

## Joseph – The Cost of Telling the Truth

Many years ago, a very bold pastor, named A.W. Tozer wrote the following: “The contemporary moral climate does not favor a faith as tough and fibrous as that taught by our Lord and His apostles. The delicate, brittle saints being produced in our religious hothouses today are hardly to be compared with the committed, expendable believers who once gave their witness among men. And the fault lies with our leaders. They are too timid to tell the people all the truth. They are now asking men to give to God that which costs them nothing. Our churches these days are filled (or one-quarter filled) with a soft breed of Christian that must be fed on a diet of harmless fun to keep them interested. About theology they know little. Scarcely any of them have read even one of the great Christian classics, but most of them are familiar with religious fiction and spinetingling films. No wonder their moral and spiritual constitution is so frail. Such can only be called weak adherents of a faith they never really understood.”

A.W. Tozer practised what he preached. He was not afraid to tell people the truth, and the whole truth. On one occasion, he was invited to preach at a Holiness church, and had to suffer through a rather trivial worship service topped of by a trio of women who sang a selection of popular secular songs. Tozer got up and said to the group, “What's wrong with you Holiness people? You used to have standards, but now the only way to tell that you are Christians is if you tell us!” And he went on, as his biographer records, to take that entire congregation to the spiritual woodshed for a chastening they would never forget.

People like Tozer are in short supply. It's rare to find people who will tell you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It's rare to find pulpits that will preach the whole counsel of God, whether or not it will offend the members and tithers. It's rare to find Christians willing to speak the truth in love to one another, correcting, rebuking, exhorting as necessary. Our culture has told us that niceness is godliness, and you can tell how nice you are by how much people like you. Therefore, if you have not offended anyone ever, then you must be a very godly person.

But Scripture doesn't bear that out. It promises that people who tell the truth will not always be celebrated, loved or cheered.

19 "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. 20 "For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 "But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." (Joh 3:19-21)

Jesus told us to expect some of that if we are as truthful as the prophets.

11 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Mat 5:11-12)

As we study the life of Joseph, we are looking at a truth-teller. This truth-teller foreshadows the ultimate truth-teller, Christ. But as we study him, we will see how his truth telling was the way God got Israel down into Egypt. We will see how God's sovereignty worked through Joseph's truth-telling, and his brother's lies, to bring about His will. And we'll learn what it is to be a truth teller.

This is the history of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers. And the lad was with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of many colors. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him. (Gen 37:2-4)

Now last week we saw why Joseph had replaced Reuben as the firstborn, and how his coat signified his position. It's possible that the Hebrew in verse 2 can actually read Joseph was shepherding his brothers. He was the steward of the house, the pastor of his brothers. And we should read verse 2 in that light. Joseph is not some juvenile tattle-tale. Joseph is a faithful, truthful man among a bunch of liars and schemers. We don't know what his brothers had done, but it was almost certainly something shady, some cutting of the corners, some fraud, some breaking of the law. Joseph, instead of becoming complicit in their evil, tells the truth to his father. That didn't make him more popular.

*5 Now Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him even more. 6 So he said to them, "Please hear this dream which I have dreamed: 7 "There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Then behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf." 8 And his brothers said to him, "Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.*

Now the meaning of Joseph's dream is straightforward enough that even his impious brothers understand its interpretation. One day, Joseph says, you will bow down before me.

*9 Then he dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, "Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me." 10 So he told it to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?" 11 And his brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (Gen 37:5-11)*

Joseph's second dream now includes not only his eleven brothers, but his father, and his stepmother, Leah. And Jacob understands the interpretation immediately: one day, the family will bow before Joseph. Jacob, for some reason, feels the need to rebuke Joseph. Maybe his is just a fatherly version of the brothers' displeasure at the dream. Jacob loves Joseph too much to despise him for the dream, but he is not happy about its content. However, like Mary would in the New Testament, at least he ponders these things, keeps them in his heart, considers what they might mean.

The meaning of the dream is obvious. What is not so obvious is whether Joseph should have shared this with his family. Most people read this and see in his action an example of youthful arrogance, some deliberate rubbing of his brothers' noses in the dirt, a childish act of triumphalism.

But look closely. The Bible never says that what Joseph did was proud, arrogant or unwise. The Bible never tells us that Joseph's motives were impure. The Bible simply records Joseph feeling compelled to tell his family these dreams.

Now let's step back and think about who Joseph was, to try to understand what he is doing. As we study his life, does he come across as a simpleton or as an above-average intellect? Does he come across as a social buffoon or as someone with the charm and wit to wisely manoeuvre in all kinds of social situations? Joseph is clearly a very bright man with an acute sense of social skills. Do you think that Joseph had no idea what effect telling the dream would have on his brothers? I find it hard to believe that someone as smart as Joseph did not know the risks of telling a bunch of men who have massacred a whole town that they will one day be his inferiors. He was already the firstborn since Reuben disqualified himself. He was the favourite because of Jacob's partiality towards him. His brothers could not speak peaceably to him. Any seventeen year-old knows what is going to happen when he tells a group of men amongst whom he is disliked, "One day you will be my subordinates." So why does he do it?

Either Joseph was crowing and thought himself invulnerable, or something else is going on here.

Either Joseph is insufferably arrogant at this stage in his life and then becomes the humble, godly man we meet later on, or we have to look for another explanation. I think the explanation is this: **Joseph was willing to speak God's word, knowing it would be received with hostility.**

In the book of Genesis, who among God's people receive dreams or visions? Dreams and visions are similar, one takes place while awake, the other takes place while asleep. Abram receives a vision in Genesis 15. God appears to Isaac by night in Genesis 26. As soon as Jacob has received the blessing of Isaac and he goes out towards Laban, he dreams the dream of seeing the stairway into Heaven and God makes promises to him. While in Laban's service, God speaks to Jacob through a dream in chapter 31 and tells him to return to Canaan. Abraham hears God's will in dreams, Isaac hears it, Jacob hears it, all in dreams and visions. So now that Joseph has the rights of the first-born, who is receiving dreams? Joseph. Joseph understands the significance of receiving this kind of dream. He knows this is not some odd personal vision. He understands that he has received special revelation, the kind that has been given only to the patriarch. He is the focus of God's revelation at this time.

At this stage in Genesis, the dreams God sends are accurate predictions of the future. Every dream which a character has in this book – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Pharaoh's butler, Pharaoh's baker, Pharaoh himself is a prediction that will take place.

Joseph understands what it is that he is receiving, and he knows he has a responsibility to tell his family. He doesn't know why it will be this way, or how, but he knows this is a dream detailing the future, and that he is responsible to share God's Word with his family.

He knew it was bad news for his family. He knew it would paint him as self-exalting and smug. But what do you do when you receive a dream which you know is of the kind given only to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? What do you do when you have received a clear message about the future, which affects the lives of your family? And what do you do when that message is going to make a bad relationship even worse?

You can choose to keep it to yourself with vengeance. You can say to yourself, "They can treat me like this all they like, but I know something they don't. Just wait. My time is coming. No warning from me. Why should I give them more ammunition? Let them hate me. It will be all the sweeter to see the shock on their faces when it comes true!"

You can choose to keep it to yourself fearfully. "I am not only going to tempt them to hate me more, I may even be putting my life at risk. I'll be painting a target on my back, and daring these men to prove the dream wrong. I'm not risking my neck for this lot."

He could even have had the naïve view that some have today, that we need to help God's prophecies along, and protect them from being undone, or make sure they come true. Joseph might have treated God's Word like it was a fragile, potential word, needing to be hidden from its enemies.

On the other hand, you can say, "I have to tell them. I wish God had given this message to one of them or to my father, because this creates an awkward situation for me. They may harm me. But this is God's revelation, it is true, it affects them, and I have to tell them." Think for a moment if Joseph's brothers had believed God's Word, and treated him differently. You say, "Well, then how would the story have unfolded? How would God have gotten them down into Egypt?" Answer: by some other way. The marvel of God's power is that He is going to accomplish His purposes, whether men submit or rebel. Had these men submitted and treated Joseph differently, the account

in Genesis would be completely different. People make real choices with real consequences. But God's sovereign purposes roll on and reach His precise goal at the precise time.

Think of someone else in Scripture, who told his brethren that He would one day rule over them.

*Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?"*

*62 Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mar 14:61-62)*

He spoke openly of His kingdom, and called people to repent and believe in Him as the King. How was it received? He was called a blasphemer, and hated. He was persecuted. Though He was beloved by His Father, He was despised by His brethren for the truth that He told them. They rejected His right to rule over them and said "We will not have this man to rule over us"

I suggest that Joseph's telling of his dream was the opposite of arrogance, it was humility. I believe it was the opposite of proud boasting, it was a courageous willingness to speak the truth in love. I think nothing would have been easier for Joseph than to hide the uncomfortable truth. I think it was the opposite of egotism that led him to tell them the truth; it was compassion for them, kindness.

What hard truths have you held back from your neighbours, your colleagues, your family? The truth of the Gospel that they need? The truth that Jesus will reign, and that they will bow the knee one day, either as rebels about to be punished, or as his brethren? Does fear, bitterness, man-pleasing keep you back from telling your family, your neighbour, your colleagues what they need to know from Scripture? Does fear of bad consequences keep you silent?

Joseph did not keep silent, though he knew the consequences that were coming his way. Here is how it unfolded.

*12 Then his brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers feeding the flock in Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." So he said to him, "Here I am."  
14 Then he said to him, "Please go and see if it is well with your brothers and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me." So he sent him out of the Valley of Hebron, and he went to Shechem.*

Now why the brothers were back in Shechem, we don't know. Remember Shechem was where Simeon and Levi had butchered a whole town of men and plundered the rest. That's possibly why Jacob is concerned about them and sends Joseph to them.

Shechem is a good 80 kilometres from where they were in the valley of Hebron. Now apparently the brothers had concealed their hatred for Joseph when in front of Jacob. He would never have sent his favourite into this kind of situation had he known of their malice. But Joseph knew. So when Jacob gave him this assignment, he had to know that he was accepting a dangerous mission. But his sense of duty and stewardship as the firstborn is so strong, that he is willing to face his 10 hostile older brothers alone in the wilderness. The father sends the son to find the wandering brothers – sounds like the Gospel, doesn't it? And Joseph perseveres. When he doesn't find them in Shechem, he doesn't shrug and go back to Jacob.

*15 Now a certain man found him, and there he was, wandering in the field. And the man asked him, saying, "What are you seeking?" 16 So he said, "I am seeking my brothers. Please tell me where they are feeding their flocks." 17 And the man said, "They have departed from here, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan.*

That's another 20 kilometres. A 100 kilometre walk, probably over several days, to find the brothers he knew despised him for telling them the truth.

*18 Now when they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him. 19 Then they said to one another, "Look, this dreamer is coming! 20 "Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, 'Some wild beast has devoured him.' We shall see what will become of his dreams!"*

Probably seeing him with his unique coat some way off, they begin conspiring. And you can hear the hatred in the voices. He has a nickname – the dreamer. And such is their contempt for God's Word, they believe they can thwart God's Word. They want to murder him, throw him into a pit, and claim he was eaten by an animal. No one will know, and that will be the end of the prediction that we will bow down to him!

There is a long tradition in Greek mythology of how those who try to escape the word of a prophecy end up fulfilling the prophecy by their actions. And we see that those who wanted to prove that Jesus was not the Messiah by putting him to death, ended up fulfilling the prophecy that Messiah would die for the sins of the nation in Isaiah 53. The word of the Lord cannot be broken.

*21 But Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands, and said, "Let us not kill him." 22 And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit which is in the wilderness, and do not lay a hand on him"-- that he might deliver him out of their hands, and bring him back to his father.*

For some reason, Reuben wants to save Joseph. Perhaps he wanted to win back some of the favour he had lost after he defiled his father's bed. Perhaps he felt answerable for Joseph as the oldest of the brothers. Maybe he feels some genuine compassion. But he tries to modify their cruelty by advising they throw him in a pit. The pit would have been a cistern, a bottle shaped hole dug into the rock, with a narrow opening and wide base, the sides often waterproofed with plaster made from burnt and slaked lime. The chances of escape from a cistern were minimal. Joseph would still have died, by starvation or exposure, but it would not have been the direct murder of violence. Apparently Reuben wanted to somehow come back, get Joseph out and bring him back to Jacob. And so at some point here, Reuben goes off somewhere, leaving the other 9 older brothers.

*23 So it came to pass, when Joseph had come to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the tunic of many colors that was on him. 24 Then they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it. 25 And they sat down to eat a meal. Then they lifted their eyes and looked, and there was a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead with their camels, bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry them down to Egypt. 26 So Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 "Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother and our flesh." And his brothers listened. 28 Then Midianite traders passed by; so the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.*

They strip him of his robe, which they no doubt delighted to do. The cold at night would probably kill him. Without water in this cistern, he will die of thirst soon. You see the absolute callousness and cruelty of these men, that their own brother has been thrown into a pit, and they sit down to eat, right there. They spot traders on the trade route to Egypt, and Judah suggests they sell him into slavery rather than leave him to die in the cistern. They are probably all aware of the story of Abel's blood crying out to God from the ground. Judah doesn't want that, but he does want to be rid of Joseph permanently. So they engage in human trafficking, a crime that was later punishable by death under the Mosaic law. It is the equivalent of kidnapping and then selling the human as a product. And there, for the price of a slave, 20 pieces of silver, he becomes the lifelong property of complete strangers.

And now I want you to see the marvel of God's sovereignty. God needs to somehow get this tribe of irreligious men and their wives and children out of Canaan, down to the richest nation on Earth,

where they can prosper and grow into a mighty nation of several million, which He will then dramatically move from that nation back to Canaan. How does God begin that plan? With a bunch of evil brothers, eating their lunch, seeing a coincidentally passing caravan, who are covetous for some money.

And see the long shadow cast here into the future, and see another Man who is sold for pieces of silver. Another man named Judah is again the one to come up with the idea of selling a righteous one for pieces of silver. That Righteous Man would also be stripped of his robe. He would also be put into the Earth, and then come back out alive.

Now wherever Reuben was when this transaction take place, he now comes back.

*29 Then Reuben returned to the pit, and indeed Joseph was not in the pit; and he tore his clothes. 30 And he returned to his brothers and said, "The lad is no more; and I, where shall I go?"*

So deep does the deception and lying run in this family, that none of the other brothers even tell Reuben what they have done. And then, with some of them knowing the truth about Joseph, and Reuben unsure of what has happened to him, they all agree to deceive their father.

*31 So they took Joseph's tunic, killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the tunic in the blood. 32 Then they sent the tunic of many colors, and they brought it to their father and said, "We have found this. Do you know whether it is your son's tunic or not?" 33 And he recognized it and said, "It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces." 34 Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. 35 And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, "For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning." Thus his father wept for him. 36 Now the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guard.*

I wonder if there isn't a faint portrait here of the Father's grief to see His beloved Son, wounded and torn and bleeding for our sins, dead because of our evil. For Jacob it was a lie that he believed but for the Triune God, it was the reality.

Joseph spoke God's Word, even at risk to himself, even when he knew it would be received with hostility.

But I want you to see something else about Joseph's telling of the truth. Joseph remained hopeful in God's word, even when it had not yet been fulfilled.

*5 Then the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison, had a dream, both of them, each man's dream in one night and each man's dream with its own interpretation. 6 And Joseph came in to them in the morning and looked at them, and saw that they were sad. 7 So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in the custody of his lord's house, saying, "Why do you look so sad today?" 8 And they said to him, "We each have had a dream, and there is no interpreter of it." So Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please." (Gen 40:5-8)*

Now this takes place after Joseph has been in Potiphar's house, ended up in prison on a false accusation. And here these two other prisoners both have dreams. And I want to point out to you that Joseph does not respond to them by saying, "Dreams? Ha! Don't put any stock in dreams! I can tell you about how trustworthy dreams are!" There is no cynicism in Joseph. There is no sarcasm, no jaded attitude toward God's Word. He still hopes in God's Word, believes it is true, even if he hasn't seen its fulfillment in his life yet! He is in a foreign land, foreign culture, having gone from field slave, to master of the house, to more betrayal, and into prison. He could really get cynical about God's Word, had he chosen unbelief. But instead, he continues to believe it, continues to obey

it, and continues to trust in it.

Have you found yourself becoming cynical about God's Word? “Yah – obedience. Let me tell you what that made of my marriage! Prayer – a lot of good prayer ever did me! Keeping myself pure – what did that ever bring me – more loneliness! Doing the ethical thing at work – I just watched as all the sharks were promoted above me.” Cynicism is when we refuse to hope anymore in the truth and power of God's Word. We deny its truthfulness because we are afraid to hope. The pain of suffering erodes our confidence, until we prefer the cold and grim world of despair and cynicism, to the piercing real world where sin and grace co-exist, where the curse and the Cross work simultaneously, where the pain of sin and the pleasure of God's promises co-exist. A make-believe world of pessimism, cynicism and jaded despair is just as false as a make-believe world of false optimism and cheery sentimentalism.

Joseph, in the midst of jail, did not let that happen to him. Joseph kept preaching the truth, and kept believing the truth.

Christ, for the joy set before Him, continued to believe God's Word, even on the Cross. He did not grow cynical at the promises made to Him, but believed. He believed the truth, and spoke the Truth.

We need more believers like A.W. Tozer, like Athanasius, like Luther. We need believers like Daniel, like Jeremiah, like Joseph. Unwavering faith in God's Word. Speak it, whether or not your audience will like it. Speak it, even if you have not seen it all come to fruition in your life.