoh about the “young Hebrew,” (not just “one of the prisoners”) whereupon Pharaoh promptly sent for Joseph.

Can you just imagine how Joseph felt at that unbelievable moment when a messenger came to tell him to clean himself up and present himself to Pharaoh? The mind boggles. Wisely Joseph shaved, to be in conformity with Egyptian fashion, and found some better clothes than his prison garb. His heart must have been pounding! But even in this moment of heady freedom Joseph stayed close to his God, passing Pharaoh’s praise in verse 15 onto the correct source and confidently trusting that God would interpret the dreams for him. But he didn’t stop there: his facile mind was already conceiving the ideal plan for coping with the drought to come, a plan that impressed Pharaoh enough to appoint him, an ex-prisoner, there and then to the second highest office of the land! Joseph was 30 years old.

It is interesting to see how God uses history to work for Him. It is most likely that the reigning Pharaoh was one of a Semite dynasty, the Hyksos or “shepherd kings” that for a long period controlled the land of Egypt. They were hated as foreigners, so much so that all records of that alien rule, including the

saga of Joseph, were destroyed and its history deliberately suppressed. The fact that Joseph was a Hebrew, a fellow-Semite, could account for Pharaoh's sudden approval of him and his ideas. From verse 41 we see the extent of the honour he bestowed on this "nobody" – the signet ring, fine linen robes, a gold chain around his neck, a chariot fit for the "second-in-command" and authority only second to Pharaoh himself. And it is gratifying to see that the virtuous Joseph was given a wife of his own: I am romantic enough to believe that God organised it to be a love-match! Joseph soon had 2 sons of his own.

How long did those 2 extra years in prison feel to Joseph? Had God let him down after all? On top of hatred and slander he now had to endure ingratitude. But he was learning a vital lesson; God's timing is always perfect. Remember that when the waiting time seems to drag for you.

The 7 years of abundance came to an end (verse 53) and the 7 years of famine began. Joseph's foresight now paid dividends as he opened the storehouses of grain; there was enough for Egypt and enough to share with neighbours, a great boost to Egypt's power and wealth. It is interesting to note that, by clever organisation, by governing wisely and supporting Pharaoh the Semite, Joseph was the means of stabilizing Semitic power in Egypt and influencing the surrounding nations. Indeed, God's promise to Abraham and Isaac that all nations would be blessed through them, was in part already being fulfilled! As for Joseph, this Hebrew showed the skill which later was to become apparent throughout Israel, to move easily from agriculture to business: it was to happen again in Babylon. Joseph, raised as a shepherd, was now an outstanding statesman and businessman.

Chapter 42 begins the saga of reconciliation; Jacob was desperate enough to send his sons to Egypt for supplies. We can squirm with delight as we see the tables turned, Joseph standing in powerful authority over those recalcitrant men! But what a moment it must have been for Joseph, by this time 39 years old. In verse 8 he recognized his brothers and remembered his dreams about them; he could see now what God had been doing all along, in sending him ahead so that he would be the means of enabling the whole family to survive. The realisation must have been sweet.

It seems from his treatment of them that Joseph was being vindictive. The accusation of spying was quite feasible, with the ruling dynasty being unpopular in Egypt and the men coming along the one perilous road available to an invading nation. But Joseph had a purpose in his roughness; with his high intelligence and powers of psychological insight he was trying to discover if his brothers had changed in any way, if time had tempered the meanness, the jealousy, the self-interest that had previously governed their actions. Verse 21 shows that they were indeed repentant and knew they deserved their punishment. Because Joseph used an interpreter they did not realise he could understand what they were saying, and it nearly brought him undone. Verse 24 shows how much he still loved them. Above all, he was longing to see his young brother Benjamin again and demanded that they bring him next time they came. As a surety that they would come back he kept Simeon in prison.

It must have been with a still greater fear that the brothers set off on their second journey, as told in chapter 43. Their money had been returned, they would have to prove their innocence and guard with their life young Benjamin whom Jacob had been reluctant to trust to them. Back in Egypt they attempted to hand back their money to Joseph's steward, only to be told he had received payment for their previous corn. Their puzzlement deepened as Joseph ordered them into his house where a banquet was prepared, the men (including the released Simeon) being seated in order of age, their feet washed and their donkeys fed. They presented him with their local gifts, balm and honey, spices, nuts and myrrh, and Joseph asked them with apparent indifference how was their aging father. At sight of Benjamin Joseph nearly became undone again and had to retreat for a good cry. It was Benjamin who got the largest meal. The height of the drama comes in Chapter 44, as the brothers make the terrifying discovery of Joseph's silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack, and hasten in dread back to Joseph, unaware of his artful ruse. But Judah's outstanding self-sacrificing plea to save Benjamin for the sake of his

father Jacob, at last convinced Joseph that these men had changed; their path to God had been as rough, twisting and difficult as their father's had been, but they had arrived.

Joseph could contain himself no longer. In chapter 45 he ordered all his courtiers out and made himself known to his brothers in the privacy of the family. Their astonishment struggled with their fear of the reprisals he could inflict. But Joseph in one huge gesture of forgiveness reassured them in verses 5-7, "because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance." And then verse 8 shows his grace as he lifted their guilt from them – "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." His words showed just how far he had come from the spoilt little favourite they had hated; his faith had enabled God to transform the evil events in his life and make him a towering trophy of His grace.

Remember that God our Great Creator has not stopped His creative function. If we unreservedly place any evil circumstance in our lives into His hands, He can transform it into good for us. Let Joseph's journey from suffering to serenity encourage us today.

When Pharaoh heard the news of Joseph's brothers he was delighted (verse 16) and issued an immediate invitation, complete with gifts, for all the family of Joseph to come and share the benefits of Egypt, though his generosity was most likely prompted by self-interest: it would be an advantage to have a sizeable number of fellow-Semites in the land. The brothers hastened home to their father with the wonderful news.

In chapter 46 we see that Jacob hesitated before making the journey. His grandfather and father had both suffered from their errant sojourns in Egypt, and at Beersheba – where Abraham and Isaac had both worshipped the Lord – he paused to offer sacrifices to God. And God answered him in a vision, (verse 3), "Don't be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again."

Reassured, Jacob set out with his extended family of 70, and verses 28-30 speak of the emotional reunion with his favourite son. They were to enjoy 17 years of fellowship before Jacob died. Joseph cleverly assigned the newcomers to the region of Goshen with its fertile land ideal for livestock, in the eastern part of the Nile delta, separate from the main part of Egypt, yet near enough to benefit from this most advanced civilisation of the day. Here, at a safe distance from the Egyptians - who despised shepherds - they could retain their national identity while at the same time their Semite presence would bring military and political advantage to Egypt's communications. In their new home the Israelites acquired property and were fruitful and increased greatly in number. (Chapter 47:27.)

In chapter 49 the dying Jacob issued a blessing to all his sons and in verses 29-32 instructed them to bury him, not in Egypt, but back in the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and himself, the land of Canaan. At 110 Joseph too died, (chapter 50:22-26), echoing his father's instructions that his body be kept in a coffin until it too could be buried in the promised land. Both father and son died with their faith still strong in their God.

One would think that God would have chosen the outstanding Joseph, rather than the imperfect Judah, to be the ancestor of Jesus. Jacob's blessing to Joseph was pastoral rather than regal, whereas to Judah, "a lion's cub", he assigned a perpetual sceptre (the symbol of a king, not just a tribal chieftain) and the prophecy shows itself to be Messianic as it includes the obedience of the nations, leading us to its fulfilment in Revelation 5:5, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed." St. Paul comments in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 about such an enigma – God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong, He chose the lowly and despised ... so that no-one may boast before Him. By His grace alone we have been chosen: let us delight in fulfilling His purpose for us.

