

JOSEPH: AN ETHICAL AND BIBLICAL STUDY.

VI.

"THE PRISONER IN THE PALACE."

(GEN. XLI. 1-37.)

THERE are many verses in the Book of Psalms which are dark and disquieting because of their pointed and abhorrent reference to lying lips and deceitful tongues. When we read them, we feel as if there was nothing in either our own experience, or in that of which we are told in the lives of most of the Old Testament saints, to justify or explain that frequent and intense allusion. In the life of David there were circumstances which treachery shaped of which there may be a reminiscence in some of the psalms, but we cannot account in this way for the quivering expression of that keen, personal feeling of which we are now speaking. Perhaps in this account of the lie that wronged Joseph the key is struck which is resonant in those excoriating passages which ruffle the soul when we listen to them. For it is not difficult to realize that this life of Joseph would, during the formative period of Hebrew history, seem much larger and more distinct than afterwards, and than it seems to us when we survey the Bible as a whole. A peak which on a wide view is only one feature on the horizon may dominate a valley which lies near it and cast its shadow on every homestead there. To those who now see the sweep and lie of all Scripture, one other Life there, the contour of which suggests (if we may so say) the same formation, stands so prominent that this one is of quite dwarfed importance in comparison; yet, in the nearer vicinity of it, many generations must have seen the life of Joseph in large proportions, and some of its own features must have often fascinated the moral eye of men into surprise and awe. Till human lips betrayed the Christ

of God, they had done no work more cruel than that of dishonouring Joseph and dooming him to his cell; and the memory of that might well send a shudder into Hebrew song whenever its singers had aught to say about lips of lies.

While in Genesis we see men literally taking in territory as they spread abroad and occupy a new world, we see them at the same time, in another sense, taking possession of what God had assigned them. The house of life has many rooms, and one after another its doors had to be opened by human hands and all its chambers peopled. Joseph had pioneer work to do along the untrodden halls of that mazy house, and he had to open and prove and bring back his report of the large room which God had appointed for His prisoners of hope. Prophets and Apostles and martyrs and exiled confessors have filled that room since, but Joseph was the first to know its doleful walls. To a nature like his, full of energy and ambition, those years in the dark there were the hardest of his whole life. Give him a difficulty, and he will master it; give him even a sore temptation, and he will fight it, and be a better man after it; but in solitude and silence will his soul not prey upon itself and enervate? In enforced idleness will his activities not rust? Joseph came forth of that room, and his word was that on even its bare floor God can set a table spread with food convenient for the human soul. He *gave* that word; and great has been the company of those who have published it since.

“It came to pass at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh dreamed.” Joseph no doubt thought that the clock went slow. “Two full years”! There is the pressure of a gentle emphasis laid on the words; they were years and more; they held more than their capacity; they were years of God which contain “a time, times and a half.” Set for any purpose, or judged by any standard,

“two full years” was long to wait until the night came that brought a restless king two dreams. We say again, and we cannot say it once too often, that Joseph is a soldier of the grandest type in life’s wide battlefield, where Eternity gives the orders. He was told off to the loneliest outpost of duty in all the field, where he had to stand and simply look out into the dark; but his Captain said so, and he neither quarrels with nor questions his necessity. Though he has not a sign of how the battle is going around or behind, he stands there all the time in lonely touch with duty; and his whole manhood is knit and set to that one task until God’s word relaxes and releases his soul.

This power to obey God in patience is vitally connected with his power to obey his own best nature; yet, after all, who of us can draw these fine distinctions, and determine the boundaries after this fashion, when a nature like Joseph’s is before us? His consciousness of self seemed lost in his consciousness of God; his doing of God’s will seemed instinctive and effortless, like the drawing of his breath and the beating of his heart; he seems to have been oblivious of himself in the simplicity of his purpose to serve. Something of a child-like, pristine relationship to God seems to have been Joseph’s; and he probably had neither a theory of life nor a theology, but only and always felt as if he heard a Father-God calling him by name. At the same time that still perseverance through two years’ solitude is an evidence of his perfect rectitude. It was not the sloth of a phlegmatic soul that saved him there; it was mettle of fine spiritual breeding, under the finest control, which kept him alert and ready every hour of those dreary years. There was the outward grace of a delicate, susceptible soul, unspotted and unsoiled, as he trod to and fro his few steps of stone day after day; but there was the valour of a splendid strength as well. His trenchant decision in

Potiphar's house, which had sent him to that exile, qualified him to be there. Had there been moral lesion in his life, or disruption of spiritual fibre in his nature, the strain of that solitude would have disintegrated and made havoc of his powers. Solitude searches and sifts a man. If he has once yielded himself to the mesmerism of sin, he will see its glittering eye when he is alone with himself and yield again to its fascination—sin thus teasing the soul and mocking its eye with air! If his memory be full of old, unhappy things, conscience will only the more stir these up in solitude, and carry them round in helpless eddy. For sin becomes a fatal emotion when it cannot get outlet as a motive, and it then decomposes the soul. But, of this knight of God in his dungeon, it would be only increasingly true all through his years of solitude,—

My strength is as the strength of ten,
Because my heart is pure.

At last Pharaoh dreamed. He slept and dreamed and awoke; he turned in his bed and slept again, and he dreamed the second time. The dream might have passed unheeded—a breath from nowhere quivering for a moment across the stilled consciousness of the king; but there was a current with it and a pressure behind it, for “the dream was doubled twice” unto him. The dreamer detected the divine in his dreams. They were not as other dreams, in which some broken fragment of the past merely slips from its place, and adjusts itself, and then settles again—making memory tremble for a moment; they had a reference to one another, and a relation to higher things, the second saying something about the first, and both together confusing the king with their one tale of mystery. There was motive in some higher zone of life, of which these visions were the curious foreword; and that was now making itself felt in premonition, which was soon to sweep along at the earth-

level with the force of storm and change. It was a breath-whisper of what was coming, and Pharaoh was troubled in his palace; but had Joseph no visitant in his cell that night when God's angels were down dispensing dreams? If they left the mystery at the palace, they left the meaning in the gaol; and the night must have brought to Joseph what felt like a comforting. The breath of God abroad that night in Egypt must have made a music in the sail and stays of his life that had ridden so long at gloomy anchorage. For the powers were soon to have play that would carry him from the cell to the palace. Behind those airy tokens of change were the hosts of God, and they were ministering spirits whom He was sending forth to minister to an heir of His own salvation.

The elements of the dreams were Egyptian. The daily observation of the king supplied the materials out of which, from amidst the mists of sleep, the dreams shaped themselves and troubled him. Sleep, the enchanter, took his imagery from the waking hours and touched it to finer service. Pharaoh stood by the river, and from far away across the flood there came the kine that swam to the shore, and, sleek and fat-fleshed, they fed along the meadow by the waterside; and, also from beyond the Nile, there followed the lean and ragged cattle that would not fatten. The king, of course, was only dreaming; he turned in his sleep, and slept again. But another dream was awaiting him; and in the east wind and the west wind his spirit was wandering in the fields of corn, and before him the blasted cornstalk prevailed against all the promise of Egyptian harvests. Dreams they might be, the shut eye retaining a few vagabond visions of the day that danced awhile with idle fancies athwart his brain; and he only needed to open his eyes and waken them away; but it came to pass in the morning that he was troubled. In a higher and wider sense these things are true, for they are a parable.

It is out of the realities of our everyday life here that we make the scenery of dreams. But "our little life is rounded with a sleep." And when the eyes have been shut to a longer sleep, the scenes of here and its long ago will work themselves into still stranger results in the soul. The past and present are making our future for us. And if that daybreak drew a strange music from Memnon's statue by the river there, and wakened still stranger voices in the heart of Pharaoh, may not the morning after the graves are wakened leave many a spirit troubled?

Pharaoh was soon in touch with "the magicians of Egypt and all the wise men thereof." Every man gets superstitious at a time. A large area of human nature is reserved for the supernatural. There are chords in every soul which the man himself can neither tune nor silence, and invisible fingers touch their keys. Our science, which looks so wise and grave on this side of our age, is mocked from the other by a spiritualism and a theosophy which are silly compared with the fine fairy lore, and even the stern witchcraft, of our forefathers. The times go by extremes, and so do individuals. One of the larger scientific figures in our century was known to shuffle in haste from his laboratory when he had turned out its lights, afraid of the supernatural as he sought his room in the dark. You may make havoc of any man's brain, you may upset his reason, if you play long enough on his hopes and his fears out of the unseen and from the far away; so large an element in our being is that which is susceptible to the supernatural. Not more faithfully does the round earth turn to light and to dark than the soul of man alternately to fear and hope of he knows not well what in his unrealized future. Every one of us has at times a troubled soul, and every man who has not the Christ has his witch of Endor that he seeks to then, or he has his magicians and wise men to whom he tells his dreams. No man gets quit of the supernatural by rejecting

the Bible ; it is only the Bible and its Christ that interpret the supernatural, that give it its reasonable place in the rooms of human life, that keep men from being under the bondage of superstitious fear.

Thus it was in Egypt long ago. The Nile had been having its rise and fall, each at its season, as it was wont ; and the land was grey and green in what seemed its eternal course. The sun, that morning, had risen on the land as usual, and the workers were out in the fields everywhere. But during the night God had put His finger upon the affairs of the land, and the whole history of it would take a new turn. There is a troubled king in its palace, and he can get no help from the magicians, nor has he wisdom from the wise men. He has received missives from a far-away court that he cannot decipher and that he dares not destroy, and on his throne he trembles. The sceptre has departed from Pharaoh's hands, and two short-lived visions of last night's sleep are on the throne of Egypt to-day. In these two dreams that glided into the royal bed-chamber, while Egypt slept there was futurity enough. God means henceforth to interfere with the Pharaohs, and if they be wise, they will not fight with God.

The light of Egypt was buried in a dungeon below, while the weird magicians and wise men stood dumb in the palace halls. It was Joseph's time at last. The deliverer is to be born now out of long travail ; for the number of God's months is counted. God's clock which had moved so slow, ticking the moments one by one in the dark, has moved on ; and the fulness of the time is come. How well it was that the butler did not tell earlier ! Joseph might have been out of the cells too soon ! He remembers and tells now, and Pharaoh strains his ears to hear. " A young man, an Hebrew," has the golden key, and will now open the future of Egypt and the world. " Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the

dungeon." Deliverance broke upon him in a moment. It was hot and breathless work, as if prophetic of coming emancipations, when, hardly having time to rectify the disorder of years on face and vesture, he was hurried before the king. How fluttered and anxious he must have been at the first word of it all when such a summons came! How hard it must have been for the prisoner, hastily got ready, to be calm and self-possessed as he made for the palace! How strange the light on the pale, wronged face, lined with melancholy resignation! What an ordeal for the youth! Yet who, knowing his character, will doubt that he was master of himself and the situation, and walked upright—physically, mentally, morally upright—"all together" and ready? And how he must have struck the king's gaze with his eye the moment he looked up to interpret, and held the monarch enchanted and spellbound. They did not make a lackey of him by making him a servant, nor a libertine by giving him gawdy temptations, and they will not make a coward of him by setting him before a king. The two of them were soon at work over the mysteries of the night—he on the throne with his tale, and Joseph with his interpretation. Joseph arranged matters at the outset, giving the king his place and taking up his own. The king was there and God was yonder, and Joseph was between; he was bold and drew steady breath, and soon, not arrogantly, and in plain words, the counsel of God that had glittered in the darkness was read out in the silence. "The dream of Pharaoh is one; God hath showed Pharaoh what He is about to do."

What a tale it was for Joseph to tell and Pharaoh to hear! Yet every word seemed to carry its own evidence. Soul was flashing to soul with every syllable. It was the truth, because it was the thought of God which was being deciphered. The king felt that it was being read aright in every sentence and to every detail; it came to him like a

forgotten word or the note of an old tune that he had heard before and forgotten. It brought its own self-evidencing testimony; something far in the subconsciousness of his soul answered all along, "Yes, that is it! that is what I wanted and could not get! that is God's meaning!" It was not a pleasant story to tell a capricious king, but with what emphasis of confidence Joseph went through it to the last letter! He never hesitated, never faltered; he knew what he would say, and he dared to say it all. He might have trimmed and sailed cautiously where there might be dangerous currents which a king's instantaneous passion might have stirred; but he went by the fixed stars, he feared nothing, he knew he had the truth and could shake the throne therewith. He soon outran interpretation and became a counsellor. He told Pharaoh what to do, grasping the situation and solving the problem of years in a moment. "Now, therefore, let Pharaoh look out a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt." Here again is the genius of the man. The interpretation was from God; but in the consciousness of his own power and with the spontaneity of an instinct he sees the one thing to be done and indicates it. He knew he was right, though he knew not why; and king and court bowed to his wisdom. The prisoner taught the senators; Joseph became the statesman within an hour. A few fast steps have taken Joseph up to the proudest post that the world of his day had to give. Such is the play and power of genius. It darts and flashes to its conclusions, but you may verify the whole path that it has taken by the slowest steps of reasoning afterwards, and find that it is as swift and true as a glance of the Divine thought.

Again we find the lessons in human life which this glowing narrative gives laid out at two different levels. The Divine Spirit here and thus prescribes our conduct and duty on a double plane—a primary and a secondary, a

higher and a lower; and obedience on both is needed if a life is to be saved in and by the fulfilling of itself. There is a virtue in an example of manhood so robust and yet so winsome as that of Joseph, which the Bible here consecrates to the service of all of us as we live our daily life at common tasks; and there are at the same time manifest tokens of the Life that hath immortality in it. We dare not draw a line and say, when our God-given nature is involved, where the human ends and the Divine begins, and assign different values to duties which God has prescribed as if we might trifle with the life that now is and attend to some higher life to come. Joseph's life is written in Scripture for *correction* as much as for instruction in righteousness; and one of its lessons is that in every room and at every task we must be faithful in God's house of life.

It is as much a man's duty to equip himself for his threescore years and ten of life here as to prepare for his eternity in the hereafter. A monk or hermit, who knows not the world and hides himself out of it ere God calls him away from it, is not doing his duty; he is making himself a cipher when he ought to be a figure of power, a factor in the working out of the long results of time. Nor are the simple, easy-going men, to whom one man is as good as another and one way as good as any of the rest, if only they are allowed amiably and peaceably to saunter along life's paths, ever to be taken as models. The Joseph, the Moses, the David know men and know the world; they are simple as children towards God and the unseen, and harmless as doves when an hour of rest and love comes and when life may retire awhile within some leafy shade at summer noon. But they are wise as serpents towards men and the world, and they are valiant and daring when there is need for decision and when the difference between right and wrong must be kept. They equip themselves with

worldly powers for worldly work. They are wise men and keep their eyes in their head.

Every man should get well acquainted with the work that is to be done during his own day in the world, and also with his own powers. He should master the circumstances and understand the spirit of the age he lives in. He may be at once convinced and go on the understanding that this is not an age when he will get on by dreaming or by interpreting dreams. He must take things to a certain extent as they are and estimate what needs to be done for the best. He must find out his own distinctive power, and do with that what he can do, and never waste it in putting it to the impossible. He must steer between over-estimating and undervaluing his powers; between the weakness of conceit and that of undue humility. Each man must conscientiously study and know himself, confronting the realities of the present day with his own capabilities, so that he may know when to speak and when to be silent, when to act and when to hold back. To his own measure he must imitate Joseph, who knew himself and who could submit in the prison, but could not help commanding in the palace.

There is a great deal possible to the man who has himself always in hand. In the stormy periods of Border story the Branhholme knights ate and drank and slept in armour, and with gloved hands had their battle axe always within grasp. So, in a world like ours, men must be ready for emergencies. While a man is gathering his wits, he may lose a dozen of his best chances; while he is slowly drawing himself together, another has stepped in before him. Let every one study self-control; let him have his powers at his command; let him watch and wait, ready-dight! Joseph was always ready, calm and waiting for his opportunity; and no sudden alarm ever took him unguarded and unawares, nor did any sudden opportunity come and go

because he was asleep. Whatever was to be done, he instantly brought all his forces to bear on it, and it was done with the concentration of his whole energy. He did one thing at a time—only and always one thing—and he did it well. Was it resisting temptation? he did it with his whole and undivided nature; and having struck once vigorously enough, he needed to strike no more, and sheered off from his tempter victorious. Was it keeping a prison? he threw himself wholly into the distasteful task and made virtue out of the necessity. Was it counselling a king? he did it with the composure of an undisturbed earnestness. He was always in readiness and had all his reserves in waiting, resting in the preparedness of a great strength, and he never needed to make haste. This splendid equipoise and balance of powers, which has condensed into it so many forces and which contains so many possibilities, involves at least two cardinal points to which a man is true: he must reverence God and he must reverence the body which God has given him.

On another and higher level Joseph was simple and ingenuous as a child. He kept his own ideals fresh amidst all their exposure to frost and wrong. His dreams seemed to have mocked his own eyes with their nothingness; but when either prisoner or king dreams, he reverently accepts the omen when it is of God, and rises to read with the sincerity of one who hears and loves a Father's words. His long waiting for God was done patiently, and the element of patience not only pleased God but made endurable what the least grain of fret would have made impossible. Thus the Bible not only gives us plain lessons for life's ordinary levels, but thus early was instructing men in an example, presented with vivid dramatic power of life in its highest references and relations. This life, in its intenser and lonelier passages, so gentle and patient and true, yet so harassed and wronged, was but a gentle open-

ing of the eyelids of the world to see long afterwards the life of a more innocent Sufferer more terribly wronged. It was but one curl of a wave when a great tide was setting in, which was to rise higher and higher until, borne on its full waters, the life of sorrow was seen to be in this world divine; for, on the principle of making humanity perfect through suffering, God has governed the world from the beginning and will govern it to the end. And this principle we have here exemplified in an early instance; we have it illustrated unforgetably in a narrative glowing with poetic art and swift with action. What could the world have made of Christ's life? Who could have believed that it could have been attended with Divine favour and love, if it all at once had been flashed upon human sight? It would only have blinded; it could not have revealed. But in previous lives, on which in this Book the Divine approval was set, men were gently prepared for the discipline of sorrow which makes life pure, and for the Captain of Salvation being made perfect through suffering.

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