

Joseph in Prison
Genesis 39 & 40

FAMILY TALK:
JOSEPH

by Rev. Frederick L. Schnarr

When Joseph first came to the land of Egypt as a young man, he came as a slave. His brothers, because of their jealousy and anger, had sold him as a slave to a passing caravan of Ishmaelites. The Ishmaelites took him to Egypt and there re-sold him as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guards.

We can imagine Joseph's great sorrow in being treated so terribly by his brothers, and especially in being parted from his father Jacob.

But although Joseph was sad about how he came to Egypt, we can imagine his wonder and surprise with what he saw in Egypt. Everything was different from the way he had been raised as a shepherd boy—caring for sheep and cattle, living in tents, searching for grass and water, wearing clothes made mostly of animal skins, eating simple bread and meat, and on the whole living in and near the things of nature in the land of Canaan.

In Egypt, all of this changed. This was a land totally dependent on the waters of the great Nile river. Along its banks Joseph would have seen great pyramids, monuments, statues, and carvings. He would have seen large cities near the river, with boats bringing supplies from all over the lands of the Great Sea. They had great crops of grain and fruit along the edges of the river, with many slaves to help with the harvest. The Egyptians were not a shepherd people, and their dress, their hair, and their trades would have been very different from anything Joseph had ever seen.

While Joseph at first did well in the land of Egypt, it was not long before Potiphar's wife got him into trouble by telling lies about Joseph, saying that he had tried to hurt her. So Joseph was put into prison where he was to stay for a number of years.

He had no friends to help him, and no one to speak for him and defend him. Again, we can understand his sense of loneliness and sorrow. We are not told anything about the prison in which he was kept, but we know from ancient drawings and descriptions that they were usually rather horrible places.

Given all the bad things that happened to Joseph, isn't it amazing that he seemed to do well and knew that the Lord was still with him? When the chief butler and chief baker of Pharaoh were put in prison and came to Joseph to have him explain the dreams they had, Joseph reminded them that such

explanations belonged only to the Lord.

There are times in our lives when we feel that everything is going wrong for us. Maybe we feel that our family doesn't love us anymore. Maybe we feel that our friends don't treat us nicely, and even that they don't care for us anymore. Maybe we feel that our parents or teachers have treated us unfairly, or accused us of things we didn't really do. Maybe nothing seems to be going well with anything, and even our own bedroom feels like a prison.

Have you ever had any of these feelings? Most people do once in a while. Sometimes we may feel like this when we are children, sometimes when we are adults. When these troubles come, we start feeling lonely and sad. At such times we can identify with Joseph and his troubles. The fact that thousands of years have gone by doesn't change this, does it? It helps us to realize that the Word is for all of us and for all time.

Can we sense that the Lord is present with us and doing things for us at difficult times? Well, the meaning of this story is that we can, and that it is very important for us to do this. We are not just to fold our hands in sorrow and say, "What's the use!" We are not to feel so sorry for ourselves that we just mope around and don't do anything; we are not to get angry with our parents, or sisters and brothers, or our friends, for what we think they are doing to us that is unfair or unjust.

Sometimes things happen to us that really are unfair and unjust. Whatever the answer is to such treatment, this much we know for certain: treating other people unjustly in order to get even does nothing to help us become better people.

In this, Joseph is an excellent example for us. He was treated unfairly and unjustly for many years, and yet he never stopped being kind and gentle. He never stopped looking to the Lord, and seeking the Lord's help.

And, in time, look how the Lord turned things around for Joseph! The Lord hadn't forgotten him. The Lord was going to raise him up, from being a slave in prison to being one of the greatest governors that Egypt ever had. The Lord would not only help Joseph come into peace and prosperity, but through him the Lord would help untold thousands of others.

Trusting in the Lord when we are in times of difficulty and stress seems such a simple lesson. Yet the Lord repeats this message for us in the Word many, many times, and in many different ways. The reason is clear isn't it? It is so important to everything in our lives to really believe that the Lord is always with us, always looking after us.

Amen.