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LIGHT FROM THE PATRIARCHS FOR OUR DAY¹

THE familiar story of Joseph and his brethren retains even in translation a fascination and a charm that still arrest the world, and its message has a distinct and poignant relevance to the present-day situation. Undeniable difficulties present themselves in the narrative, and a careful and devout consideration may serve to dissipate honest perplexities and lead to a sounder estimate of both Joseph and of Scripture. Great interest must attach to the central figure of the story, Joseph himself, who developed a character of striking elevation and magnetism in most untoward circumstances. By his agency, immense gains were made in matters of the first moment. The "family" of Jacob was recalled to a new allegiance and service to God, and thereby an indispensable impetus was given to the cause of righteousness and salvation in the world. In virtue of his life's work Joseph ranks as one of the founders of the Jewish race and of the Christian Church, whose fortunes are so closely intertwined. The heart of the story is reconciliation, a reconciliation which results in man being at peace with man, and man being at one with God. It has thus an inevitable appeal to our disrupted and tortured and baffled world, and it must come home with peculiar force to preachers of the Gospel, whose commission is to exercise the ministry of reconciliation and proclaim peace on earth for God's ends and on God's terms.

The ground to be traversed is the nature of Joseph's achievement, the factors that went to his success, and the bearing of the whole on the world of to-day. The scope of the address precludes any reference to Critical questions. Suffice it to state that the historicity of the Genesis-narrative and the unity of Scripture are assumed.

I

Joseph averted a grave peril threatening his father's house and brought God's cause in the world safely through a major crisis in its history. He contrived by his combined authority and ability to save much people alive, including the small

¹Address at opening of Free Church College session, 1942-3. Oct 14, 1942.

company of his own Israelites, with whom were bound up the destinies of the true religion. Egypt, the granary of the ancient world, was spared through his efforts the worst ravages of prolonged famine and became the asylum and home of his famishing kindred. And Joseph rescued his family, not only from physical destruction, but also from serious moral deterioration. His brothers as a whole had a scandalous record, and the tiny clan was menaced with opposition from without and disharmony and corruption from within. The black treachery of Dothan had raised an almost insuperable barrier between Joseph and his brothers, whilst the chronic deception these had practised on their father, Jacob, regarding the fate of Joseph, caused another deep cleavage in the family. The general addiction to polygamy and the trend towards making affinity with the Canaanites also proved powerful divisive influences. In short, the privileged Hebron community bade fair to break up and vanish as a force in the world. It was when the worst seemed to have come to the worst that Joseph interposed and restored the situation. His guilty brothers were won back to a real friendship, the breach between them and their father was healed, and a substantial unity took the place of the advancing disintegration. And the conclusion can scarcely be avoided that relationships with God were rectified at the same time. The religious emphasis is strongly marked throughout the narrative, and it was not merely the providence of God that brought about the meeting of the severed family in Egypt but also the grace of God that welded them together in genuine amity. After the death of Jacob, Joseph's brothers claim to be the "servants of the God of Jacob", and Joseph may be held to have allowed the claim. Jacob, too, manifestly advanced in holiness, showed up in human nobility and spiritual grandeur supremely in the Egyptian period. And we may assume with some confidence that the women and the younger generation shared in the gracious spiritual renewal and prosperity. Everything points to the crowning glory of Joseph's achievement as the playing of an important part in the religious renovation of the Chosen Family, by which they were equipped to resume with efficiency the mission of serving God in a world that knew Him not. As far as the records show, the Josephic amelioration of conditions in the family group brought the Abrahamic age to its meridian and confirmed the community in adherence to

God. And in its fundamental character the Abrahamic age is the true precursor of the Gospel age, the final phase of which is to have a close connection with the return of the Jews as a people to their own Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Joseph must therefore shine as a name of enduring lustre and grateful memory among all the children of Abraham, natural and spiritual.

Now, vital religion is neither attained nor maintained *in vacuo*. The truth of God is essential to the life and work of the followers of God. Revival of doctrine normally accompanies and succeeds revival of soul. Must it not be assumed that the new peace prevailing in the hearts and homes of the patriarchal band would lead to a new interest in the theology of the fathers? What, then, had been learned of God by that date? Not much, we may say, and yet enough. The simple childlike faith of these simple childlike figures in its elementary yet strangely profound character may be set out in a few simple phrases. The Covenant stands in the forefront. God undertakes to be all that his People need; and they pledge themselves to do all that He requires. Obedience ensures the benefits of the Covenant; but failure calls forth the mercy that restores the repentant sinner. Sacrifice is God's gift, speaking of sin in its ill effects and of the grace that removes it. Sin is man's doing, and time, past and present, proves it an evil and a bitter thing. God showed that He had grace enough and to spare. His people are reckoned righteous on the strength of their faith. They embrace the promises: they are sure of possessing the land of Canaan, and of becoming the inheritors and heralds of abundant blessings. They hold aloof from other peoples, accounting themselves strangers and pilgrims on earth. But beyond the earthly heritage they descry a heavenly portion; and they look forward to the Better Country with its sure hope of reunion with the Better Company on high, all in unbroken fellowship with God. And now and then they get fleeting glimpses of the great Promised One and His conquest of sin and death. Taken all in all, a fine creed, a creed to sign and to sing!

Objection has sometimes been taken to the Joseph-stories on the ground that the long, diffuse recital of allegedly trivial and insignificant details is unworthy of inspired Scripture dealing with the things of the soul and God. When, however, we dig beneath the surface and light on the shining treasures

of truth lying beneath, the momentousness of the epoch in the Kingdom of God, the big events which took place in the souls of men and in the history of the Chosen People, the bearing of it all on the purpose of God and on the welfare of the world of men, the preserving and transmitting of the things by which men live, we think there is not much reason to quarrel with Scripture on the score of the form assumed by the Genesis stories.

II

Joseph might well have spoken of his great work in Pauline strain and said: "I did it; yet not I, but God." The sufficiency was indubitably of God, Joseph was but chosen to be His agent. He acted, and acted as a man, not as a machine. The chief elements in his success were the psychological insight, the moral force, and the spiritual vision which he possessed.

First of all, there was his fine practical knowledge of the human heart. He had the understanding and skill which enabled him to adopt the proper method for beginning the work of reformation and closing the breach between himself and his unbrotherly brothers. Where a real reconciliation is in question, it is worse than futile to say: "Time will heal", or "Let bygones be bygones". There are three plain and inescapable conditions for overcoming estrangement and restoring fellowship: the repentance of the aggressor, the forgiveness of the aggrieved, and the acceptance by each party of what the other offers. Joseph apprehended the realities of the case and did not hesitate to take the steps which were necessary.

It is never easy to forgive a real injury. The wrong done to Joseph was one of the most hideous in all experience. His good was rewarded with evil and he was sold, a mere stripling, by his older brothers into foreign slavery with its nameless injustice, shame and suffering. Did he allow himself to dwell on these years of darkness and woe? No, for that way lay madness. Joseph took the better way and saw God, and not merely man, in the events of his grievous past, and he could consider reconciliation possible. He went further and both desired it and met the cost of it. Common experience makes it plain that when the wronged party contemplates in a worthy spirit the friend who has wronged him, he is constrained at once to condemn and to compassionate, and the conflict set up in the soul causes

him intense agony, for he is torn between a just abhorrence of the wrong-doer's deed and a strange yearning sympathy with the sorrows endured by the guilty friend. Forgiveness is more than a proud, frigid, magisterial act of benevolence to the sinning party. "It is an active process in the mind and temper of the wronged person", says H. R. Mackintosh in his *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, "by which the old confidence and affection rises like a tide to cover the wrong committed against him." The whole tenor of the narrative indicates that Joseph was animated by a true love, in which moral discrimination balanced compassion, that he met the demands of the situation and both could and would forgive.

But were his brothers ready to receive forgiveness? Did they have that penitence without which pardon is a farce and even an impossibility? Joseph must therefore keep up his incognito till he knows the attitude of his brothers to their old sins. His apparently harsh treatment of them in Egypt was in reality the imposition of a series of tests to reveal their moral condition. "The guilty men", says Alfred Edersheim in his *Old Testament History*, "were made to taste undeserved sorrow through arbitrary power, against which they were helpless." The programme was sound, though not necessarily flawless, and the results were satisfactory. Those brothers of Joseph appeared to be changed men. They had repented and escaped their old sins, which were many. With a cowardly deception they had been imposing on their father regarding Joseph's fate. Then, in the deed of Dothan, they had evinced a most callous inhumanity. Further, behind the murderous hatred that had consigned Joseph to the living death of slavery lay a covetous envy which had grudged him his place in the household. And, deeper still at the heart of their beings, there lurked the mother sin of all—*self-love*. And the four species of trial to which they were subjected,—the charge of spying, the rigours of imprisonment, the disturbing banquet at the court, and the accusation of theft,—brought out the fact of their sorrow and victory over their four cardinal sins. The way was open for ending the alienation, for the moral foundations of friendship were shown to exist.

What hindered then, that they should all be brothers again? Nothing. Yet who does not know the shivering hesitations at accepting proffered pardon? There is always more readiness to

forgive wrongs suffered than to think it possible that wrongs inflicted can be forgiven. Both Joseph and his brethren reacted naturally to the situation. He had to take the initiative and labour to convince them of his entire goodwill and sincerity. And he prevailed, reconciliation was brought about, and true brotherly relations established. The wonder of forgiveness had come about! Yea, we believe, a miracle of grace, shedding peace on earth, and making the courts of heaven ring!

Further, Joseph's performance is traceable to the moral potency of his personality. Joseph may not have presented the impressive proportions of an Abraham or a Jacob, or even of an Isaac, but he combined in himself some of the finest traits of each of these great forebears of his, and displayed a highly attractive and compelling character. His virtues were, in a human sense, the vintage of a sound early training and of long and bitter adversity. His youthful vanities and ambitions—quite open and unconcealed—did not bode well for the future, and had to be corrected through the terrible discipline of his Egyptian thralldom. And slavery bred a manhood that rose superior to self-centredness and self-assertion and showed a strongly self-forgetful spirit. Dutifulness is perhaps the most marked characteristic of Joseph. Loyal to his lot in life, he strove to the utmost of his ability to adorn the office assigned him. With singular equanimity and fortitude he bore the loss of freedom, the assaults of temptation, and the infliction of cruel injustices, and he never let his experiences sear or embitter his soul. Having the divine grace as his life and stay, he made the calamities overtaking him stepping stones to higher things, and gathered, the while, sagacity and strength for the main phase of his career. He was to have the notoriously difficult task of winning and restoring the offending brother. Suffering Joseph had certainly known, but suffering by itself is neutral. It is the attitude of the sufferer that determines whether the outcome is to be benefit or damage, just as the set of the sails to the contrary wind decides whether the ship is helped forward or driven back in her course. Joseph was rightly "exercised" by the chastening of the Lord and reaped the peaceable fruit of righteousness. His experience yielded the moral qualities of a fine delicacy of spirit, a proper reserve of manner, and above all that sympathetic understanding which is so potent in reassuring and comforting the victims of sin. It

was the calm, strong and winsome character which issued from his well-fought fights that stood him in such good stead in his efforts to bring back his brethren to the practice of brotherhood, righteousness and the fear of God.

Once again, Joseph's success in bringing his Israelite brethren to a new peak of attainment was due to his unswerving loyalty to his religion. The worship of Osiris and the other Egyptian deities might be universal, seductive and intimidating, but he would have no God save Jehovah. Outstanding about him is his profound regard for God's will. He accepted with a good grace whatever burden was laid upon him; he did that which lay to his hand heartily as unto the Lord and not to men. And he counted his elevation and power not an honour to be enjoyed but a trust to be discharged, ever studying how he could use the opportunity for good—for friends, for neighbours, for humanity. He set himself to learn God's mind; he waited God's time. He would not see a step farther before him than God allowed, and his consistent refusal to go without God's bidding may best explain parts of his behaviour which seem obscure and which have been much debated. In especial, Joseph accorded the Word of God the reverent respect which it always demands. There was already an outlined prospectus of the Kingdom, and the Abrahamic race was the subject of prophecy. In some respects the precise course which the righteous seed would follow had been made known. One of the predicted events was a long and afflictive sojourn in Egypt. Joseph's dramatic encounter with members of his family in Egypt perforce raised in his sensitive mind the question: Has the time for removal to Egypt come for the house of Jacob? Various considerations indicated that it had, and before long God gave specific sanction for the change. The pacification of the family and the provision for their livelihood in Egypt were now seen to have prophetic significance. And the small group of refugees who meant so much to the world had also urgent need of adequate defences for the soul. Egypt did indeed afford greater religious security than Canaan. But the inevitable irksomeness of the new life for these free sons of the open spaces would, as they well knew, deteriorate into positive oppressiveness. Increasing dangers of a moral and spiritual kind, too, were sure to develop. And God would seem now as often to have blessed His people with a view to coming trials. Pardoned,

united, quickened, sheltered, and long nurtured in things religious, the patriarchal family owed much, under God, to Joseph who wrought wonders in arming them to fight a winning battle against forces of which he or they could reckon but little at the time. In entering the open door of opportunity and taking action on the bare word of God, Joseph purchased himself a good degree. His fame endures.

III

The story of Joseph enshrines much truth of abiding value and dovetails easily into the present-day situation. The world has reached a tragically unhappy pass in its history, and—to deal mainly with ourselves—Britain needs to be restored to-day no less than did the Israelite family of old. As the great world conflict proceeds, it becomes ever clearer that the fundamental issue is between God and the powers of darkness, and it cannot be doubted that the side on which we are fighting stands for right and religion and God. But it may too complacently be assumed that we are fit champions of God, the born vindicators of His cause and the trustees and architects of the future. Surely to contemplate that formidable task is at once to abase us, for questions rise up unbidden to which we dare return no reassuring answer. Have we, alone or in conjunction with our allies, the courage, the wisdom, the spirituality, to fulfil that lofty call? Are we better than our fathers in the things that mainly matter? Do we approach or even apprehend the standard which our advanced day and privileged past would warrant God to expect of us? Many of the more far-seeing and fearless of our public men have been saying for long that what is needed to meet the stubborn and insistent problems of the country is a change of heart in man. We can all subscribe to the view if a sufficiently thorough revolution in the life of man is implied and a sufficiently high idea of its difficulty cherished. The Church is shut in to declaring the sovereign grace of God to be the only and all-availing hope for man in his desperate need, and when the well-tried message is again proclaimed with faithfulness and received with faith, very life from the dead may be expected to overspread the lands. And the clamant call is for a work of renewal at the heart of things. The Church lives by revival, and revival of any magnitude is hardly even a memory with

our generation. And it has often been the case in the past that when weariness and despair had overtaken the most earnest and zealous of Christ's witnesses, their longing upward gaze and confident appeal to heaven proved the prelude to revival, in which God alone was exalted. May we be soon as men that dream at the sight of the Lord arising in His might and glory!

And God is manifestly pouring confusion on our national idols, and bringing our vaunted devices to nought. A stern and unmistakable summons is He issuing to us in these sad calamities of a sore and long war. Famine, the scourge of ancient Egypt and Canaan, has menaced our nation and swallowed up most of the Continent. War has sown broadcast a legion of other woes probably unexampled in the story of human strife. What is the national reaction to these divine remonstrances? Shall we not shun a dull insensateness, on the one hand, and a panic-stricken flight and collapse, on the other? Let us not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when we are rebuked of Him.

The condition of spiritual recovery involves the realising and removing of the obstacles between the soul and God. That the fault is serious and lies in ourselves must be brought home to us. What has been let loose on the world to-day is too easily said to be "the work of one man". That some have a deeper guilt than others cannot be denied and they will have to bear that awful responsibility. But, in a deeper and more real sense, the many are implicated—nations, Churches, classes, families. And, in the final analysis, it is the individual that has to stand on trial. There is something in the recent impeachment that "our civilisation has repudiated the whole background which makes belief in God possible". And the doctrinal chaos has given rise to the moral disarray which stares us in the face. In examining our record and making the definiteness of confession called for before God, we might well begin by taking up the old patriarchal charge-sheet. Mean, craven falsehood; heartless inhumanity; covetous envy; blind, constricting self-love—here are arrows that must surely find a mark in the hearts of not a few individuals and of most peoples and nations. But it is simpler and quite sufficient to limit our scrutiny to the last member of the series. Self-love is the immediate root and the embodiment of sin. It implies the unnatural withdrawal of dependence on God and the equally unnatural exaltation and worship of self. It isolates from God, the fountain of life, and

shuts in to the impoverishment and death, which are all that man himself has. What happened in the Hebron family long ago and what has been happening in the world to-day are demonstrably due to human sin. "The dangerously accentuated process in our modern humanity of limiting its purview to

Lamentable space and doleful time",

along with the unchecked growth of familiar swerings from the straight path, like lying and greed, envy, ambition, and force, have deluged society with those monstrous and appalling evils before which men stand numb and dismayed. And we must not linger in the moral sphere but go on to the religious, if the root of the matter is not to escape us. The truth will conduct the sincere seeker to this avowal: "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned." And all reluctances and disguisings flee before the light of our Lord's deep utterance: "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not *believed* . . ."

Surely our squirming and disillusioned world need not yawn in weariness nor explode in fury if it is said, as said it must be, that there is no other road to real recovery but the old, old road of repentance. A strange thing and a noble it is, taking a convinced stand *against* sin and self and *for* righteousness and God. And what finally wins people back is not the terror of God's displeasure but the tenderness of His grace. A heart-stirring wonder it was for the conscience-stricken brethren to find the dread power of the exalted Governor of Egypt, which could have overwhelmed them, graciously turned to protect and save them! And the old-time incident gives but a faint image of the amazing grace of God, pledged to all that will have it in our Pentecostal day. The contrite prayer infallibly secures God's plenteous redemption, full forgiveness and perfect righteousness, a new start and new strength, unfailing help in life and sure hope in death. And it is no cheap salvation, which could be of no use to God or us. God gave His only-begotten Son in a completeness that bodied forth His uttermost love for sinners, and it is the "wondrous Cross" alone in which the great inexorable demands of the righteous Law of God and of the awakened heart of man are fairly and fully met. And the gifting is as like God as the gift itself. It is from the pierced hand of the enthroned Saviour Himself that the returning sinner receives the benign salvation of heaven. The prime

instrument for moving the hearts of the fallen is the heart that has sustained the attacks of temptation and has not yielded, and here our Lord is peerless. As the compassionate High Priest, who is not untouched with the feeling of our infirmities, having been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin, it is He who persuades and empowers the thralls of sin to receive the freedom of the City of God. The Gospel abides the power of God unto salvation, and by it He calls into being His New Creation. Necessity is laid upon His servants to declare the one message that can bring hope and life to individual hearts, nations and peoples. It is ours to buy up the opportunity and accumulate stores that will serve for the coming day which, in the long view, is bright with unfading glory.

The Church waits for Christ's triumph and earth's jubilee. We know not when or how it will come, but *that* it will come is certain. The house of Jacob attained revival and prosperity in circumstances which appeared sufficiently strange. And to-day who can say what will emerge? The future is always full of surprises and constantly confounds the prophets. Will our eagerly canvassed New World be poor, bleak, and primitive in material things or will it abound in outward wealth and comforts? We need not mind. What matters is that our hearts be kindled into devoted love for the King and our lives inscribed with HOLINESS TO THE LORD. God has His own ways in working, and they are often refreshingly unlike what we expect. He has His own time, and it may be later or sooner than we forecast. And He has His own messengers and many a time they are not the manner of men we would choose. But, then, His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. And His patience cannot be measured nor His power imagined. The Lord tarries and our patience gives out. Ages pass and nothing is done. So we say in our simplicity. Then, in a moment, suddenly, He moves. The revolution has come and the face of the earth is changed. The perfection of the work justifies the slow, silent preparation. An effective stimulus and finger-post the lovers of God have in the grand saying of Peter that "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day".

There is one aspect of the patriarchal revival that should not be lost on us. The restored health of the Church that then was had an intimate connection with human suffering. The deeply-sinners of Jacob, the lagging and retreating Jacob himself,

the untrained or badly-trained youth of the clan, and especially Joseph, the evangelist of the day, all suffered. And the pain varied; it might be physical, mental or spiritual, egoistic or altruistic. And the same mysterious law of progress in the Kingdom still prevails. The highest attainments of experience and the greatest exploits in service seem to be bound up in some strange way with the enduring of hardship and wrong in doing the will of God. The alabaster box has to be broken for the perfume of the nard to escape; the tree must be pruned for its fruitbearing to be fully realised. How varied, keen, and widespread have been the agonies of this long-drawn-out war! And who dare limit the degree or duration of that which still remains? In many lands, too, the common ills of war are supplemented by the evils of positive persecution. May the horrors and woes of the hour lead our generation to find rest, consolation, and deliverance in the Saviour! And may our day not guiltily decline the honour of suffering for Christ and the brethren, if so be that the cause that really matters will be furthered thereby. We rejoice in the faithful sounding forth of the truth in the face of indifference and obloquy; we are heartened by all outspoken protests against abuses and all brave defence of righteousness; we are refreshed in soul by the sight of heroic Christian bodies braving the ferocity of the godless and taking the part of the cruelly-oppressed Jews in German-ridden countries on the Continent. And may brotherly-kindness buttress courage, and the brethren in the Churches be at peace among themselves, following the standard and time-honoured way of reconciliation. And spiritually united and fearless, the true witnesses of the Lamb may prevail right early in abolishing divisions and in achieving peace, inward and outward, under the hegemony of the Prince of Peace.

East is East and West is West,
And yet the twain *shall* meet;
The East still East, the West still West,
At Christ's nail-pierced feet.

In the sure hope that He that shall come will come and will not tarry, let us be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.

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