

JOSEPH RULER OF EGYPT

Genesis 41

The story should be very familiar to all the young people of the Junior age and up, and a few questions and reminders should be enough except with the Primary class. The emphasis should be on the difference between Joseph and his older brothers in their outlook on life, and on the fact that because Joseph was gentle and upright, the Lord could be with him and make his very hardships stepping-stones to success.

Doctrinal Points

The nature of memory-knowledges.

The spiritual should be ruler of these knowledges in us.

Notes for Parents

We all know the story of Joseph. It is one of the most familiar and the best-loved in the Bible. Looked at from the outside we might think of it just as a “success story,” the story of a young boy driven from his home by the jealousy of his own brothers, sold as a slave, cast into prison on false charges, and nevertheless in thirteen short years declared ruler of Egypt, second only to the king. Joseph was indeed honest, industrious, prudent, and faithful, but there is something else in his story which is sometimes overlooked: When Pharaoh sent for Joseph out of the prison and said to him, “I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it: and I have heard say of thee, that thou canst understand a dream to interpret it,” Joseph answered, “It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace.” And after Joseph had interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams, telling him of the coming famine, and had advised him to choose a wise man and set him over the country to prepare against the famine, Pharaoh said to his servants:

“Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?” Joseph took no credit to himself for his wisdom. He believed in God and trusted in His guidance. When Joseph ruled Egypt, it was the Lord who really ruled.

This is the lesson we should learn from Joseph. We are not wise except as we learn wisdom from the Lord through His Word. We all have our seven years of plenty, our times when we have opportunity to learn the Lord’s way of life and when it is easy for us to learn, and we have our years of famine, the times when the way seems too hard for us and we recognize our ignorance and weakness. But if in the time of plenty we store our minds with as much of the Lord’s truth as possible, we shall be able to draw on that store in the hard times.

Childhood and youth are given us for the particular purpose of acquiring knowledge for life, and the most important knowledge of all is knowledge of the Lord and His ways. Let us all help our children to make the most of their years of plenty.

Primary

The teacher should plan to retell the whole story of Joseph as simply as possible, not adding anything that is not in the Word. Stress the fact that the Lord could be with Joseph and take care of him because Joseph was good. There may be children in the class who can tell some of the story themselves. Always give them an opportunity when possible to tell what they remember. Point out that things which happen to us that seem very hard at the time will often lead to good for us if we remain good ourselves.

When Joseph was seventeen, his brothers decided to get rid of him. When they were all away from home, they seized Joseph and he was sold to men of a caravan which was on its way to Egypt. They pretended to their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast.

In Egypt Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of the king’s guard. Joseph was so industrious and so wise that he rose to be overseer over his master’s household. But Potiphar’s wife lied to her husband about Joseph and her husband believed

her and threw Joseph into prison.

But in prison also Joseph rose, until he was in charge of all the other prisoners. The king's butler and his baker happened to be in prison, too, and Joseph interpreted some strange dreams that they had.

Later Pharaoh—the king—had two dreams which none of his wise men could interpret.

So the butler who had been in prison told him of Joseph, and he sent for him.

What were Pharaoh's dreams?

What did Joseph tell him they meant?

What did Joseph advise Pharaoh to do?

Pharaoh found Joseph so wise and so favored by the Lord that he decided to put Joseph in charge of all the land of Egypt.

Junior

We have included in the Junior notes a description of Egypt for the purpose of impressing on the children's minds the nature of the country, since its correspondence will become very important when they reach the Intermediate age. The same principal lesson should be stressed as for the Primary class.

The Joseph story is a very familiar one and most of you have heard it from the time when you were little children. Let us see how much you remember of the part of the story which precedes our chapter for today.

What did Joseph's brothers do with him?

To whom was he sold in Egypt?

To what position did he rise in Potiphar's house?

Who told lies about him to Potiphar?

What did Potiphar do with him?

How did he get along in the prison?

Who were in prison with him?

What did he do for them?

What did Joseph ask of the king's butler?

Did the butler remember when he was free what Joseph had asked him to do?

What finally made the butler remember Joseph?

This last question is part of our lesson for today. Egypt is a unique country. It is long and narrow because it follows the course

of the Nile River, and all its fertile land is in the valley on either side of the Nile. This is what a Bible dictionary says about Egypt: “. . . The general appearance of the country cannot have greatly changed since the days of Moses. The whole country is remarkable for its extreme fertility, which especially strikes the beholder when the rich green of the fields is contrasted with the utterly bare, yellow mountains or the sand-strewn rocky desert on either side. The climate is equable and healthy. Rain is not very infrequent. on the northern coast, but inland is very rare. Cultivation nowhere depends upon it. The inundation of the Nile fertilizes and sustains the country, and makes the river its chief blessing. The Nile was on this account anciently worshiped. The rise begins in Egypt about the summer solstice, and the inundation commences about two months later. The greatest height is attained about or somewhat after the autumnal equinox. The inundation lasts about three months. The atmosphere, except on the seacoast, is remarkably dry and clear, which accounts for the so perfect preservation of the monuments, with their pictures and inscriptions. The heat is extreme during a large part of the year. The winters are mild—from 50° to 60° in the afternoon shade, in the coldest season.”

So you can see that seven years of famine in Egypt would be a very unexpected calamity. And as Egypt, because of its steady climate and productiveness, was the place to which all the surrounding countries were in the habit of sending for food in times of drought and famine, it would have been a calamity for many besides the Egyptians if the famine had caught Egypt unprepared.

How was the Pharaoh (the title of the king of Egypt) of the time of Joseph warned of the approaching famine?

Who finally interpreted his dreams?

What did Joseph advise him to do?

Why did Pharaoh choose Joseph to carry out this advice?

What power did he give him?

Whom did he give him for his wife?

What two sons were born to Joseph?

How did he prepare for the famine?

The story of Joseph teaches us a great many lessons which you

will study when you are a little older. But there is one principal lesson which you can understand now. When things happen to us which we do not like, we are all liable to waste a great deal of time and energy in being sorry for ourselves, blaming other people, and thinking of ways to “pay back” the wrong we believe has been done to us, and even in finding fault with the Lord for not making everything in the world just to suit us. If instead of this we, like Joseph, would accept what has happened without resentment and begin immediately to make the best of our changed condition and set ourselves to work at being useful, we should soon find that what we thought was a misfortune was really an opportunity for new and greater achievement. We gain strength of character by meeting our difficulties in the right way, just as we gain physical strength by exercise.

Intermediate

The correspondence of the story of Joseph—particularly of this part of it—is especially important for the Intermediates because it may affect their general attitude toward their lessons in school and Sunday school. The meaning of the time of famine and of the fact that only Joseph was capable of foreseeing and providing for it will be of great help to them if they will take it to heart.

There are many things in Joseph’s story which remind us of the Lord’s experience when He was on earth. Men hated the Lord because he pointed out the wrong things they were doing, and the Lord was betrayed by one who should have loved him, and was sold for a few pieces of silver. But just as the Lord’s trials were the means of our salvation, so the hardships through which Joseph passed became a means of advancing him and eventually of saving his brothers.

Through this story also the Lord teaches us a beautiful, practical lesson. Egypt represents the plane of memory-knowledge. This means not only knowledge about the natural world but also the kind of knowledge we learn in Sunday school: the stories of the Bible, the Psalms and other passages which we memorize, the Commandments, and the simple lessons we get even before we under-

stand any of it very deeply. You know from your study of geography that Egypt for the most part is a low, flat country, depending for its fertility entirely on the inundations of the Nile River, which rarely fail. The rich soil deposited throughout the valley by these floods raises rich crops of grain, but no precious metals or precious stones are found in Egypt, although the Egyptians were skilled workers in the gold and silver which they imported. The Egyptians of Joseph's time were simple, peaceful, and industrious, and their great men were noted for their natural learning in the sciences. The fact that Egypt was the granary of the ancient world is symbolic of its collected learning. Swedenborg tells us that in ancient times the knowledge of correspondences was especially cherished in Egypt and that the Egyptian hieroglyphics were based upon this knowledge. Ancient Egyptians worshiped the calf, the symbol of affection for useful natural learning.

The Lord was with Joseph and protected him. His being sold in Egypt saved him from the jealous plots of his brothers. Hundreds of years later another Joseph was warned in a dream to take the infant Jesus into Egypt to save him from the wrath of Herod. This has a meaning for us also. The chief business of every one of us during our childhood and youth is to acquire knowledge of all sorts. Did you ever hear it said of someone who had been a very active child, "I don't see how he ever lived to grow up"? The Lord takes special care of children until they have learned to take care of themselves. He gives us a long childhood for the very reason that we need so much knowledge with which to face the problems of life, and He takes care of us while we are acquiring this knowledge. When He came into the world, He went down into Egypt to show us that this is an orderly part of our lives and also as a symbol of what He in His assumed humanity was doing: learning the letter of the Scriptures.

The Lord used quotations from the Scriptures constantly in his ministry. He had learned these in His childhood just as we memorize Bible verses. Only unlike us the Lord in His childhood stored in His memory *all* of the Word of the Old Testament. This shows

us how important it is that we use the opportunities we have in childhood and youth to store our minds with knowledge of the Word and to memorize as much of it as we can.

We have learned that the twelve sons of Jacob represent all the good thoughts and affections which we develop. But we must remember that any of these may be “perverted,” which means turned to selfish purposes, just as Joseph’s brothers turned against him because they were thinking of their own importance. When this happens, the Lord makes use of the higher things in us as a means to save us. Joseph in us is our affection for spiritual truth. Joseph lived in a higher thought world than his older brothers; he dreamed dreams and interpreted them. So when we love to think about the Lord and heaven, worldly things—food and clothes and parties—do not seem so important because we see over and beyond them. But very often for a time at least our worldly affections get the better of our “Joseph” and try to get rid of him. Then the Lord preserves him for us in Egypt. He becomes a part of our memory-knowledge and he is in prison there. But even in prison Joseph rose to become ruler, and he interpreted the dreams of the butler and the baker. This is a picture of how the Lord works in our lives even when we have tried to put Him out of our thoughts. He holds our lives in some sort of order and from time to time gives us glimpses of what the results of our actions must finally be.

Then some day an experience comes to us which we cannot understand, and none of the principles by which we have been living in our selfish pursuit of our own pleasure is able to help us. This is Pharaoh with his strange dreams which none of his magicians could interpret. So we are reminded of Joseph and we send for him out of prison: we think of the Lord and try to see things in the light of His truth. And in that light everything becomes clear and we realize that we must set our lives in order according to the Lord’s way instead of our own, as Pharaoh placed Joseph over all the land.

The seven years of plenty are the times when it is easy for us

to learn and when we have the opportunity. The seven years of famine are the times—which come to all of us—when we are too busy earning a living and taking care of our families to acquire new knowledge, and have to depend on the principles we have acquired in our youth. So the earlier we put Joseph in charge of our land the better.

Basic Correspondences

Joseph = the affection for spiritual truth
for the sake of life
famine = prolonged lack of knowledge

Senior

The principal lesson for the Seniors is the same as that for the Intermediates but should be approached in terms of the spiritual and natural planes of life rather than as merely teaching the necessity of storing up knowledge. The quotation from the writings will serve as a guide here.

Joseph's gradual rise to power in Egypt pictures our gradual realization that the only really safe and wise ordering of our everyday life must come from putting it under the government of spiritual principles. When we are young, we are carried away with the delights of natural learning and natural satisfactions. But we have premonitions even then that these will not always be enough. Pharaoh's dreams are a picture of these times of ours when we ask ourselves, "Where do we go from here?" None of the magicians of Egypt—none of the specious arguments of self-interest—can answer this question. But from deep within us, where worldly interests have buried it, comes a reminder of someone who can answer, someone who in the past has told us truly what our life would be like. The Lord once said to His disciples, "And now I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe." Most of the spiritual instruction of our childhood is of this sort. When the magicians could not interpret Pharaoh's dreams, the butler suddenly remembered Joseph.

Egypt under the Pharaoh who chose Joseph for his governor

pictures a practical life which is inclined to be rightly ordered. In such a life the seven years of plenty picture all the states in which we are eager to learn and to do what is right. The experiences of these times of plenty are stored up to tide us over the inevitable times of doubt and uncertainty, which the famine represents. Whenever in times of sorrow or temptation we remind ourselves of what we have learned of the Lord's goodness and of His Divine providence over us, we are going to Joseph's storehouses to buy food.

The ability of the spiritual truths we have learned in childhood to show us plainly what the future will bring and how we should provide for it leads the wise to order their lives accordingly. As in the Bible story, we still have many years in Egypt. When we recognize that spiritual principles must rule in our everyday life, we are not immediately freed from all necessity of worldly learning and prudence. Nor are we safely on the highroad to heaven. In the story the captivity and the forty years wandering in the wilderness are still ahead, before the bones of Joseph can be taken back to the Holy Land.

Our chapter for today shows us the necessity of storing up in our minds, while we are young and learn easily, as much as possible of the letter of the Word, so that when we need it, the Lord can recall it to us and give us guidance and strength to see our way and to resist temptation. And it shows us also that if we are truly wise, we shall from the start recognize the spiritual as our true ruler. As Pharaoh said, "Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?"

Adult

The most fruitful discussion topic is probably the application of this story to our own lives in our recurring states of temptation, especially the lesson of the Lord's wise providence in preparing for these states in us before we ourselves have reached them. The meaning of Joseph is worthy of careful study. It is not simple—but our mental processes are not simple—and we could all

profit by a clearer understanding of what actually goes on in our minds and hearts and of the Lord's care over us.

The story of Joseph is so familiar to us and contains so many obvious lessons that we do not always stop to think of its spiritual meaning. In reference to the education of our children we see readily that Joseph sold into Egypt and there cast into prison is a picture of how the spiritual inclinations of childhood and youth are often pushed into the background and even willfully confined there as our young people grow up and become absorbed in the activities and pleasures of adult life in the world. If we have been careful to give them adequate spiritual instruction in their childhood and to foster in them an affirmative attitude toward religion and the church, we can be patient during this period of lessened interest, knowing that Joseph is still alive and at work under the surface and will in the Lord's good time be brought forth to interpret their problems and nourish them in the inevitable time of famine.

But no part of the Word is applicable to one period of life alone. If we are making spiritual progress, we pass through various cycles of the Word again and again in the course of our lives. With every spiritual success—such as is pictured by the return of Jacob and his family to the Holy Land—there comes the temptation to be self-satisfied, to forget that our seeming goodness is not our own and to imagine that we shall not again be in want of spiritual instruction and help. The place we think we have earned for ourselves in the world is very satisfactory. Every time we close our minds to the thought that we still have shortcomings, “Joseph” is sold into Egypt.

Our own wisdom cannot prevent the recurring famine nor provide against it. Our chapter for today teaches us how the Lord foresees our coming need and prepares us to meet it. We recall that Joseph later said to his brothers, “God did send me before you to preserve life.” (Genesis 45:5) Egypt pictures the plane of memory-knowledge. In that plane in our minds are gathered all the facts we have ever learned, not only the facts concerning the physical

world and life in it but all we have read and heard of the letter of the Word and the instruction which has been given us in connection with it. The Lord's preparation for our time of need begins in this plane. He sees to it that a Pharaoh—a ruling principle—comes to the throne in Egypt who wants to be enlightened. Then he inspires dreams which foreshadow the approaching trouble. Then, to interpret the dreams and provide for the salvation of the people, He causes the butler to remember Joseph and brings Joseph up out of prison.

We should try to come to some understanding of what Joseph and his experiences mean in our own lives, if we are regenerating. For this effort one of the most helpful passages is AC 4286, where in connection with the changing of Jacob's name to *Israel* Swedenborg says: "That this signifies the Divine celestial spiritual now, and that 'Israel' is the celestial spiritual man in the natural, and thus is natural; and that the celestial spiritual man itself, which is rational, is 'Joseph,' is evident from what follows. This is the reason why it is said that Israel is the celestial spiritual man which is in the natural, and thus is natural; and that Joseph is the celestial spiritual man itself, which is rational. For in the universal sense all the good which is of love and charity is called celestial, and all the derivative truth of faith and intelligence is said to be spiritual." Another helpful statement is found in AC 4585 in connection with the birth of Benjamin: "These things cannot fall into the understanding of anyone unless it is known what the external man and the internal man are, and that the former is distinct from the latter, although while man is living in the body they appear as one; also unless it is known that the natural constitutes the external man, and the rational the internal; and further unless it is known what the spiritual is and what the celestial."

The importance to us of the Lord's provision for our times of famine is impressed upon us throughout the interpretation of this part of the Joseph story in the *Arcana*. In AC 5342 we find this especially clear and simple statement: "That truths adjoined to good are stored up in the interiors of the natural mind, and there

preserved for use in after life, especially for use in temptations during man's regeneration, is a secret known to few at this day; and therefore something must be said about this. For by the 'seven years of abundance of produce' are signified the truths first multiplied, and by the corn being 'put in the cities' and 'in the midst' is signified that these truths adjoined to good are stored up in man's interiors; and by the 'seven years of famine,' and by the sustenance at that time from the gatherings, is signified a state of regeneration through truths adjoined to good, stored up in the interiors. . . . It is these truths adjoined to good that in the proper sense are called 'remains.' In so far therefore as the man suffers himself to be regenerated, so far the remains serve for use; for so far a supply from them is drawn forth by the Lord, and is sent back into the natural, in order to produce a correspondence of the exteriors with the interiors, or of what is natural with what is spiritual; and this is effected in the state signified by the 'seven years of famine.' Such is the secret. The man of the church at this day believes that no matter what anyone's life is, he may of mercy be received into heaven, and there enjoy eternal bliss; for he supposes admission to be all that is necessary. But he is much mistaken, for no one can be admitted and received into heaven unless he has received spiritual life, and no one can receive spiritual life unless he is being regenerated, and no one can be regenerated except through the good of life conjoined with the truth of doctrine: from this he has spiritual life."

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 5326: "The natural in the man who is being created anew, that is who is being regenerated, is entirely different from what it is in the man who is not being regenerated. The natural in the man who is not being regenerated is everything; from it the man thinks and desires, and not from the rational, still less from the spiritual, because these are closed and for the most part extinct. But in the man who is being regenerated the spiritual becomes everything, and not only disposes the natural in its thinking and desiring, but also determines the character of it, just as the cause determines

the character of the effect; for in every effect the only thing that acts is the cause. Thus the natural becomes as the spiritual is; for the natural things in the natural, such as the knowledges that derive somewhat from the natural world, do nothing from themselves; they merely agree that the spiritual should act in the natural, and by means of it, thus naturally.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. How did Joseph get into prison in Egypt? *Potiphar's wife's lies*
- P. What did he do there for the king's butler and baker? *interpreted dreams*
- P. Why did Pharaoh send for him? *butler remembered him when Pharaoh dreamed*
- J. What were Pharaoh's two dreams? *seven fat/thin cattle, seven fat/thin ears of grain*
- J. What did Joseph tell him they meant? *seven years plenty/famine*
- J. What did he advise Pharaoh to do? *appoint wise leader, store food*
- P. Whom did Pharaoh choose to carry out this advice? *Joseph*
- J. What powers did he give Joseph? *control of whole country*
- J. Whom did he give him for his wife? *Asenath*
- J. Who were Joseph's two sons? *Manasseh and Ephraim*
- J. How did Joseph prepare for the years of famine? *stored grain all through land*
- S. What does Joseph represent? *our religious sensitivity*
- I. What does Egypt represent? *state of acquiring memory-knowledge*
- I. What is meant by the famine? *"too busy" to learn new truth*
- S. What is pictured by Joseph's being made ruler of Egypt? *putting our everyday life under control of spiritual principles*