

Introduction

What a wonderful time was had last evening as we as a church family spent time together in fellowship and worship commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ. As December 25 gets closer and closer, our minds and hearts are captivated with the mind-boggling event of the incarnation. I want therefore to take a couple Sundays to break away from our series in Matthew to focus on the nativity of Jesus. The birth of Jesus is cause for great joy! And I want us, in our minds and hearts, to gather at the stable with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and marvel. I want us to treasure these things in our hearts just like Mary did in hers. I want us to sing with the angels, "Glory to God in the Highest!"

However, our journey to the Bethlehem manger this morning is going to start 17.5 centuries before Christ's birth. We are going to consider the life of Joseph the son of Jacob from the book of Genesis and find our way from him to Jesus.

[Pray]

I. Gripping Tale

We encounter in the life of Joseph one of the most riveting accounts in the Old Testament. Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob, the first of his sons born to Rachael. The only other son born to Rachel was the twelfth and youngest son of Jacob. Jacob was partial to Joseph and loved him more than the others. It was quite apparent as Jacob made an exquisite many-colored robe and presented it to him. The other brothers were jealous and hated Joseph. It inflamed their hostility that he reported their bad behavior to Jacob and also told them two dreams he had in which the family bowed down to him. The brothers conspired to kill him but were dissuaded by the oldest son Reuben. Instead they stripped Joseph of his robe and sold him to a caravan of traders who took him off to Egypt and sold him as a slave. Joseph was 17 at the time.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for him? When I was 15 years old, I was super excited to be traveling on my own. I had lived in France with my parents for 6 months as a 10-year-old and had learned some French. Now that I had a year of high school French under my belt, I was sure I was ready to function easily in the French culture. So away I went to spend a few weeks with a family my parents had befriended during our previous time there. I boarded a plane in Atlanta and got off in London and then on to a city in south-central France. It was all very idyllic until I arrived at the home of my host family. I suddenly realized how far I was from home. I wasn't able to communicate like I had imagined. And all I wanted was to turn around and go back home. But I couldn't. I had made a promise to my dad that I would stay at least two weeks. And for those two weeks, I lived with a knot in my stomach and a longing in my heart, a yearning to be back home.

Without doubt Joseph felt far worse. And it was more than two weeks. And there was no going back. He was now a slave in the home of an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. And no one was going to come looking for him because the brothers had taken the multicolored coat and dipped it in goat's blood to explain the disappearance of Joseph to their father. He concluded that a fierce animal had devoured him.

Meanwhile, however, God was with Joseph in the household of Potiphar. He was a resounding success in all he did, and Potiphar entrusted everything to his management. But a sinister temptress lurked in the household. Potiphar's wife was relentless in seeking to seduce Joseph. He refused again and again. One day she grabbed his garment. He did what men ought to do whenever tempted to sexual sin. He fled. But it looked bad. She cried out with a loud voice and accused Joseph of attempting to force himself on her. In anger, Potiphar took and threw him in prison. And there he was for a period of years. The total time with Potiphar and in prison was 13 years. We can't know exactly how long he spent in each, but it was a long time. It appears Joseph was in prison for at least three of the thirteen years. The two weeks I spent in France were the longest two weeks of my life. I can't fathom what it must have been like for Joseph except for the assurance the text gives us that the Lord showed Joseph steadfast love and gave him favor.

After a while two of Pharaoh's servants were thrown in the same prison with Joseph. Both had dreams. God gifted to Joseph the ability to interpret them. They told their dreams to Joseph, and he explained that the baker's dream meant that in three days Pharaoh would execute him and hang him on a tree. He also explained that in the same three days the cup bearer would be restored to his position. Joseph urged the cupbearer to mention him to Pharaoh because he was stolen from the land of the Hebrews and falsely accused in Egypt. The events unfolded just as Joseph had indicated. The baker was executed and the cup bearer restored. But the cupbearer did not remember Joseph. Two years went by. Two years!

After two years, Pharaoh dreamed dreams. They alarmed him, although he did not know what they could mean. It was at this point that the cupbearer remembered Joseph. Pharaoh brought Joseph up out of the prison and Joseph explained his dreams meant that God would bring 7 years of plenty which would be followed by 7 years of severe famine. He recommended that Pharaoh appoint a wise man to oversee a plan to store up food when there is plenty so that there would be ample reserves when the famine came. He selected Joseph and appointed him over all. Joseph married and had two sons. Their names tell us something of the heart of Joseph. The first he named Manasseh, saying, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The second son he named Ephraim because "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." Let that soak in.

In fact, let soak in all the things that Joseph is reported to have said while he was in Egypt. To the temptress, he said, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" He said to the two fellow prisoners, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" To dreamy-eyed Pharaoh Joseph said, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." "God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do." "The thing is fixed by God and God will shortly bring it about." Now in naming his sons Joseph declares that God has made me forget me hardship and my father's family. God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." Here is a man whose life revolves around God. He is unshakably certain of the sovereign hand of God in all his affliction and in all his pain and in all his hardship. His comfort is from God. His wisdom is from God. His confidence is from God. His joy

is from God. Joseph's life proves that loneliness is not a bad thing if one will but draw near to God in the midst of its affliction.

But there is more. Food was stored in the years of plenty. It was stockpiled. Then came the famine. It stretched far and wide, but there was food in Egypt. And the day came when Joseph's brothers arrived in search of food. Joseph recognized them. They came a second time, and this time he revealed his identity to them. Now catch the weight of what he said to them.

[Read Text – Genesis 45:4-15]

II. Remarkable Reassurance

I want to hone in on verses 4-8. Joseph does not want his brother's to be troubled over the evil they had done. It was a great evil. They wanted to KILL him but resorted instead to selling him. Yet he says, "DO not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here." Is that what you say when someone offends you, when someone sins against you? How can Joseph say that? How can he mean it?

BECAUSE he saw the hand of God. In verse 5, he declares, "God sent me before you to preserve life." In verse 7 he repeats, "God sent me before you to preserve FOR YOU a remnant on earth and to keep alive FOR YOU many survivors." And lest there be a shred of doubt remaining, he declares in verse 8, "It was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt." Now just once more for good measure, after Jacob died, Joseph asserts it again. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph proclaims the conviction of his soul in the matter, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

III. Captivating Comparison

Let's make our way now from Joseph to Jesus. In a number of features, the life and experiences of Jesus parallel those of Joseph, and Joseph proves to foreshadow Jesus in a magnificent way.

For example,

Both went far away from home—Joseph from Bethel and Jesus from heaven. Both departed home because of human sin and both because of the sin of their brothers.

Both experienced the favor of God upon their work. Joseph in his administration and Jesus in his mighty works.

Both suffered false accusation and were punished for it—one in prison, the other on a cross.

Both suffered their punishment in the company of two others—imprisoned with Joseph were Pharaoh's baker and cup bearer; crucified with Jesus were two thieves. In both cases one of the company faced justice and the other received mercy.

Both emerged from their punishment to reign—Joseph came out of the prison to rule over all Egypt and Jesus came out of the prison of the grave to rule over all the universe.

Both determined to provide abundantly for their family in their own presence. Joseph told his brothers to come to Egypt and they would dwell in the land. They would be near him and he would provide for them.

Likewise, Jesus gives to those who belong to him life eternal in his presence in Emmanuel's land, the new heavens and earth. He prayed, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me."

And the thing I especially want to highlight this morning is this: both were sent to save others at great cost to themselves.

It was not happenstance or coincidence that resulted in the saving work of Joseph or Jesus. No, it was according to the sovereign purpose and directive of God the Father. Each was delivered up according to the definite plan of God. Joseph declares over and over, "GOD SENT ME." To his evil brothers with their hateful intent, he said, "It was not you but God." And GOD DID IT.

In like manner, in the gospel of John, Jesus says the same thing of himself: "God so loved the world that HE GAVE his only Son." Paul the apostle writes the Galatians, "But when the fullness of time had come, God SENT

FORTH his Son." First John declares, "God sent his only Son into the world" and "He loved us and sent His Son."

The work for which each was sent was to SAVE . . . OTHERS. It is striking the three times Joseph says "You" to his brothers. He says "I was there in Egypt FOR YOU. He tells them. "I was sent ahead of YOU to preserve FOR YOU a remnant on earth and to keep alive FOR YOU many survivors." He was sent by God not in the interest of himself but in the interest of others. And so Jesus came FOR US! Joseph the carpenter, the supposed father of Jesus, was told by the angel, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he shall SAVE HIS PEOPLE from their sins." Jesus laid down his life FOR THE SHEEP. Neither Joseph nor Jesus came or went for themselves; it was for others.

And both were sent at a terrible cost to themselves. I can sort of imagine Joseph's sorrow based on my own two week experience in France, but that was two weeks and I wasn't a slave! All that time and all those years spent in a foreign land as a slave and then a prisoner. Jesus came from heaven and walked this guilty sod. He couldn't be any further from home. And he gave his life literally. He went to the cross where outwardly he faced the wrath of wicked human beings. Inwardly he faced the wrath of the Father who sent him. Jesus could literally have given no more than he gave.

And finally, both did all this triumphantly! Joseph in the naming of his sons declares how God has given him victory over his sorrow. When he reveals himself to his brothers, he speaks kindly and comfortingly with full assurance of his forgiveness and desire to provide for the family. His life with its injustices was lived for the well-being of the very ones responsible for his suffering. Yet he is not regretful, bitter, vindictive, or expecting anything in return. And in victory Jesus intercedes, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." He declares "It is finished" and then commends his spirit into the Father's hands." And the writer of Hebrews says, "For the JOY set before him, Jesus endured the cross despising the shame." After 3 days in the tomb, he arose to reign. And he ever lives to make intercession for the very ones who ultimately are responsible for his suffering.

IV. Glorious Gospel

The example of Joseph and the life of Jesus present to us the glorious gospel. God sent forth his Son to redeem, to save, to rescue sinners. Whoever believes in him, trusts in him, receives forgiveness, reconciliation, and eternal life. This very morning I urge anyone in this room who has yet to turn to Jesus to turn from your sin and yourself. Accept the gift Jesus died in order to provide for you.

V. Enormous Opportunity

The example of Joseph and the life of Jesus present to followers of Christ the lives God has called us to lead. Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." A life lived for Christ is a life of self-denial. It is a life of death to self. It is being willing to take the role of Joseph for others. In this life we are willing to embrace evil done to us. We are willing to embrace trials and affliction which bring pain to bear upon our souls. But like Joseph we take comfort in God and his plan in the midst of our hardship. Like Joseph we submit to God's sovereign will and he makes us fruitful in the land of our affliction. Like Joseph we repudiate bitterness. When the flesh cries out for justice, we declare that God has been merciful with us and we shall show that kind of mercy to others. We gladly embrace the cross for the joy set before us. If God would use me and my hardship to serve the well-being of others, I will gladly embrace the selflessness necessary. I could never out-serve what Christ has done for me.

Last week I boldly preached the truth that each of you are your own biggest problem. This morning I want to press upon you who belong to Christ your biggest opportunity to glorify God. It is when you follow the examples of Joseph and Jesus in the power of Christ. It is when you embrace whatever suffering and affliction necessary to serve the interests of others. 1 John 3:16 says, "By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." Laying down our lives means humbling ourselves. It means seeking the well-being of others not counting their sins against them. It means serving. It means doing without so that others may have. It means forgiving. It means rejecting bitterness. It means relinquishing our wishes our personal preferences when necessary.

It means drawing near to Christ and seeing the hand of God more clearly than we see the evil others have done to us.

He who is great among you must be a servant. He is a servant for the good of others, and he can rejoice in the midst of serving because he is fulfilling the calling and purpose of God to die to self and live for him. That's what servants do. And there is no greater example of a servant than the One who holds the universe together. Christ Jesus was in the form of God but did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Conclusion

And with these words from Philippians 2, we have made our way to Bethlehem. The baby conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of Mary, lying in the manger is God born in the likeness of men. As we draw near in our minds and hearts to the manger, let us draw near with wonder and awe. This baby in the feeding trough is heaven's one and only true son. He is worthy of worship. He is now exalted at the right hand of the Father because he came not as a king but as a slave to serve and to give his life a ransom. He came as an outcast. He poured out love to do good even to those who wouldn't follow him.

We should draw near in the worship of awe with singing and joy at his amazing condescension and now exaltation. But the truest worship is to follow in his footsteps and be like him—a servant even to those who cast out, even to those who receive our service without gratitude, even to those who spit in our face, but for the joy of pleasing God.