

THE MAN I'D LIKE TO BE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 2, 1967 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

Through the years I have occasionally approached a class of young people by asking, "If you could not be you, who would you like to be?" This is a rather, simple, direct approach which calls attention to the primary qualities of life. In posing this question, we need to realize that on the deepest level few people really want to be someone else. It is quite true that they might like to have the talents of someone else, the appearance of someone else, or the possessions or situation in life of someone else, but few people actually wish they could totally change into a different person. So, I emphasize that the person must make a change. "If you could not be you, who would you like to be?"

Some years ago in a high school assembly in this congregation I asked the question. After a thoughtful period of time one boy responded, "Well, I guess I'd like to be my father." This was a great compliment to the father and also to the boy. Another occasion on which I used this method of opening a class discussion was at the Jordonia school for boys who have been in trouble with the law. On a Sunday morning when my schedule permitted, I attended one of the Sunday school classes and talked with a group of fifteen to eighteen boys. These boys ranged in age from fourteen to seventeen. When I asked the question, the first boy to respond suggested that he would like to be his mother and then gave the reasons why. A second boy responded to the question, but his answer I have forgotten. The third boy, a boy with unusual ability and fine appearance, said that he would like to be "his girl-friend's brother." We asked his reasons. He told us that the man was a game warden, and described him as an honorable man. His real reason, however, was that "He's always ready to help everybody."

When God caused the Bible to be written his Holy Spirit inspired the writers to tell of the lives of many people. It is my conviction that the Holy Spirit describes many lives in the hope that those of us who read of them will want to become like them. Of course, the pre-eminent pattern for all of us is the Lord himself. In the New Testament there are several others who might well be patterns for us to follow. However, I have chosen a man deep in the Old Testament as one that I should be happy to be like. Of all the several thousand characters mentioned in the Old Testament, I would choose to be Joseph.

A Twelfth Child

Joseph was the eleventh son and twelfth child of Jacob, the great patriarch from whom came the twelve tribes of the Jewish nation. Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, and the rest of the older sons had all been born, as had the only sister, Dinah, when Joseph was born. He was the first child of the beloved wife, Rachel, who was yet to bear the youngest son by the name of Benjamin. Born in Padan-Aram, Joseph lived there for about six years at which time his father and the family moved back to Canaan. On the way back to the native land, Joseph's mother died, leaving him at the age of six a half-orphan.

It would be interesting to know what training this mother gave her son in those early years. A child learns much, especially concerning attitudes, during this early period of life and it may be that Rachel had a major part in the successful life of Joseph. After her death, Joseph remained in the family only for another ten or eleven years, for it was then that his older brothers became so incensed at what they thought was preferential treatment on the part of their father

that they sold young Joseph into Egyptian slavery. Their jealousy caused Joseph to be purchased for twenty pieces of silver by an Ishmaelite caravan of traders who carried him to Egypt. Here he was purchased by Potiphar, captain of the guard of Pharaoh.

When Joseph arrived in Egypt, he did not know the language, nor the customs, nor even a single friend. Yet, within a very brief time, we discover that his hard work and industry had caused Potiphar to put him in charge of his entire household. It was at this point that strong temptation confronted Joseph. In Gen. 39:8, we read Joseph's decision: "But he refused, and said unto his master's wife, Behold, my master knoweth not what is with me in the house and he hath put all that he hath into my hand: he is not greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

We are impressed not only by Joseph's morality, but also by his unusual insight into the basic nature of sin. He realized that all sin, even though it might be against another person or even one's self, is ultimately a sin against God. In spite of the fact that we in our day have the benefit of the entire Old Testament, the life of Christ, and all of the New Testament, many of us do not see as clearly as did this seventeen year old boy the true nature of sin. This insight is impressive indeed.

Prison Incidents

As a result of false accusations Joseph found himself in prison. Here again his dependability and industry paid dividends. We read, "And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were bound: and he was there in the prison. But Jehovah was with Joseph, and showed kindness unto him, and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatsoever they did there he was the doer of it." (Gen. 39:20-22.)

During his sojourn in prison he had opportunity to interpret the dreams of the king's butler and baker. His interpretations were fulfilled exactly, since God was guiding him in this special ability. Two years later he had opportunity to interpret Pharaoh's dream concerning the seven fat cattle who were devoured by seven lean cattle and seven well developed ears of corn which were devoured by seven thin blaster ears of corn. Even in this interpretation Joseph showed his basic nature. Instead of arrogating to himself the glory for this achievement, we read, "And Joseph answered Pharaoh saying, It is not in me: God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace." (Gen. 41:6.)

The three chapters which follow find Joseph's brethren coming down to Egypt to buy grain in order for themselves and their families to survive. The seven years of plenty had passed and two years of famine had taken place. Joseph recognized his brethren but did not reveal his identity to them on their first visit. After they returned home with bags filled with grain only a few months passed until they came again to buy grain in order to survive. On this second trip Joseph revealed himself to his brethren in one of the most dramatic moments in history. While they were dining as his guests, "Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence. And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt."

Then came one of the most remarkable qualities in the life of Joseph, his willingness to forgive his brethren. He said, "And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. . . . And God sent me before you to preserve you a remnant in the earth, and to save you alive by a great deliverance. So now it was not you who sent me hither, but God: and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord to all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt." (Gen. 50:3-5, 7-8.) In spite of the fact that they deserved both blame and punishment, Joseph forgave them freely.

Immediately, Joseph sent for his father and the rest of his family and brought them to live in the land of Goshen. The paragraph which tells of the invitation reaching the ears of Jacob is a moving one. "And they told him saying, Joseph is yet alive, and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt. And his heart fainted, for he believed them not. And they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said unto them: and when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived; and Israel said, It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive: I will go and see him before I die," (Gen. 45:26-28.)

Final Events

After seventeen years of living in Egypt Jacob died. Joseph's love for his father was so great that the text says, "And Joseph fell upon his father's face, and wept upon him, and kissed him. And Joseph commanded his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father: and the physicians embalmed Israel. And forty days were fulfilled for him; for so are fulfilled the days of embalming: and the Egyptians wept for him three score and ten days." (Gen. 50:1-3.)

Not only was Jacob's body embalmed as if he had been of Egyptian royalty, but also a great assemblage made the long tiresome journey to Canaan for the burial. "And Joseph went up to bury his father: and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, and all the house of Joseph, and his brethren, and his father's house: only their little ones, and their flocks, and their herds, they left in the land of Goshen. And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen: and it was a very great company." (Gen. 50:7-9.)

When this assemblage returned to Egypt the older brethren of Joseph were fearful that he might retaliate because of their earlier mistreatment of him. The text says, "And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said, It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully require us all the evil which we did unto him. And they sent a message unto Joseph, saying, Thy father did command before he died, saying, So shall ye say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray thee now, the transgression of thy brethren, and their sin, for that they did unto thee evil. And now, we pray thee, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of thy father." (Gen. 50:15-17.)

We can feel the anxiety of their hearts as they thought of their just deserts because of their mistreatment of Joseph. But again, Joseph's great forgiving spirit removed the necessity of their fear. "And Joseph wept when they spake unto him. . . . And Joseph said unto them Fear not, for am I in the place of God? And as for you, ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them." (Gen. 50:17,19-21.)

The final act in the life of Joseph as revealed in the book of Genesis is his request that his people carry his bones back into the land of Canaan when eventually they should return. Joseph's heart was with his own people and he did not wish to be permanently buried in a foreign land. Such was his loyalty to the people of God.

Conclusion

Joseph was in a sense a "Christian before the time." This in no sense minimizes the greatness of Christ nor of his teachings, but simply indicates that Joseph demonstrated in his life one important facet of the prime teaching which Jesus would eventually make so clear and so forceful. Joseph, like our Lord, forgave those who sinned against him. Christ did not originate all truth, but he gave it its fullest and most comprehensive statement, as in the case of the importance of forgiveness. In addition, Christ lived all truth perfectly, Joseph was merely like Christ in certain important ways.

No, we cannot roll the calendar back 3500 years or more and be Joseph, but we can be like him. Our lives can be pure and clean as was his. We also can feel a great loyalty to God and his teachings. We also can demonstrate in our lives hard work and industry which would cause us to be useful wherever we may be placed. Like him, we also can love our own fathers and treat them with respect and honor. Finally, we can aspire to have the same generosity of spirit that will lead us to forgive those who may sin against us.

The Bible is full of great lives which God would like for us to be like. They are our patterns, but the one perfect pattern is Christ. As we read of Christ and those who reflected God's way of life, we are pulled upward to a higher level of living and make our lives worthwhile. Modern psychologists tell us that we come to be like those whom we admire. This truth God knew from the beginning and incorporated it freely into the writing of his inspired word. Again and again has he presented to our minds the kind of life he would like for us to live, in the persons of Joseph, Daniel, John, Paul, and especially the Lord himself. "If you could not be you, who would you like to be?" This simple little device can help us to become the person that God would have us to be.

It is helpful as we go through life to choose someone whom we admire greatly, possibly one of these great worthies of the scriptures, and ask ourselves the question as we face each major decision of life, "What would he do in this circumstance?" This helps a young man go through the difficult years of youth. This helps a young woman as she matures into a fine Christian wife and mother. This helps a man in business or in one of the professions. It is a means of making concrete the influence of the great worthies of the Bible in our own day-to-day living. But it is as we give our love and allegiance to Christ and pledge ourselves to follow in his steps that we find the greatest help of all.

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