

# Joseph's Faith

The words on a gravestone can tell us a lot about the person who is buried there. When we look in the Bible, we learn about how men and women lived and died, and the choices they made based on their belief in God. A fantastic example of this is Hebrews chapter 11, where we have observations about the lives of people who lived 'by faith'. This list, with its comments, is special: being inspired by God, it is from God's point of view.

One such person is Joseph, whose story starts in Genesis 37. He began life in Israel as a shepherd boy, and ended up ruling the mighty nation of Egypt. The example used in Hebrews 11 is in verse 22, where we read:

*By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.*

So why is Joseph mentioned in this 'faith chapter', and why is this example used? It is indeed a strange mix of people: Noah builds an ark, Abraham lives in tents rather than a house, and Joseph says what he wants done with his remains after he is dead; all recorded as examples of acts of faith.

In fact, a great deal of the life of Joseph seems to be about faith.

## Difficult Relationships

As a youth, he was involved in the family shepherding business, either as a shepherd with his brothers, or going between them, gathering the profit and loss information about the flocks: how many lambs were born, how many



sheep died from wild animals, theft, and so on. In Genesis 37:2 Joseph brought a bad report to his father about the brothers' business, which made him very unpopular indeed.

It did not help that Joseph was his father Jacob's favourite son, and this preference was no secret. Jacob made Joseph a coat of many colours, or pieces, which would have been very expensive, and would suggest that Joseph had some authority over his brothers.

As if this was not enough, Joseph had some unusual dreams. In one dream, he and his brothers were binding sheaves of wheat in the field, and when Joseph's sheaf stood upright, all the other sheaves bowed down to it. In another dream, the sun, moon, and eleven stars all bowed down to Joseph. No wonder his brothers hated him! Despite all this, Joseph seems to have been a confident seventeen-year-old, and when his father asked him to go out and see how his brothers were getting on, ranging far and wide to get good pasture for the flocks, he immediately responded.

## Exile and Prison

Walking maybe sixty miles, Joseph met his brothers, only to discover them ready to kill him and to tell his father that some wild animal had eaten him. They stripped him of his coat of many colours, and threw him into one of the local open pits. One brother, Reuben, tried to protect Joseph, but failed when another suggested that they sell him as a slave and keep the profits. So they sold Joseph to some travelling merchants for twenty pieces of silver, just as so many years later, Judas would betray the Lord Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.



Arriving in Egypt, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, one of the chief bodyguards of Pharaoh (Genesis 39:1). He did so well there that Potiphar made him the senior servant in his home, and God made the household prosper because of Joseph.

But Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph and he fled, leaving his coat in her hand. Of course, she protested her innocence to Potiphar and claimed that Joseph had tried to rape her.

Joseph remained faithful to God, but found himself in prison in Egypt. However, God continued to care for him, and he eventually became a trusted senior prisoner.

While he was in prison, two fellow-prisoners had dreams, which Joseph interpreted for them. Joseph's interpretation proved totally accurate: the royal baker was executed, and the royal butler was reinstated to his former high position. Despite asking the butler to remember him when he was freed, Joseph spent another two years in prison. That is a long time to be incarcerated, thinking that you have been forgotten. We may wonder how Joseph kept his faith in God during these dark years.

## Joseph's Rise to Power

At the end of these two years Pharaoh, king of Egypt, had a dream that really bothered him. The dream was rather strange: he dreamed that he stood by the mighty river Nile, and seven extremely well-fed cows came up out of the river, and grazed in the nearby meadow. Seven very thin and ugly cows then came up out of the river, and stood by the other cows. Without warning the seven gaunt cows ate up the fat cows, but became no fatter.

Going back to sleep, Pharaoh had another dream. Seven ears of corn came up on one stalk, strong and good. Then seven thin and wind-blasted ears of corn sprang up and devoured the full and strong ears, but were not improved. None of the magicians or soothsayers of Egypt could offer an interpretation for the king.

Finally the butler thought of Joseph, who was brought out of prison, cleaned up and presented to Pharaoh.

*Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that you can understand a dream, to interpret it" (Genesis 41:15).*

Joseph replied: *“It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace”* (v16).

Pharaoh happily recounted his dreams about the thin and fat cattle, and the thin and thick ears of corn. Joseph explained that the message of the two dreams was the same. There would be seven years of great plenty, with amazing harvests throughout Egypt, followed by seven years of appalling famine, so bad that the good years would be completely forgotten.

*And the dream was repeated to Pharaoh twice because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass* (v32).

Joseph was given great honour: the signet ring of the king, fine linen clothes, a gold chain and use of the second carriage of state, behind Pharaoh himself. He was also given great power. Managing all the store-houses of Egypt during the seven good years, Joseph had control of all the corn sales, and therefore the entire nation of Egypt, when famine came.

## **Fulfilment and Reconciliation**

During the years of famine, Joseph’s brothers came down to buy food from the great granaries of Egypt. They didn’t recognise him at first and did in fact bow down to him, exactly as he had dreamed all those years before. His father, Jacob, and all his family later came to live in Egypt as honoured guests of Pharaoh.

Eventually, Jacob died in Egypt and was embalmed, but was taken to be buried in Israel. Maybe this is what prompted Joseph to give “instructions concerning his bones” as we saw in



Hebrews 11. The exact words are recorded in Genesis 50:24–25:

*And Joseph said to his brethren, “I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Then Joseph took an oath from the children of Israel, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.”*

So after all his adventures, Joseph wanted to be buried in the land of Israel. He understood that God had promised the land to his great-grandfather, Abraham, and he wanted to be part of that promise. Having showed faith to God throughout his often difficult life, he did so at its end. And God acknowledged this in Hebrews 11.

God also promised that all nations will be blessed through Abraham’s one special descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16). Jesus will soon return to the earth and fulfil these promises, raising his faithful followers from the dead and establishing the Kingdom of God, reigning from Israel. Let’s be faithful, just like Joseph, and be part of that wonderful time.

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