

THE LORD IS WITH US!

JOSEPH: MAN OF FAITH...IMAGE OF CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

The holiday season has passed. The family members have all gone back to their homes, the parties are over, the tree has been taken down, the nativity scene has been put back in its box, and the decorations have all been stored in the garage. A new year has begun.

One of the first letters I received at the beginning of this new year was a reminder from the government that I should begin to prepare my 1994 income tax return. I don't know why, but that letter had a way of bringing me back to our current reality in a hurry. I was in my garage when the mail carrier brought it, and as I sat down right there and read it alone, I found my heart beginning to fill with fear and worry about a lot of personal issues. After talking to many men and women about their lives this week, I found out that I was not alone. They shared with me many of their fears and the difficulties they are struggling with at this moment: problems in family relationships, the need for jobs and job security, financial difficulties, taxes they owe or may owe, changing health programs and benefits, retirement programs, social security benefits, etc., etc. The temptation to give in to fears about all these things can be overwhelming at a given moment, especially if you feel that you are alone.

But in the middle of my fear and worry---which, by the way, change none of the above situations---the Lord reminded me of a wonderful spiritual truth out of the Christmas story. The angel of the Lord had come to Joseph in a dream and said that he should take Mary as his wife, and she would bear a son whom he was to name Jesus, for it was he who would save his people from their sins. And then Matthew added, "Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled saying, 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God [is] with us'" (Matthew 1:22-23; see also Isaiah 7:14). That truth is real in our lives at this very moment regardless of whatever stressful circumstances we currently face.

That "God is with us" is powerfully illustrated in the life of the patriarch Joseph in Genesis 39.

God is with us in our trials

Genesis 39:1-6a

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.

The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

God was preparing Israel to become a great nation from which would come Messiah, who would be "the light of the world" and would bring blessings to the nations. It all began with God's covenant with Abraham and

Sarah; which then was continued through Isaac and his wife Rebekah; and then through Jacob and his wife Leah, who gave birth to Judah, and his wife Rachel, who gave birth to Joseph. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were each men of faith who struggled with God and in reality were prime candidates for our current recovery programs---all three came from dysfunctional families. This affected all their children, right down to Joseph, who was a man of faith and an image of Christ.

In Genesis 37 we found that Joseph (1905-1815 BC) was the eleventh son of Jacob and the first son of his beloved wife Rachel. "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe [many-colored tunic] for him" (Genesis 37:3). This love and special treatment watered a seed of hatred and jealousy in the hearts of the other brothers, which began to grow into a murderous anger when Joseph saw some of them break some family rules and felt obliged to tell his father. Then the straw that broke the camel's back in their relationship came when God gave Joseph two dreams in which he saw his brothers and parents bowing down to him in subjection. From then on the brothers looked for an opportunity to kill Joseph.

That opportunity came when Jacob sent his favorite son north to look for his brothers and the flocks to see how they were doing and report back to him. When Joseph arrived in camp, the brothers stripped off his many-colored tunic and threw him into a dry well to die. Judah, the fourth son of Jacob, convinced his brothers to sell Joseph to some traveling Ishmaelite merchants passing between Syria and Egypt rather than kill him. The deal was made, and they sold him as a slave for twenty shekels of silver. The brothers then took Joseph's robe, dipped it into the blood of a slaughtered goat, and returned to their father Jacob to tell him that Joseph had been killed by some animals. Jacob mourned Joseph's death, not knowing that at that moment his beloved son was being sold again as a slave in Egypt to the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

Chapter 38 tells the story of Judah, who married a Canaanite woman who gave birth to three sons. When they came of age to marry, Judah found a Canaanite bride for his first son Er, named Tamar. But because Er was evil in the sight of God, the Lord put him to death. Judah asked his second son Onan to marry Tamar, but he refused to produce children with her. This was wicked in the Lord's sight, so he put Onan to death. Then Judah promised Tamar that when his third son came of age, she could marry him. In time Judah's wife died, so in his aloneness he decided to join some of his men to shear some of his flock, forgetting his promise to Tamar. She reacted to this abandonment by dressing as a shrine prostitute with her face covered. Judah saw her and offered her a goat in exchange for sex; and she became pregnant by him and gave birth to twins, Perez or Pharah ("Breach") and Zerah ("Dawning"). And it would be out of the lineage of Perez that King David and Messiah Jesus would come (see Matthew 1:3).

But working behind all these scenes of hatred, jealousy, deception, and sexual immorality is the fine hand of God, the Master Potter, who had placed Joseph on his potter's wheel in order to mold him into his very own image. And after being placed into the fires of trials, temptations, and persecution, Joseph would come out as a chosen vessel through whom the Lord would pour out his life, love, and the gift of salvation to many.

"Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there." The year was 1888 BC, and Joseph was seventeen years old when he arrived in Egypt as a slave. Either Amenemes 1-IV or Senwosret 1-III was ruling in the Twelfth Dynasty (1990-1775 BC), which was called the Strong Middle Kingdom of Egypt. You can imagine the physical and emotional state Joseph was in when he arrived at the slave block in downtown Cairo. One day he had been a teenage boy greatly loved by his father, and the next day he was experiencing the murderous hatred and jealousy of his brothers, being thrown into a dry well, feeling the fear of being abandoned to wild animals that would surely take his life, and having no one to protect or rescue him. Sitting in the semi-darkness, he had begun to hear the voices of several of his brothers mixed with the foreign accents of some other people, and then the words, "Sold for twenty shekels of silver." Sold! To whom? He had been pulled up out of the well into the bright daylight only to have chains placed on his legs and an iron collar fastened around his neck. He had been tied by a rope to a camel and forced to follow the Ishmaelite traders some three hundred miles from Dothan to the capital of Egypt with no hope of redemption, no family, no friends, no future---alone!

Finally, after being cleaned up, this well-built and handsome seventeen-year-old boy was placed on the block

to be sold again to a total stranger, an Egyptian named Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. In the immediate circumstances it looked like a horrible moment in the life of Joseph, but as King David would write some nine hundred years later (Psalm 105:1-4, 16-19),

"Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.

Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of his wonderful acts.
Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
Look to the LORD and his strength;
seek his face always...

He called down famine on the land
and destroyed all their supplies of food;
and he sent a man before them---

Joseph, sold as a slave.
They bruised his feet with shackles,
his neck they put in irons,
till what he foretold [dreams] came to pass,
till the word of the LORD proved him true."

That word, according to his first dream, was that he would one day become the leader of a nation, which would take place in order to save not only the Egyptians, but also the surrounding nations and in time his own family, from death. He would become part of the foundation of the second dream which would finally be fulfilling in Jesus in his humanity and finally in his deity at his second coming (see Revelation 12).

"The LORD was with Joseph...." Potiphar took Joseph into his own home, and Joseph was given some tasks to do. In time his master saw that there was something about this slave that made him totally different from all his other slaves. The Lord was with him...Somehow the master found out that Joseph was a follower of the God *Yahweh*, and that this one God, in contrast to the many gods in Egypt, had blessed this boy, because everything he touched on Potiphar's behalf prospered. Promotions were in order, and Joseph was moved from the position of just one of Potiphar's slaves to that of Potiphar's personal attendant, and then that of steward over his household and all his property. And the Lord continued to bless Joseph and all that Potiphar had in the house as well as the fields. In time Potiphar turned everything over to Joseph except his wife and what he had for dinner. And at this point we can see the seed of the Abrahamic covenant taking root: "...All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). In the case of Joseph the blessing began in the house of Potiphar, and it would spread to the staff, a prison warden, some prisoners, and eventually to Pharaoh, his Egyptian people, the surrounding nations, and finally Joseph's own family. The communities in which we live and work are also blessed by God when we choose to trust in him and walk in righteousness.

In this way Joseph reflected the life of Jesus (see Genesis 18:19). We can see it in the spiritual principles of the New Covenant as recorded in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 37:24-28, where divine sovereignty and human responsibility are woven together by the Spirit of God, when he gives to all men and women who choose to follow Jesus "a new heart" that desires to respond to him in obedience and faith. "I will be your God and you will be my people."

Pharaoh would describe Joseph as a man with the Spirit of God (see Genesis 41:38; Deuteronomy 30:6-10). This story is not about the success of Joseph but the reason behind his success: The Lord was with him. As Jesus would grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men (see Luke 2:52), so did Joseph.

But like Jesus, before he would be given a ministry of saving many people, he would have to go through the fire of temptation.

God is with us in our temptations

Genesis 39:6b-15

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

Joseph had three strikes against him: (1) He was a slave of his Egyptian master, (2) he was well-built, and (3) he was handsome. And he was placed in a situation in which his Egyptian master's wife appeared to be bored with her life, wanting to add some personal excitement to it. You can have everything, be in a position of power and honor, and still be alone and empty. Isn't this what our society tells us every day in our magazine articles, books, and TV programs? Just because you're breathing doesn't mean you're living! So to ease her boredom and emptiness, she commanded this new slave, perhaps as she had many others before him, "Come to bed with me!" expecting an immediate response so she could satisfy her sexual needs.

"But he refused." This is an amazing moment in the life of Joseph when you realize that he had lived in a Canaanite society that was given over to degrading sexual perversion that included the rape of his own sister Dinah by a man of Shechem (see Genesis 34:1-2). He had also experienced the disgrace of his brother Reuben's giving in to his sexual lust and sleeping with his father's wife Bilhah (see Genesis 35:22). And it is even more amazing when you realize that the Law of Moses that would command, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14), and, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife...." (Exodus 20:17), would not be written on stone for another five hundred years.

So where did Joseph get his high idea of morality and the strength to refuse his master's wife's sexual advances? First, he had the direct revelation of the character and heart of God and the truth about good and evil, or righteousness and sin, that God had personally revealed to mankind when he spoke directly to Adam and Eve in the garden: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over [it]...." (Genesis 1:28). "...You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). God also spoke directly to Cain and asked him why he was angry with his brother, and then told him, "If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." (Genesis 4:6-7.) God spoke to Noah, who found favor in his sight, and told him he would destroy the earth with a flood because he saw that "...the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). We have already seen in this series (see Discovery Paper 4417) that God had spoken personally, in dreams and visions, and through angels to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph himself.

Later in the history of Israel and then of the church of Jesus Christ, God sent his priests, prophets, and apostles, his Son, and his written word to reveal his character and moral will to humanity in every generation. And all mankind has had indirect revelation as Paul declared to the Romans some two thousand years later (1:18-20): "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them,

because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities---his eternal power and divine nature---have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." Paul also articulated to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7-8) a spiritual truth that had been given to mankind since the beginning of the creation of men and women: "...This is [always] the will of God, your sanctification [being set apart unto God for his purposes]; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality...For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit." (God would never ask us to do something without first providing the power of his Spirit to accomplish it.)

So Joseph responded to Potiphar's wife's advances in a spirit of righteousness as revealed to him by his God *Yahweh*. Here he stood, a handsome young man, before this apparently beautiful and powerful woman, with no one else around as far as they knew. She knew that even in her Egyptian culture what she was proposing was punishable by prison and death, but she wanted to make sport of him anyway. Joseph, on the other hand, let her know that his master had entrusted to him everything he had---*except* his wife. He also saw immediately that what she was suggesting was wicked and declared openly to her, "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against my God *Yahweh*?" Joseph was more concerned with how adultery would affect his relationship with God than with what it had to do with her or him. He was living in the presence of God; he was never alone. It was God alone whom he had chosen to live for and honor with his life. (If only King David had had the same moral fiber when he saw Bathsheba; yet we find that God was willing to extend mercy and forgiveness to David and to all of us who sin against him, when we are willing to confess our sin. But no one sins without personal consequences [see 2 Samuel 11-12; Psalm 51].)

However, the master's wife had her mind made up, and the issue had become not just her need for sexual fulfillment, but her struggle for power and position. So she set a trap to get rid of him. A day arrived when her servants were not in the house and she was alone, so when Joseph came into the house to make his daily rounds, she appeared out of nowhere, grabbed his coat, and again commanded him, "Come to bed with me!" But Joseph left his coat and ran out of the house.

There are times when in the midst of temptation you can give the tempter a theological reason why you do not want to participate in a sin, and then there are times when you have to run without a word. Peter would later write to the Christians in Turkey: "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. And after you have suffered for a little, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you" (1 Peter 5:8-10).

Before Jesus began his public ministry, he was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Later the writer to the Hebrews would remind us, "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (2:17), and "...We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (4:15). During his ministry he told his disciples and all who wanted to follow him, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you, that every one who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28).

Joseph's spiritual stand may have strengthened his own heart, but it had little if any effect on the wicked heart of the master's wife, for she tempted him day after day, although he refused to listen.

God was with Joseph in his trial and in his temptation. Now God would be with him in his unjust persecution.

God is with us in our persecution

Genesis 39:16-23

She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

When Joseph ran, his master's wife was embarrassed to be left holding his coat in her hand. So she immediately designed a plan to save face and get rid of him. She called in her servants, and with racial overtones accused Joseph, the Hebrew slave, of trying to rape her, saying that only her screams had saved her, causing him to flee for his life. "And look what I have in my hand---the proof...his coat." Then she waited for her husband to come home, and feeling very secure because her servants believed her story, she repeated it to her husband and held up the evidence of Joseph's coat, as if she had not ripped it off him, but he had disrobed and dropped it beside her in order to rape her, leaving it behind when she screamed. And then she drove the nail home on Joseph's coffin: "Look how your slave treated me, your wife!"

The master, angry yet wanting to quiet his wife and end the situation, took his once trusted slave Joseph without a word of explanation and cast him into the king's prison. For unlike American justice, Joseph was guilty until proven innocent.

But now we get a review of the blessing of God on the man of God regardless of the circumstances. The Lord knew where Joseph was, and he was with him in the same way that our Lord Jesus would be with his disciples and all who would love him over the centuries: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). And not only was the Lord with Joseph, but he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners with their work details, and he was so successful that the warden did nothing, becoming a warden in name only.

As Joseph suffered unjustly, so would Jesus. Peter would remind us, "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously...." (1 Peter 2:21-23.) As Joseph was placed into the darkness of prison in preparation for bringing blessing to the nations, and as Israel too would be placed in the darkness of Egypt for four hundred years before bringing blessing to the nations, so Jesus would be placed on the cross and buried in darkness for three days but raised from the dead by his Father. And from his heavenly throne he can bring spiritual blessing to all who love him, and one day he will bring blessing to all the nations.

These days our hearts can be tempted to become fearful and worry about many unknown situations. But as we look at this wonderful story of Joseph, there are five statements that are important to remember in the midst of our trials, temptations and persecutions:

- "The LORD was with Joseph..." (verse 2).
- "...His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did...." (verse 3).
- "...The LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph" (verse 5).
- In prison "...the LORD was with him...." (verse 21).
- "...The LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did" (verse 23).

"Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God [is] with us.'"

Out of this study I hope that both you and I will take this new year and make it one in which we choose by the power of the Holy Spirit to have the faith, courage, and strength to demonstrate to ourselves and all those around us the eternal reality that Immanuel, Jesus himself is with us and, is our firm rock in the midst of the storms that may come into our lives; and I hope that we will continue to demonstrate this reality for the rest of our time on this earth.

Catalog No. 4418
Genesis 39:1-23
Second Message
Ron Ritchie
January 8, 1995

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