

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (30-8-1998 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Joseph and the life of faith
Genesis 50:15-26
Additional Bible reading: Hebrews 11:21,22

Introduction

Aged 110 years, Joseph is on his deathbed. It was 93 years since he was taken as a slave to Egypt, and 80 years since he was introduced to Pharaoh. Now he was dying and all his family was around his bed – all his children and their families, including great grandchildren. He tells them about his coming death. He is sure God will visit them and bring them out of Egypt to Canaan, to the land promised to Abraham and Isaac. He made the family promise to take his body with them when they finally leave Egypt. After his death, his body was embalmed, placed in a coffin, and after 300 years it was carried out of Egypt by the Israelites at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 13:19).

For 40 years they wandered in the Wilderness, still carrying Joseph's coffin. In the days of Joshua, Joseph's bones were finally buried in Shechem in Canaan (Joshua 24:32). At Shechem (present day Nablus) what is claimed to be Joseph's tomb is still preserved, the focal point of many Jewish pilgrimages.

The writer to the Hebrews records: **By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones** (Hebrews 11:22). Like all the great men of the Old Testament who are named in the "Westminster Abbey of the Bible", the great mark of Joseph's life was faith. Faith played a huge part in his life, and it can do in ours too.

First of all, what is faith? Often in the Bible it is personal trust and commitment. But in Hebrews it has a different and special meaning. **Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see** (Hebrews 11:1). It means having absolute confidence about God and eternal realities. The people recorded in Hebrews 11 did not see the things they believed would happen. There were no external signs for them. But they grasped and believed them, and based their lives on them, leant their full weight on them, on the authority of God's Word. They had a firm hand on God's promises and His truth giving living power in life. There was absolute certainty, not just a wistful perhaps or maybe, but firm conviction. The whole of life was shaped by this conviction.

We have seen that in Joseph's life there was a certainty about God and confidence in His purposes and promises. To all appearances, Joseph was an Egyptian since captivity, working in the Egyptian Court, given an Egyptian name, and Egyptian wife, working for the welfare of the Egyptian people. But all the time he was really a Hebrew at heart. He was a stranger in the midst. His heart was elsewhere – in this God of his fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. His confidence in God never wavered. He knew he was a pilgrim passing through Egypt, and his real home was Canaan, not Egypt. He believed God's promise that one day God's people would dwell in the Promised Land.

God invites all men to have a similar faith. Though unseen, we are certain of Him. **Anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him** (Hebrews 11:6).

Faith enables us to see God's hand in all events

Recall that after father Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers were terrified. They feared that Joseph, who was powerful, would now get his own back on them because of what they had done to him. They assumed Joseph's nature would be as base as theirs. So they sent him a message, pleading with him not to take revenge, since their father Jacob would not have wanted that (Genesis 50:16,17). It grieved Joseph that his brothers misunderstood and mistrusted him. Then the brothers fell down before him (like in Joseph's childhood dreams), asking him to make them slaves. Joseph reassures them that they need not be afraid, and points out that God's hand was in their actions: **You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good** (Genesis 50:20).

Joseph's faith kept him from taking revenge, and he was able to see that beyond the actions of his brothers was the overruling hand of God, carrying out His purposes for His people and saving them from starvation at the coming famine. The brothers, though responsible for their evil deeds, at the same time were instruments carrying out God's plans.

Joseph looked beyond man to God. He looked beyond the misfortunes, adversities, suffering and upsets of life to God Himself. What is He saying to me in all this? What is His purpose that He is carrying out? When Paul was in prison, he did not moan. He saw it as an opportunity to witness to the people in prison with him who would otherwise not hear the Gospel. **I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel** (Philippians 1:12). The greatest example is the Cross. Judas's betrayal, the priests' jealousy, Pilate's cowardice, were all overruled and used by God to be the means whereby we might be saved. **This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross** (Acts 2:23).

It is good to look beyond the secondary causes in life, to the hand of the sovereign God. If God has permitted certain things, experiences that may be very unpleasant, harsh words spoken to us, changes in circumstances – why has God allowed this, we ask. Instead, we should be asking – what can I learn from this? What purposes are being carried out in this? What can I experience of Him through these things? This helps us forget the resentment and revenge, and we fix our eyes on God.

Hudson Taylor experienced bitter attacks on his China Inland Mission, in the press and in Parliament. But he had rest of heart amid the tempest, because he refused to look at the secondary causes. He looked at God's purpose, not at man's actions. "It does not matter who the postman is; it is the writer of the letter we are concerned with." Be sure that whatever happens, it will end in ultimate blessing because God is God.

Faith enables us to be faithful in present duties

Faith grasps eternal realities. But that does not mean we become so heavenly minded that we are no earthly use. In fact, the contrary is true. Because of Joseph's faith, he was more competent, hardworking and reliable than he would have been.

Life here is all the more important and significant because it is lived in the light of unseen realities. The more we feel the reality of eternity, the more significant do things on earth become. "This world is where God makes men, and the next world is the palace where He exhibits them." We know that here on earth we are being trained and prepared for the future. If we take away the eternal dimension, life is just monotonous, trivial and pointless. The end makes the means important.

In the master roll of Hebrews 11, a variety of tasks are represented – statesmen, soldiers, prophets, shepherds, widows and martyrs. All were fitted for their task because of their faith. They raised the bar above the world, and that fitted them to work in the world with all their might.

Faith is very much of earthly use. It affects all details of business and home, market places, workbench and kitchen sink. The man of faith works diligently, not because he is making a living or because he is being watched by a supervisor, but for the glory of God. He makes the most of his time, is fervent in spirit, punctual, methodical, energetic, careful and thorough. **Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might** (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Faith brings new dignity to life and to toil. We are accountable to God for the quality of our life. Men of faith ought to be living exhibitions to the world of industry and commerce about how they could be changed for good.

A pilgrim spirit makes us practical. Joseph's life shows how it is possible to live an ordinary life, hold a high position, shoulder great responsibility and serve God in the highest walks of life, all because faith in God is the secret of our life and achievements.

Faith makes us confident about the future

Joseph was about to die, but he was confident that though the family was at present in Egypt, God would one day fulfil His Word and bring them to the Promised Land. He knew God's work would not fold up merely because his eminent servant was about to die. God buries workmen, but carries on the work. No man is indispensable. God depends on none of us. He is able to carry on His purposes with each new generation. His purposes will not fail, but will come to fruition.

The message at every graveside is "This man has died, but God lives". Leaves fall off, but new leaves come. There are cradles as well as graves. We can be confident about the future and the purposes of God. Think of the men who followed Joseph – Moses, David, the prophets, and above all God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Joseph was merely one of the first men used by God, in the infancy of His great plan.

We, coming this side of the Cross and the empty tomb, and the Holy Spirit's outpouring, have even more reason to be confident about the future, because we know

so much more about God's worldwide purposes of blessing for each person - the Second Coming of Christ, the New Heaven and New Earth. We also know His individual plans for lives. One name which abides through all centuries is the Name of the Everlasting God. We are born, grow, decline and pass away. But the everlasting God remains from everlasting to everlasting – the dwelling place of His people in all generations.

*“But while mortals rise and perish,
God endures unchanging on.”*

Amid all the changes of mortal life, the living God abides, reigns and rules. His kingdom will be set up, His purposes will be realized, and His will must be done. Therefore take heart as His servants pass away into the unseen. Take a large view of the future. This eternal dimension enlarges and enables our life, broadens our outlook and perspective. We see the emptiness and futility of a Godless life. We realize the pointlessness of being absorbed in this narrow little life. God's unchanging presence and undeviating purpose can keep our hearts peaceful, restful, hopeful and trustful, amid all the vicissitudes of life. **You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal** (Isaiah 26:3,4).

Conclusion

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. When we have this kind of faith, we see God's hand even in our adversities. Such faith enables us to be faithful in our present duties, and imparts confidence about the future. Some people think it is impossible to have such confidence, given the state of the world and a life full of cares. Look again at Joseph, and **all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance** (Hebrews 11:13).

What are we living for? Pursuits that are bounded by a narrow horizon of time and sense? Or do we have the broad view? Do we live in light of eternity with all our responsibilities and duties? We need to have our affections set above, where Christ is, and always remember that we are pilgrims and strangers here. How do we get faith like this? Look at the Bible story, and the history of the Christian church. The Christian's hope is not in this world. It is not based on a vague idea that has been passed down, but is based on experience of placing one's whole self on God, and finding Him true. He is all that matters. Feed on His promises. Ask for the gift of faith. Nourish your spiritual life on His faithfulness and promises.

Faith in God leads to the fullest of lives, a life controlled by His power, giving unity to the personality, overall direction to life, calm in changes and sorrows, and strength in face of threat and danger. **God rewards those who earnestly seek Him** (Hebrews 11:16).