

THE JOURNEY TO EGYPT

by Steve Zeisler

This year marks the two hundredth anniversary of the Constitution which has guided and framed our nation. We ought to be grateful to God for the many ways in which he has blessed this country. As it is the weekend of July 4th, and because of the nature of the passage we will be looking at this morning, I want to ask you to think about what it means to be a citizen of the United States; and what it means to you as Christians to be citizens of heaven. So what does it mean to us to be part of this nation at this particular time in history, and how does that fit in with the fact that we also are citizens of heaven, and as such know from Scripture the eventual outcome of all things?

Jacob and Joseph, with whom we have been spending a lot of time lately, will help us here. Joseph was a man of great power. He was second only to the Pharaoh in the nation of Egypt. As such, he was capable of doing good for all the peoples of the earth, for it was God who had granted to him all the power and influence which he possessed. He was an influential participant in the life of his adopted nation, administering the affairs of Egypt during seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. Thus, Joseph was God's handpicked man whom he chose for the purpose of orchestrating and moving world events for righteous results. What a good example he is for us to focus on, particularly on this weekend as we contemplate our role as citizens of the United States, and as we think of what role we might play in its history.

The second figure we will look at, Jacob, was very different than his son Joseph. He had reached the end of his days on earth. He was without any standing in his own country. He was a wanderer and a sojourner, having been forced by circumstances to leave the land in which he had any inheritance at all. Jacob never really became a citizen of any country. He spent his days serving God in a land which his family would one day control. He arrived as a beggar in Egypt, seeking food. Even his wealth could not deliver him from the terrible famine which had come upon the earth. Jacob thus had no earthly platform from which to influence the course of history either for good or bad.

Jacob was concerned, rather, with what his life had amounted to now that he was in his declining days. What had he become? What did he hope for in eternity? What was the quality of his worship and prayers? We will see that when he has opportunity to speak, Jacob does not comment on the economy, the military situation, or any other pressing issue. He speaks about God, about worship and eternity; about what people will become if they listen to the word of God. For him the critical issue in life is not what becomes of nations, but what becomes of people. Hopefully we will end up strong in both areas; strong enough to take the opportunities God gives to change this world for good, but also certain that those things will pass away, and that the most important things in life, as Jacob modeled so faithfully, are worship and faith.

I will read two passages concerning Jacob that illustrate his spiritual perspective. The first is found in the beginning of chapter 46 of Genesis. Joseph's brothers have returned to Canaan, laden with gifts, carrying orders from Joseph to return to Egypt with his father. The brothers comply with this request, and we pick up the story again in Genesis 46:1-4:

So Israel set out with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here I am." And He said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there. I will go down with you to

Egypt, and I will surely bring you up again; and Joseph will close your eyes."

The second illustration is found in the closing verses of Gen.47:29-31:

When the time for Israel to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt, but when I lie down with my fathers, you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place." And he said, "I will do as you have said." And he said, "Swear to me." So he swore to him. Then Israel bowed in worship at the head of the bed.

In both of these situations Jacob worships God. First, before he sets foot in Egypt, he worships at the altar in Beersheba which his father Isaac had built. And then, second, in a very solemn moment, Jacob has Joseph swear to him that he will not bury him in Egypt but will return his bones to Canaan. Then, following Joseph's promise to do as he had requested, again Jacob worships God. As we have pointed out, worship and faith were the two things that mattered most to Jacob as he faced critical times near the end of his days.

Joseph meanwhile was second in command of the whole known world. He was God's servant, and as such was faithfully carrying out his duties in the temporal world. We find our reference to him in Gen.46:28-Gen.47:26.

Now he sent Judah before him to Joseph, to point out the way before him to Goshen, and they came into the land of Goshen. And Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to Goshen to meet his father Israel, as soon as he appeared before him, he fell on his neck and wept on his neck for a long time. Then Israel said to Joseph, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face, that you are still alive." And Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, "I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and will say to him, 'My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me; and the men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks and their herds and all that they have.' And it shall come about when Pharaoh calls you and says, 'What is your occupation?' that you shall say, 'Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,' that you may live in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is loathsome to the Egyptians."

Then Joseph went in and told Pharaoh, and said, "My father and my brothers and their flocks and their herds and all that they have, have come out of the land of Canaan; and behold, they are in the land of Goshen." And he took five men from among his brothers, and presented them to Pharaoh. Then Pharaoh said to his brothers, "What is your occupation?" So they said to Pharaoh, "Your servants are shepherds, both we and our fathers." And they said to Pharaoh, "We have come to sojourn in the land, for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks, for the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. Now, therefore, please let your servants live in the land of Goshen."

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Your father and your brothers have come to you. The land of Egypt is at your disposal; settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land, let them live in the land of Goshen; and if you know any capable men among them, then put them in charge of my livestock." Then Joseph brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh; and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Jacob, "How many years have you lived?" So Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The years of my sojourning are one hundred and thirty; few and unpleasant have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived during the days of their sojourning." And Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from his presence. So Joseph settled his father and his brothers, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had ordered. And Joseph provided his father and his brothers and all his father's household with food, according to their little ones. Now there was no food in all the land, because the famine was very severe, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. And Joseph gathered all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan for the grain which they bought, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. And when the

money was all spent in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us food, for why should we die in your presence? For our money is gone." Then Joseph said, "Give up your livestock, and I will give you food for your livestock, since your money is gone." So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses and the flocks and the herds and the donkeys; and he fed them with food in exchange for all their livestock that year. And when that year was ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, "We will not hide from my lord that all our money is spent, and the cattle are my lord's. There is nothing left for my lord except our bodies and our lands. Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we and our land will be slaves to Pharaoh. So give us seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not be desolate."

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for every Egyptian sold his field, because the famine was severe upon them. Thus the land became Pharaoh's. And as for the people, he removed them to the cities from one end of Egypt's border to the other. Only the land of the priests he did not buy, for the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh, and they lived off the allotment which Pharaoh gave them. Therefore, they did not sell their land. Then Joseph said to the people, "Behold I have today bought you and your land for Pharaoh; now here is seed for you, and you may sow the land. And at the harvest you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own for seed of the field and for your food and for those of your households and as food for your little ones." So they said, "You have saved our lives! Let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's slaves." And Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt valid to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's.

We are citizens of the United States, the most powerful nation on earth. Joseph was second only to Pharaoh in Egypt, the leading nation of the world of his day, during a state of extreme emergency for that nation. Perhaps we will face an emergency of some sort during our lifetime. God uses governments to do good, Scripture declares. He binds human beings together to form nations, to be led by individuals, in good times and bad, in times of blessing and times of judgment.

Let us try to learn some things from Joseph as he is revealed in this passage. Joseph was in a position to benefit the people of God and the cause of God. The Lord gifted him and placed him to do good for the fragile clan of seventy members, the family of Jacob, who went down to Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan. Joseph chose five of them, no doubt the most civilized and well spoken among them, and presented them before Pharaoh. He coached them on what to say, being well aware that Egyptians hated shepherds and thus they would leave the family alone in Goshen, a fertile but unused part of Egypt. There they would not be in danger of being co-opted by the Egyptians, as they were so endangered in Canaan, but would be allowed to thrive, away from the Egyptian centers of power. Thus Joseph used the means at his disposal to do good for his family and, by extension, the nation of Israel. Pharaoh even asked them to care for his flocks as well. Joseph therefore placed his family in Egypt in a way that maximized the benefit to the nation.

We too should be on the alert to do good wherever God places us. Notice that Joseph did whatever he could do for his family with impartiality and honesty. He was universally praised for his fairness. He ruled with wisdom and good judgment. We too should be willing to think God's thoughts after him, to seek out those who are genuinely good and maximize opportunities for the cause of Christ. It is not wrong for people to be organized in companies and governments. Neither is it wrong to use whatever positions God has blessed us with to use our influence for good. The apostle Paul was never shy about using his Roman citizenship to gain a hearing for the gospel. Joseph knew the psychology, the sociology and the politics of Egypt. He used his position in a righteous manner to save his family, the bearers of God's message of salvation to the world.

Let us look at the political maelstrom in which Joseph ruled and see if anything looks familiar. There was a tremendous movement of people from the countryside to the cities (Gen.47:21) because that was where the food was stored. The same phenomenon is occurring in our own day as millions of people in countries throughout the world are fleeing from the countryside to the cities. Many of the cities of the world are swollen beyond capacity by

this movement of people, and governments must come up with plans to deal with that. Joseph presided over a government that was growing increasingly centralized, so much so that Pharaoh gradually became the owner of all the land of Egypt. At a time when there is much debate in our government about fair taxation, we read here that Joseph came up with an equitable tax package for Pharaoh. We can even see here that there was a church and state issue operating during Joseph's rule. The priests were tax exempt, it seems; they did not have to give up their land. Pharaoh, history records, expected the priests to support his reign, to even worship and deify him. This should give us cause to wonder about the intermingling of church and state in our own day. At what point can we bring our influence to bear and when should we step back and retain our prophetic role, refusing to say, "Caesar is lord"?

These are just some of the issues which Joseph had to deal with during his time as governor of Egypt. Yet he had the acclaim and approval of everyone for his wise leadership. The Pharaoh praised him for putting in place an economic revolution in Egypt, and the people likewise praised him for his wisdom in planning for the seven-year famine so that they had food in times of scarcity. And amidst all of these pressures, Joseph still was wise enough to take advantage of the Egyptians' prejudice to protect his own family. Joseph is a model of how to live wisely and righteously in pressure-filled times. God may present us with similar opportunities. The company you work for may be facing reorganization and you may be the one who will act wisely and righteously to save jobs, to perhaps even put bread on peoples' tables. Joseph was a most effective citizen of Egypt in his day. We too may be given opportunity to be effective citizens of our nation. We should be ready to enter open doors of opportunity, eager to use our influence when the right circumstances arise.

Jacob, unlike Joseph, was a citizen of nowhere. He was without power to influence even the minutest of events. All he possessed was the appeal of his godly character. He was a beggar who had come to Egypt seeking food. But Jacob also was called to minister. C.S. Lewis says in his essay *The Weight of Glory*,

You and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years. Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent inner voice. Almost all our modern philosophies have been devised to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth.

Jacob too would say that the good of man was not to be found on earth. And we too should remember that no matter how important it is that we use our influence in the power structures of this world to do good, the ultimate good of man is not to be found on this earth.

On entering and leaving the presence of Pharaoh, Jacob blessed him. Hebrews says that it is always the greater person who blesses the lesser. Because he knew God, Jacob was well aware that Pharaoh was merely a man, and that he needed to know about eternal things. Jacob stopped on his journey to Egypt at the altar which his father had built at Beersheba to ask God's blessing on his trek. He remembers the promise which God had made to his father and grandfather. He knows that he and his sons possess truth about God and God's plan for mankind that no one else is aware of.

Jacob is concerned with the eternal, not the temporal. He does not bother with giving advice to Pharaoh about anything that concerned the world. When Pharaoh comments on Jacob's great age and certain distinguishing qualities which he possessed, Jacob responds by saying that he has not lived very long at all compared with his father and grandfather. Even the years that he had attained had been somewhat difficult and unpleasant as he had created many serious problems for himself. He is telling Pharaoh, in effect, that the Egyptian was focusing on the wrong issues; that reaching a great age is not that impressive a thing. Jacob by implication is appealing to Pharaoh to think beyond this life and what it offers.

God had reiterated his promise to Jacob at Beersheba. Although he was now sending them down to Egypt, they would yet become a great nation there and he would rescue them again. Every promise God had made to them would be realized. When Jacob sees Joseph for the first time after all the years of separation, he exclaims, "I can die now!" He is expressing his gratitude to God for all he had been given. God had not denied him anything.

Jacob's awareness of human mortality culminates with his making Joseph promise to not bury his body in Egypt but to return his bones to Canaan. He believed God that a great nation would spring from his family and that one day they would return to the promised land. That was where he wanted to be buried. Thus he exacts a solemn promise from Joseph not to bury him in Egypt. That was Jacob's way of expressing his belief in what God had promised. He had no doubt that the future of the people of God would not be realized in Egypt but in Canaan.

We should ask ourselves whether our conversations reflect the same things that concerned Jacob. Or are we so caught up in worldly affairs that we overlook eternal things? Do we base our decisions on values which will still be valuable in eternity, or are we more concerned with our bank accounts and with how we impress others? Referring to the fact that human beings will live for eternity, C.S. Lewis continues in the essay I quoted from earlier,

We could be left utterly and absolutely outside, repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored. On the other hand we could be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged. We walk every day on the razor's edge between these two incredible possibilities. Apparently then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is not mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation.

Jacob had no real power or influence over worldly matters, but he did have quite an influence in Joseph's life. Joseph had been at the heartbeat of Egypt for years. He spoke the language of that country; he thought like an Egyptian. He actually spent in total almost 100 years there. But at the end of his life Joseph insisted that his remains also be taken from Egypt and buried in Canaan. He had heard from his father about God's promises, and he had seen his father worship God. Thus he began to see, at the height of his power, that there were more important things in life than exercising power over people. That is why he had his body sent back to Canaan—to make the statement that he too trusted God. The Egyptians built monuments all across their land, both to the living and the dead. But Joseph, who had adopted that country and spent his life there, wanted to be remembered as one of the sons of Abraham, one who had the same faith as Abraham. Jacob, his faithful father, in exerting the vow from his son to not bury his remains in Egypt, had the effect of influencing his son to ask to be returned to Canaan also following his death.

No matter what position you hold in life you have the ear of people around you; you may even have authority even over some of them. Do not be afraid to use your position. God is not antagonistic towards nations, cultures or people who gather together in any kind of grouping. Therefore be a life-giver as Joseph was. But never forget that the eternal issues are the most important things. Do not leave behind monuments to your culture. This nation is not going to last forever, despite our many freedoms and privileges. We need to align ourselves with Jacob, to become utterly certain of the promises of God to us as Christians. At the end of your life, if you are godly, you will not be intensely interested in who has just been nominated to the Supreme Court, or who will win the next Presidential campaign, important as those things are now and will be then. As you look back on your life then, the most important thing will be your worship and praise to God, as they were with Jacob in this Genesis story.

I will close by quoting again from the C.S. Lewis essay,

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses; to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are in some degree helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them that we should conduct all our dealings with one another. All friendships, all loves, all play, all politics; there are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nation, culture, arts, civilization--these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit; immortal

horrors or everlasting splendors.

Both Joseph and Jacob glorified God. Joseph served by using his God-given position and authority at the head of the leading nation of his day. He oversaw an economic revolution in Egypt, the mass migration of people to the cities, and the salvation of his generation from the famine. Yet none of those accomplishments influence the lives of people today. Jacob prayed and worshiped his God in gratitude because he lived to see his son once more. We today are encouraged in our worship by the prayers and insight of that great man of God. I pray that God will grant us values that arise from his Scriptures; that he will use our place in the world we live in now, and grant us enthusiasm for the things that will last forever.

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Tenth Message

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