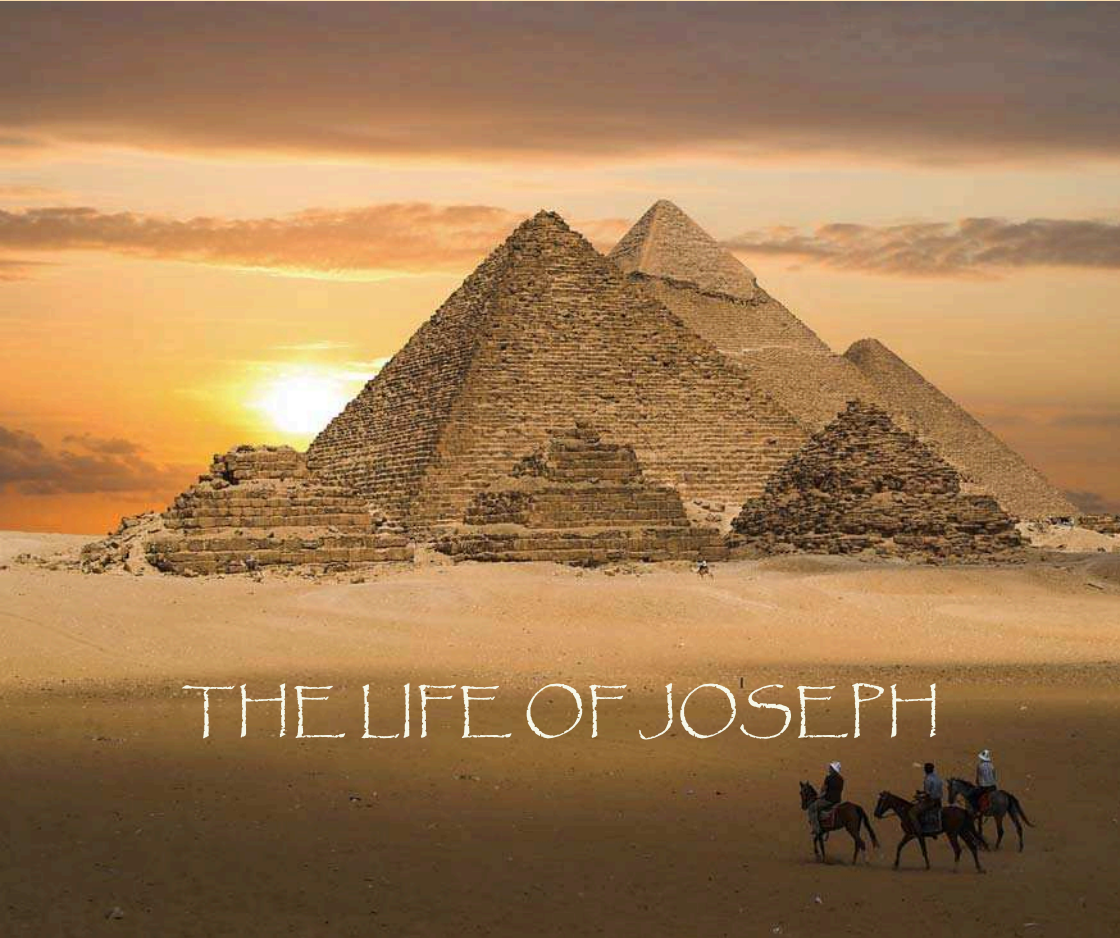


# BEHIND A FROWNING PROVIDENCE



THE LIFE OF JOSEPH

B.A.Ramsbottom

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**By B.A. Ramsbottom**

“Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.”

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## PREFACE

It may well be asked, “Why yet another book about Joseph?” To which we answer, “This is different.” Remembering that Joseph was only seventeen when the story begins, this book is intended to be a help to our young people. It consists of Sunday afternoon talks given to the Pastor’s Bible class. It is noticeable that so many of Joseph’s problems were problems our young people are called to face today. We trust, though, that it will be profitable to older readers also.

The author acknowledges help received in reading the various books about Joseph and commentaries on his life. But he believes that he has tried to deal with a few aspects of Joseph’s life and experience which have previously, for some reason, been ignored or passed over.

In the words of holy Scripture, may this little book be for “edification, and exhortation, and comfort.”

## GOD'S PLAN

*Please read Genesis chapter 37*

When the story begins we are told that Joseph was only seventeen years old. So his strange and mysterious life is of special interest to teenagers and young people - but most certainly not to them alone. Joseph experienced more trials than most; and he met with many problems and difficulties which face young people today.

### FAVOURITISM

Almost immediately we find Joseph's father, old Jacob, guilty of favouritism - which did Joseph no good. Joseph was the favourite son, and Jacob showed it in an ostentatious way, giving him a "coat of many colours."

Years ago it was always a "coat of many colours" but nowadays it is spoken of as a "coat with long sleeves." Be very wary of new translations and of young ministers who stand up and say, "But the Hebrew means ...." A learned Hebraist once warned me. He said, "Very few people really understand Hebrew. It is a most difficult language." At the time he commented that, while most Church of England ministers understood Greek, very few understood Hebrew. (We know the translators of our Authorized Version certainly did.)

The whole point of the "coat of many colours" ("coat with long sleeves") is that it marked a person out as very important, distinguished.

So Jacob was guilty of favouritism. Mr. F.L. Gosden of Brighton, not long before he died, told me that partiality and prejudice had caused much trouble and distress in our churches during his lifetime. Partiality on the one hand; prejudice on the other. "I don't like him - so ...." or, "He is my brother ... my friend - so ...."

We cannot help specially liking some more than others but we must seek to be impartial - especially if called to positions in the church of God, such as a pastor. The Word of God says, "Without partiality," and God



said to David, "He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God." What sorrow David's favouritism for Absalom brought, and surely the first split in the early church was caused by the partiality of Barnabas: "Barnabas determined to take Mark ... but Paul thought it not good" - and gave his reasons. Later we read that Mark was the son of Barnabas' sister.

## THE FEAR OF GOD

Joseph possessed the fear of God so we are told in Scripture. And it was a vital principle that affected his behaviour right through his life. This is vital, especially in the life and behaviour of young people.

What is the fear of God? It does not mean being afraid of God, frightened of Him, but a loving, tender awe and reverence. It will affect everything in our lives - what we do, where we go, how we act. If born again of the Holy Spirit, we shall have the fear of God implanted in our hearts. It will give us a secret religion before God. It will give us a tender conscience, and always take God's side. It will constrain us to what is right, and restrain us from what is wrong.

This holy fear is found in the believer's heart right from the beginning. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning ...." We have this three times in the Word of God.

I have often given the illustration of the little servant girl. She was asked if she possessed the fear of God, and, if so, how did she know. After a moment's thought, she answered, "I used to dust and clean up beautifully *where everyone could see*. But after there came a change, I was just as careful *where no one would look*."

This was Joseph's religion *right through his life*.

## DREAMS

Joseph had remarkable dreams - and it is clear that these dreams came from God. He dreamed that he was in a harvest field and all his brothers' sheaves bowed down to his sheaf. Again, he dreamed that the sun, moon and stars all bowed down to him. It is clear that he believed this meant that his father and his brothers would all bow down to him. And his father

and his brothers realised this is what he meant. Under it all Joseph knew that this was God's promise to him, which would one day be fulfilled.

What can we say about dreams? The opening verse of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that in times past God spoke "at sundry times and in divers manners." Do not forget that at one time God's people had no Bible, no chapel, no preacher, and so one of the ways in which God spoke was through dreams.

God's usual way today is to speak through His Word. But we must not limit God. If He so please, God can use a dream to make His will known. A prime example of this is Alfred Dye (1851-1930), a well-known minister. In his Autobiography *Sovereign Grace O'er Sin Abounding* he relates how God often spoke to him in dreams.

One remarkable case was concerning his long pastorate at Rowley Regis. Mr. Dye had preached for some time, but he had seen a chapel in his dreams where he knew he would be pastor. Yet he never came across that chapel. So much so that he was wondering about settling at another chapel.

But one morning he went for a long walk - and saw his chapel! It had no notice board.

He was told that the pastor had recently died - he had been there sixty years - he had never allowed another man in his pulpit. Alfred Dye said to himself, "I shall soon be in that pulpit, and be pastor there!" And very soon he was.

So much for dreams.

## KEEPING OUR COUNSEL

It is clear that Joseph was very unwise to tell his dreams to his brothers. They were certainly from God, revealing His purpose for Joseph's life; but he should have kept them to himself.

We have many, many things that we need to keep to ourselves. We need to keep our counsel. Even the virgin Mary, blessed woman that she was and with such clear revelations from heaven, "kept these things, and pondered them in her heart." You may be clearly shown what work God

has for you - perhaps some eminent position in the church of God - but it is wise to keep this between yourself and the Lord. "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass."

## THE MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE

In the life of Joseph we specially see the mystery of divine providence, the outworking of God's purposes. What is providence? God fulfilling in time what He has planned in eternity.

God has a purpose in the lives of all His people, and sometimes it seems very mysterious; but

"He keeps eternity in sight,  
And what He does is always right."

In our lives, so much hangs on so little. Look at verses 12 and 13:

"And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send thee unto them."

Joseph went out that morning. *He never returned home again.* We do not know what lies before us during the day when we wake up in the morning.

Joseph went to find his brothers at Shechem. They were not there. He could have returned home. *BUT* a man had heard them talking. He remembered what they said: they were going to Dothan. This very man saw Joseph wandering about. He asked him why. He told him where his brothers were. So Joseph went to find them. And this was the beginning of the long train of events which would end in Joseph's dreams being fulfilled, his brothers bowing before him. But what a lot of things were to happen first!

In your lives so much hangs on so little - a "chance" meeting; a letter received; a phone call; a casual remark; and your life is never the same again. What a mercy that we believe:

"My life's minutest circumstance  
Is subject to His eye!"

## JEALOUSY

The cruelty of Joseph's brothers was appalling. If such a thing appeared in the newspapers even today, it would be a scandal.

They hated Joseph. They planned to kill him. They threw him in a pit. They did not heed his bitter cries (Genesis 42. 21). They sold him as a slave to Midianites on their way to Egypt. (They were on the busy trade route.)

(We wonder where Reuben was, as he planned to rescue Joseph. He does not appear to have been there when Joseph was sold. Perhaps, as the eldest in the family, he was keeping watch.)

Jealousy is a dreadful thing - and Joseph's brothers were eaten up with jealousy. The Word of God tells us it is "cruel as the grave." No doubt much of it sprang from his father's favouritism; but also there was a difference. Almost all the brothers appear to have been wicked men, yet Joseph clearly loved and feared the Lord. So his father must have had a special affection for him.

Teenagers sometimes feel very lonely in their own families, especially if the Lord begins to deal with them. Perhaps their brothers and sisters, even their parents, do not really like it. It is a way of loneliness, and especially difficult at home as you cannot get away from it.

This is hard to bear. You will be watched. Things will be blamed on your religion. But God will be with you to help you along, and help you through.

The cruelty and wickedness of Joseph's brothers culminated in their deceit of their father, bringing him Joseph's coat of many colours, drenched in blood. They knew it would almost break their father's heart. Later the brothers would have to suffer for it.

For old Jacob this was a dreadful sorrow. He could not see any possible answer. But it was not the end! He did smile again, and rejoice.

So we find Joseph, seventeen years old, a slave in Egypt, knowing no one, never to see his home again. But God had a plan for Joseph, and this

was the first step. He must suffer, be sold as a slave in Egypt, so that one day he might be exalted, and become the saviour of those very brethren who had ill-treated him. Everything that seemed to be going wrong was really going right. But it would not be seen today, or tomorrow, or for a long time.

“His providence unfolds the book,  
And makes His counsels shine;  
Each opening leaf, and every stroke,  
Fulfils some deep design.”

It was years later, in looking back, that Joseph saw it was all part of God's plan. And we may have bitter things today for which we shall bless God as we look back.

Joseph had many lessons to learn, and God was moulding him, shaping him. The famous sculptor of a magnificent horse was asked how he could make a horse out of a lump of marble.

“How do you make it into a horse?”

“Easy! I start chipping; and keep chipping away everything that does not look like a horse, and leave everything that does look like a horse!”

That is how God works, to conform His people to the image of His Son. “This people have I formed for Myself; they shall show forth My praise.”

That was God's work with Joseph.

## TRIED AND TEMPTED

*Please read chapter 39*

We find Joseph all alone in a strange land, a slave in the house of Potiphar, a captain of Pharaoh's guard. But three times in this chapter we are told that God was with him:

“And the Lord was with Joseph” (verse 2).

“But the Lord was with Joseph” (verse 21).

“The Lord was with him” (verse 23) - and there is no vain repetition in God's Word.

Yet Joseph did not always feel that God was with him. Nor did it mean that because God was with him, everything went smoothly. But it did mean that all things were working together for his real good and for God's glory. (See Romans 8. 28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.”) Everything seemed to be going wrong, and yet in God's sight everything was going right.

### A SLAVE

What a change for Joseph! A slave. Yet he was blessed with contentment, submitting to the Lord. It was necessary for Joseph for a time to be in Potiphar's house - the house of a great man in the land of Egypt. And at this time there was a very refined civilisation in Egypt. Modern research and discoveries and the exhibits of “Egyptology” in the world's great museums bear witness to this.

Joseph must learn the refined ways of Egypt - for one day he must stand in the presence of Pharaoh. He must be prepared for this. God had a plan for Joseph's life, and he was working it out.

Some of the things that are now happening in your lives now may seem strange. Perhaps you wonder why. But maybe God is preparing you to make use of these things in later life. God makes no mistakes.

Just think of Joseph being so far away from home, a home he would

never see again. He was in a heathen land surrounded by those who had no knowledge of the Lord or His ways. No Bible to read - no church or chapel to attend - no minister to listen to - no godly friend to talk with. But his religion stood because it was real. Would ours?

An old minister used to say, "I wonder how much religion I would have left if I were sent to live all alone in the midst of the Sahara desert."

The great thing with Joseph was that he possessed the fear of God in his heart, and this prevailed.

### THE GREAT TEMPTATION

In Joseph's life came a dreadful trial in the form of a terrible temptation. His master's wife tempted him to immoral sexual relations with her when her husband was out of the way.

Such temptations are specially difficult and dangerous in our present day when there is a lowering of standards, and where what used to be called sin is now smiled at - "just having a fling" - "everyone does it." Sex outside marriage is one of the prevailing God-dishonouring sins of the present day. (It was not always so. It was counted a disgrace. But then came "the permissive years" following the last War.)

There are many who do stand only because:

1. They don't want to be found out.
2. It would damage their reputation.

But with Joseph, no one Would know. He was away from family and friends.

Joseph stood. He saw it as sin against his master, sin against his master's wife, sin against himself- but especially: "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin *against God*?" He knew he was in the sight of God's all-seeing eye and, kept by the power of God, the fear of the Lord prevailed. "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death."

Joseph saw it as "*great* wickedness." How can I? How can I (who

know and love the Lord)? How can I?

You will be tempted, but God is able to make you stand. "He is able to keep you from falling." When tempted, cry to the Lord for help. Avoid the place of temptation. Flee from evil. Turn away your eyes from beholding vanity. Look to the Saviour, especially as crucified for sinners. Do not dally. Never trust your own strength.

So the Lord helped Joseph to stand. But he suffered for it! It must have been a terrible shock for Joseph. He was innocent. He fled from the presence of Potiphar's wife. She falsely accused him, and her husband believed her. Joseph was thrown into prison, and Egyptian prisons were not nice places!

The question has been asked: how did Joseph deal with the lying accusation of Potiphar's wife? We are not told. To us it would seem helpful to know. Did he protest his innocence? Was he angry? Did he rebel? Did he submit? Scripture, for wise reasons known only to the Lord, is silent.

Often today young people who are enabled to stand suffer severely for it. What of those who will not cheat to help their boss? Those who will not work on the Lord's day? Those who refuse the unwelcome advances of their superiors of the opposite sex? Often it ends in demotion or even losing their job - certainly shutting the way to promotion.

A warning is necessary here. Some of the old Victorian pieces have some lovely things in them - but often there are stories of a young person enabled to stand, and instead of being dismissed, being honoured. For instance, a young boy, with a poor widowed mother, refused to work on the Sabbath. He is threatened with dismissal - but he refuses to give in, and is told to leave. But then the person who takes his place is accused of theft, and he is hurriedly brought back; or the managing director changes his mind and praises his integrity, etc. etc.

There are many, many stories similar to this in old magazines. Of course, there were amazing cases when this did happen; but, for the most



part, the world has not honoured those who seek to obey the will of God. The Word of God makes it clear we are not to expect it. Yet there *are* such cases; and God's Word still stands: "Them that honour Me I will honour."

So we find Joseph in prison. What a lot lies in that short, single sentence (verse 20): "He was *there* in the prison." How Satan must have roared! What a trial to Joseph.

We know the end. Joseph did not. He was *there*, day by day, week by week. But the Lord has a blessed ability to bring good out of seeming evil. It was not the end yet. And Joseph was to prove that "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning."