

“A Coffin in Egypt”

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These are the last four words in the Book of Genesis. “So Joseph died, being an hundred and ten years old: and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt” (Gen. 50:26).

“A coffin in Egypt” seems a tragic anticlimax to the day when the haughty Pharaoh took the ring off his own hand, and put it upon Joseph’s hand, arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, put a gold chain round his neck, and proclaimed him ruler over the whole land of Egypt, the mightiest country of that day. Forerunners cried in advance, “Bow the knee,” and as Joseph advanced through the crowds every knee was bowed and everyone paid him homage. And Joseph only a young man of thirty!

His had been an extraordinary experience. When a lad of seventeen he had dreamed of his future eminence. His father had given him a coat of many colours, which mark of favour earned him the hate of his eleven brethren. This hatred was accentuated when he dreamed two dreams, one that of binding sheaves in a field, when his brethren’s sheaves rose up and made obeisance to his sheaf; the other, that the sun, moon and eleven stars had made obeisance to him.

So deep was their hatred that when the lad went at his father’s bidding to enquire after his brethren as they tended their flocks in the fields of Dothan, they conspired to murder him.

Restrained from this evil intent by the entreaty of Reuben, they sold him for twenty pieces of silver to a Passing band of Midianite merchant-men, killed the kid of a goat, dipped the coat of many colours in its gore, and thus deceived the old father, who came to the conclusion that his favourite son, the child of his loved Rebecca, had been killed by wild beasts.

Arrived in Egypt he was sold to Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh’s guard. What must have been the young fellow’s thoughts? Bitter they must have been. Strange that he should dream of future eminence, and here he was degraded, sold twice over for a few pieces of silver, and held in captivity as a slave in a foreign land.

But this was not all. Finding favour with his new master, he underwent perhaps the greatest temptation a young man can be put to. His mistress implored him day by day to dishonour God and his own body. Nobly he resisted this terrible temptation. The woman, having been baulked by her husband’s slave of her evil desires, concocted a vile story to her husband, which he believed, and in his rage he flung the youthful

Joseph into prison. Being the captain of Pharaoh's guard, he placed him in the prison where the king's prisoners were bound.

That it was a terrible experience we learn from Psalm 105:18, where speaking of Joseph, we read, "whose feet they hurt with fetters; he was laid in iron." The margin of the Bible says, "Hebraism: his soul came into iron." Have we not a saying in English, "The iron entered his soul"? Nothing is more depressing than day after day, night after night, summer and winter, and year in year out, to be in captivity of such a nature. The utter weariness, discomfort, sameness, hopelessness of the situation is a great test under which character will go under, or be brought out. Trials make or mar a man. They prove what stuff he is made of.

The hand of God was in all this, little as it looked like it. In the king's prison house were two servants of Pharaoh, his chief baker and chief butler. They too dreamed dreams but they were troubled dreams. Joseph interpreted these dreams to the consternation of the one, and the comfort of the other.

The chief butler found himself in due course out of prison, and reinstated in the responsible post of being Pharaoh's cupbearer. Joseph had asked the chief butler to mention his evil case to Pharaoh, but in base ingratitude he had forgotten his promise to do so.

Pharaoh himself dreamed dreams, which in those superstitious days were sinister and mysterious. When none of his magicians and wise men could interpret the dreams, the chief butler remembered Joseph's services in the matter of his dream. He told Pharaoh of Joseph. Joseph to his great astonishment was brought in haste out of his prison, shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and stood before Pharaoh.

He interpreted his dreams, that there were to be seven years of great plenty, of abundant harvests, to be followed by seven years of biting famine. He gave Pharaoh good advice as to preparing for the years of famine with the result that Pharaoh on the spot chose Joseph to be the greatest food controller the world has ever seen. In one day this slave only thirty years of age, apparently in hopeless captivity from man's standpoint, was lifted out of his dungeon to be ruler over the whole of Egypt.

Now we see how God fulfilled the dreams of the lad of seventeen, and in the intervening years was preparing him for this wonderfully exalted position by passing him through this dreadful experience, that, like as steel, heated and cooled, heated and cooled, should be well tempered, Joseph might develop character and trust in God, that would stand him in good stead. Remember he was only thirty years of age when this amazing transformation took place.

He kept his place of honour and power for eighty years, and died, and his career ended with a coffin in Egypt. Was that all?

The coffin was not to rest in Egypt till it and its occupant should crumble into dust. Joseph had faith. He knew of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He believed them. So he said to his brethren, "I die: and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which He swore to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence" (Gen. 50:25)

Joseph was a man of faith, a man of vision. His bones remained in Egypt for something like three hundred years. Had God forgotten? Generations came and went. A Pharaoh arose who knew not Joseph. Evidently Joseph's brethren had the care of the coffin, and the trust was handed down from generation to generation.

Moses arrived on the scene. God's promises were fulfilled. The children of Israel left Egypt, a redeemed people, redeemed by the mighty power of God, and Joseph's bones went with them. There never has been such a funeral procession in the history of mankind, a procession lasting forty years, accompanied by six hundred thousand men besides multitudes of women and children. Was there ever such a funeral?

The coffin in due time with its contents was deposited in its final resting place as far as this earth was concerned. Was that the end in Joseph's mind? Surely not! We have enough indication in the Genesis narrative what a wonderful product of God's grace was Joseph. How was God with him! How he was trained by terrible suffering for his exalted future! How he bore his remarkable honours with credit to the God who had called him to this providential task, which brought his father and brethren into the land of Goshen, where they multiplied till the time should come when God would fulfil his promises to Abraham to give his seed the promised land of Israel.

But more. Joseph's name shines in the gallery of faith-worthies unfolded to us in Hebrews 11, "By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones" (v. 22). His was a true and simple faith. His interests were not in Egypt with its glory and splendour, but with the people of God. When they should leave Egypt, an event of which he was assured, he gave commandment that his bones should leave too.

Doubtless he looked still further ahead, and wished his body to be in the land of Israel in view of the day of resurrection, and the day when God's promises to Abraham should be fully carried out. At that time the truth of the resurrection as synchronising with the coming of the Lord for His saints was not known. Christ had not yet come in flesh. But there is no doubt that Joseph believed in the God of resurrection, and in the

coming of the promised Messiah, and by this act of commanding that his coffin should not rest in Egypt, but find its final repose in the land of Jehovah's choice, he exhibited in a wonderful manner the way that faith worked in him.

May all this be an encouragement to us who read these lines. We are living in very difficult times. We need simple faith in God. Circumstances may seem sadly against us. But God is able, and He will not suffer us to be tried above that we are able. With the trial He will make a way of escape, that we may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13) The day of suffering will soon be over, and the day of glory, a day without a cloud or a tear, an endless day will be ours in the blissful company of our Lord.

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