

# The Greatest Youth

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It centers upon a lost boy. It contains all the elements of suspense, surprise, love, loyalty, lust, hate, hope, and heartache. It has been called "The World's Greatest Story."

The story of Joseph is found in Genesis 37—50. Joseph was referred to by Clarence Macartney as "*the most Christlike man in the Old Testament.*" Batsell Barrett Baxter declared Joseph to be his favorite Old Testament character, the purest and most consistent patriarch.

We know Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, but none of those in the Old Testament do we know so intimately as Joseph, the son of Jacob and Rachel.

In the life of Joseph, there are some remarkable likenesses to our Lord. One author claims to have found one hundred, including:

Each story had shepherds.  
Each was the object of unjust envy.  
Each came to his own, but was not received.  
Each was sold by his own brethren.  
Each was possessor of a famous cloak.  
Each was falsely accused by officials.  
Each was unjustly arrested and taken away.  
Each was numbered with transgressors.  
Each was sold for pieces of silver.  
Each predicted future events.  
Each sat at the king's right hand.  
Each began his greatest work at age thirty.  
Each dispersed bread to the multitude.  
Each was a savior of his people.

### THE BEGINNING

The story of the greatest Old Testament youth begins with these words:

These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing

the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. 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 (Genesis 37:2, 3).

Joseph was dwelling with his father at Hebron, where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were buried. He was sent to Dothan to "see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks." Dothan was sixty to seventy miles away, which says something of the widely scattered grazing pattern in those days. As he approached his older brothers, "they plotted against him to put him to death," and said, "Here comes this dreamer!"

The very flutter of his many-colored coat in the distance awakened their resentment. Jacob loved Joseph above his other sons and foolishly displayed his favoritism, even to the presenting of the beautiful coat. "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; . . ." (Genesis 37:3). He was the late-born, long-awaited son of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, who was deceased. In addition, Joseph dreamed some unusual dreams about his brothers' sheaves bowing before his sheaf. Even the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed before him, a forecast of the entire family in obeisance to the younger brother. "So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words" (Genesis 37:8).

As Joseph approached his brothers, they said to one another, "Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; . . ." (Genesis 37:20). But Reuben, the oldest, counseled them to cast him into a lonely pit in the

wilderness, intending later to rescue him. This the brothers did, stripping Joseph of his coat. However, while Reuben was away, a caravan of Ishmaelites appeared on the horizon bound for Egypt. Judah suggested that Joseph be sold rather than slain. This they all agreed to, bargaining for twenty pieces of silver (receiving ten less than Judas Iscariot).

### **BOUND FOR EGYPT**

Joseph, only some seventeen years of age, was likely loaded down with baggage and led toward Egypt, across the burning Sinai desert. Apparently, the caravan passed near Hebron, on the ancient road from Damascus to Egypt. He was not far from his father's tent, but no escape was possible. Meanwhile, the brothers split the loot and set out for Hebron with the coat of Joseph, freshly dipped in the blood of a goat. Jacob assumed that he had been devoured by a wild beast, saying, "It is my son's coat, an evil beast hath devoured him. . . . I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning."

We wonder if, on Joseph's first night out, he did not recall his father's first night, when his head rested upon a stone and he saw angels ascending a ladder to heaven.

### **ARRIVAL IN EGYPT**

Life goes on, even for a slave! Young Joseph arrived in Egypt, over the rolling river Nile, and was taken to a busy marketplace where he was sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's royal guard.

What a simple matter it would have been for this teen-ager to moan himself into an early, bitter grave. Somehow, he resolved to do and be his best, even under the worst of circumstances. He had been the favored son of a rich farmer; now he was a slave. But he determined to be the best slave possible. Soon he was the overseer of Potiphar's house: "Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand" (Genesis 39:3). "The Lord blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph" (Genesis 39:5).

### **TEMPTATION ARISES**

And it came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she

said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me around, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. 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?" (Genesis 39:7-9).

With subtleties and innuendoes, the wife of Potiphar sought to seduce her young Hebrew slave. At last she caught him alone in the house and insisted, "Lie with me."

Joseph was not yet thirty and was already confronted by the greatest single decision of his entire life. All that would come after depended upon that moment and that decision. On every side in our "evil and adulterous generation," one may find those who would sympathize with the wife of Potiphar. Their view, and hers, is that one ought to do what comes naturally, unfettered by ancient taboos. Ernest Hemingway has said, "What is good is what you feel good after. What is evil is what you feel bad after." No one would know, the house was secluded and empty, Potiphar was away, and Joseph was in the flush and vigor of young adulthood. The woman pressed Joseph daily to violate his conscience. He refused, saying, "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?" (Genesis 39:9).

Having entered the house alone, Joseph was caught by the woman, who insisted once more that he satisfy her lust. Not bothering to discuss the matter, he fled, leaving his garment in her hand. Immediately, this spurned and angry woman screamed for help, claiming that Joseph had intended to rape her. One wonders if there is any rage to compare with that of a spurned lover! That such a beautiful and desirable woman as she should have been resisted by a simple, poor Hebrew slave was more than her sinful mind could absorb! Upon his return, Potiphar evidently accepted his wife's accusation without question and immediately confined Joseph to prison.

"And he was there in the prison." For the most honorable, praiseworthy act of his young life, Joseph is imprisoned! How he must have wondered, "Where is the God of my fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?"

## THE BEST PRISONER

As Joseph had resolved to be the best of servants, he became the best of prisoners:

But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. And the chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. 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 (Genesis 39:21-23).

Among the inmates of Joseph's were the chief butler and the chief baker of Pharaoh. Each soon had a dream which Joseph correctly interpreted. The butler returned to his post, as predicted, and was urged by the young Hebrew to "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. 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 40:14, 15). However, "yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him."

Two more years slowly slid by. Joseph was still a prisoner of the state. But it happened that Pharaoh himself dreamed an unusual dream of seven lean ears of corn consuming seven fat ears and of seven lean cows eating seven fat cows. All the wise men and magicians of Egypt were summoned to give the interpretation, but none could do so. At that point the butler remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh of his unusual powers.

Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to Pharaoh. And 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." Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer" (Genesis 41:14-16).

The interpretation meant that Egypt was facing seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Joseph advised the king to gather food into the nation's graineries and to take one-fifth of the produce during the years of good harvest "... that the land perish not through the famine."

There have always been and always will be failed harvests. No economic system yet devised can erase those lean years. Like Joseph, we can wisely plan for the worst while enjoying the best.

Pharaoh was so impressed by the Hebrew prisoner that he made him governor over Egypt, riding in a chariot immediately behind his own. His authority was such that "without your permission no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt" (Genesis 41:44). On his finger was the ring of royalty, and about his neck was the gold chain of authority. Joseph, recently a slave and prisoner, was second in command of Egypt.

## NEW TEMPTATIONS

"Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt" (Genesis 41:46). Now he faced new temptations to pride and vainglory. The man who suddenly fell heir to a fortune was likely in greater peril of his soul than the man who just lost a fortune! Prosperity has a way of turning our hearts from heaven's door. We are told to "instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. . . ." (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Once again Joseph stood the test, remaining true to Jehovah. His sons, born of his wife Asenath, were named Ephraim, "for God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction," and Manasseh, "for God hath made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." Governor Joseph honored and magnified the name of Jehovah.

## THE BROTHERS' APPEARANCE

The predicted famine came, and so did the older brothers as they were seeking for corn. Joseph immediately recognized the ten men and sent them through a series of tests to determine what changes had occurred in their lives. Were they different? Were they penitent? As they spoke to one another, the governor listened, they being unaware of his knowledge of Hebrew. Finally, in one of the most touching scenes on any page of literature, Joseph emptied the throne room and revealed his identity (Genesis 45:1-8).

With tears and warm embraces did Joseph forgive his brothers, urging them to return home and tell Jacob, "Joseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt." Wagons were sent to bring the father down to Egypt, where there was bread and to spare. All the family members, seventy souls, made the journey "and they came into the land of Goshen." Upon seeing Joseph, his father said, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face, that you are still alive" (Genesis 46:30). Jacob was 130 years old when he arrived in Egypt, and he died at 147. Joseph himself died at age 110 with the request that his bones be carried back to Canaan for burial. His body was embalmed and centuries later carried back by Moses and Joshua.

### **THE GREATEST YOUTH**

It does appear that Joseph is the most Christ-like individual in the Old Testament. From boyhood to manhood, from youth to age, from poverty to riches he remained true to God and his conscience. What other individual could be set forth so confidently as an example to young people?

#### **He Kept Himself Unspotted From the World**

He was far away from home and family. There was no one who knew or cared about his behavior. He was a single adult in a sinful city, tempted on all sides. Yet he chose the high road, refusing to sin against God.

Every young man, like Joseph, has dreams of the future. But what becomes of those dreams is often decided in a solitary hour of temptation. Joseph's character, reputation, influence, peace of mind, and future hope rested upon his honorable handling of Potiphar's sensuous wife. In the same spirit all young believers are instructed to "flee youthful lusts." In a moment of weakness, one can tie a knot in time that cannot be undone in eternity! Those who sow to the flesh reap corruption . . . of all sorts.

#### **He Kept Alive in His Heart the Capacity To Forgive**

Again and again do we read the animosity of Joseph's brothers. "They hated him and could not speak peaceably unto him. . . . They hated him yet the more. . . . They hated him yet the more for his dreams" (Genesis 37). Yet twenty

years later when Joseph by the snap of a finger could erase them from the earth, he managed to find both in his heart and home a place of welcome.

Our world is constantly acquainted with anger, attack, hate, and hostility. Visiting recently with a congressman in Washington, D.C., I was told that one Cabinet member does not attend the State of the Union address lest a bomb should explode and no one be left in the line of succession of the presidency. Two automobiles are left running at all times, one at each end of the Capitol building, to ram any vehicle which refuses to stop. In this kind of world, how we need a fresh anointing of the spirit of Joseph, who was too big to be little, too anxious to be better to be bitter.

#### **He Kept Always in Plain View the Providence of God**

He urged his brothers not to be angry with themselves, "And God sent me before you to preserve life. . . . It was not you that sent me here, but God. . . . God has made me lord of all Egypt."

All that occurred—through persecution, prison, and promotion—was the working of God. That was the conviction of Joseph and ought to be the affirmation of all. How differently would we live our lives if we actually believed God was in control!

#### **He Believed In and Moved Steadily Toward a Brighter Day**

Being governor at age 30, he died at 110. His story closes with these hopeful words, "And 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.' . . ." (Genesis 50:24, 25).

He assured his people that Egypt would not be their permanent home, and that they will return to the Promised Land. They did hundreds of years later. Twice did Joseph insist that "God will surely visit you."

The great dome of the Capitol of Washington, D.C., was completed in 1863, at the height of the Civil War. Lincoln was criticized for continuing the project in wartime, but he viewed it as an expression of public confidence in the future.

The war would end, the Union would survive, and the Capitol City would survive. We too must live daily in hope, believing that a better day is coming and that just over Jordan is the Promised Land.

## **CONCLUSION**

Let Joseph remind us all of our capacity to be good and Christlike regardless of our circumstances. Let Joseph point you to Jesus.

—Paul Rogers

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