

Marks of True Greatness

Genesis 46-50

Introduction

History has recorded several individuals who have adopted the name “Great”.

If you have been a follower of history or have simply studied history courses in high school or college, you have learned of Peter the Great. He adopted that name with the ambitious thought that he was great. Yet, if you study his life closely, you discover that Peter the Great had a maniacal temper and was given to fits of rage, which one day, resulted in the killing of his own son.

Another individual we know of is Alexander the Great. He adopted that name as well, and we know that he indeed, conquered empires and ruled the known world of his time. Yet Alexander the Great, who conquered worlds, could not conquer his own flesh. He was given to drunken brawls, which, in one instance, resulted in the killing of his favorite general and friend, Clitus.

Herod also called himself “Great”. You know him from New Testament times. He was the man who built the temple and organized the nation. Yet Herod was given to fits of jealousy that would take the lives of his wife and his children, lest they dare take his throne.

What the world may consider great is something other than what the Bible considers great. What man marks as greatness may be completely different than what God marks as greatness.

Joseph’s Greatness is Seen in His .

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As we bid farewell today to Joseph, a man who has been a delight for us to study in our last few discussions, I want to look back at some of the passages we have already looked at, and then, look to the end of this book. Let us take a look at the greatness that is true in the life and character of Joseph. From that, I will give seven marks of true greatness. I suggest that you write these down to study further in the future. Ask God, as you look into the mirror of Joseph’s life, to make these marks of your own character as well.

Commitment to using authority wisely

1. Joseph’s greatness is seen, first of all, in his commitment to using authority wisely.

Look at chapter 46, verse 31 of Genesis.

Joseph said to his brothers and to his father’s household, “I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and will say to him, ‘My brothers and my father’s household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me;’”

We have previously discussed the story of the way Joseph and his family were reunited. Continue in verses 32 through 34, as Joseph says to his brothers,

“and the men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks and their herds and all that they have.’ When Pharaoh calls you and says, ‘What is your occupation?’ you shall say, ‘Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,’ that you may live

in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is loathsome to the Egyptians.”

You should underline “that you may live in the land of Goshen,” as that is the purpose of this interview.

It is interesting that Joseph, in greatness, never abuses his authority – not now, not before, and not after. He will rule as premier in this land for nearly a hundred years.

In these verses, we find Joseph introducing his brothers and his father to Pharaoh. They have come into the land, and Joseph, obviously, wants to take good care of his family. They, being shepherds, must settle in the only place that can capacitate sheep, and that is the valley land; the delta region, known as Goshen.

Now Joseph, being the greatest authority other than Pharaoh in the land, has every right; has every potential of telling his brothers, “Hey, settle in Goshen and don’t worry about a thing – I’ll handle the rest. I’m the premier; I’m the prime minister, what I say, goes. We won’t worry about Pharaoh, he’s my trusted friend. Who cares what the people might say? They know you are being given the most fertile region in Egypt and that there is a famine in the land, but don’t worry about them, you just go live in Goshen.”

Joseph had every opportunity to abuse his authority, yet he says to his brothers, “Go to Pharaoh. Let’s let it be Pharaoh’s decision.”

Later, in chapter 47, we discover that Pharaoh, in fact, says, “Go live in the land of Goshen.”

We can kind of chuckle because Pharaoh probably takes credit for the thought. Joseph had given him the thought, yet allowed Pharaoh to make the decision.

One of the most discouraging things in the work force is working for an employer – a boss, a foreman, a straw boss, the president of a company, an unsympathetic vice president – who constantly and continually abuses authority. And tragically, the individual, who may call themselves a Christian, finds himself in authority and we cannot help but stand back and think, “Man, did he ever change once he was given that position. I knew him before and he never talked like that; he never did things like that. But now, you can’t come within an arms reach of him.”

It has been said that the greatest test of a man or woman’s character is authority. Give an individual

some authority and see how they respond. You will note whether they have true greatness or not.

Willingness to live humbly

2. The second thing that strikes me and impresses me about Joseph is that he has a willingness to live humbly.

Look at verse 1 of chapter 47.

Then Joseph went in and told Pharaoh, and said, “My father and my brothers and their flocks and their herds and all that they have, have come out of the land of Canaan; and behold, they are in the land of Goshen.”

In other words, “They are awaiting your final approval.”

Continue to verse 2.

He took five . . . brothers and presented them to Pharaoh.

Now remember, they are loathsome to Pharaoh; to the Egyptians. Look at verse 3.

Then Pharaoh said to his brothers, “What is your occupation?” So they said to Pharaoh, “Your servants are shepherds, both we and our fathers.”

I cannot help but wonder what Joseph is doing about this time. As he is standing next to his brothers, he is perhaps, thinking, “Don’t mention that. Say something like, ‘We deal in large tracts of real estate.’ Don’t mention that you’re shepherds because they are loathsome.”

Archaeologists have discovered Egyptian art dating back to the time of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. The art, depicts shepherds, on occasion, and they are always pictured as emaciated, evil, wicked kinds of people. For some reason, and we do not know all of the reasons, shepherds were considered loathsome; they were hated; they were despised. Shepherds were the lowest cast of society.

Some of that attitude toward shepherds carried through, even into New Testament times with the Jew. It is interesting that God would give the message that His Son was born to shepherds.

In these verses, however, we see an interesting characteristic and mark of Joseph’s character. He is willing to live with the knowledge that he is from the line of shepherds being rampantly spread in that kingdom. His father is a shepherd. His brothers are

shepherds. I can imagine him hearing or thinking that the people will say, “Will we follow a shepherd? Will we obey this premier, who we now know is a mere shepherd; a keeper of sheep?”

I think Joseph, in fact, risks his credibility with the people by being honest; by being humble.

Someone wrote well, “One who knows God well will be humble. One who knows himself well will never be proud.”

Ability to administrate honestly

3. A third mark that strikes me of Joseph’s character is that he had the ability to administrate honestly.

Look at verses 13 through 16 of chapter 47 and note Joseph’s honesty in administration.

Now there was no food in all the land, because the famine was very severe, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. Joseph gathered all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan for the grain which they bought, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh’s house. When the money was all spent in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, “Give us food, for why should we die in your presence? For our money is gone.” Then Joseph said, “Give up your livestock, and I will give you food for your livestock, since your money is gone.”

In other words, this welfare system was not a handout. If they had something in exchange for the food, they were going to give it. Finally, their money was gone and their livestock was gone as well.

The striking thing about that passage, that we often overlook, is the simple fact that Joseph was virtually handling the gross national product. He was handling all of the money in his hands. He had the key to the pantry; he was the one who had the meal ticket for the entire nation and they brought all of their money to him. I would imagine that literally, millions of dollars in gold and silver trickled through Joseph’s hands. What did he do with it all? He did what he was supposed to do – he brought it into his superior’s house.

If there was ever a time in Joseph’s life when he could have padded his account; when he could have

thought of retiring early, this was it. This was a gold mine! He could have thought, “I am unaccountable. I am having people come to me and say, ‘Joseph, we’ll do anything for you. We’ll give you all of our money just for food. Here, take our livestock.’”

Joseph, however, allows himself to be a funnel. That is a mark of character. He was administrating honestly.

George Mueller, who has been mentioned often from this pulpit, was a man who took care, in his lifetime, of ten thousand orphans. It has been said that more than eight million dollars came to George Mueller as a result of prayer. Yet, when he died and his accounts were tallied, he owned less than a thousand dollars in his own name.

Another Old Testament character that strikes me is Nehemiah, who was building the walls of Jerusalem. The world cannot figure out why anyone would build a wall and restore a city without some kind of financial manipulation in mind. Why would you build a kingdom if you were not going to become wealthy from that kingdom?

Nehemiah is there, building the wall, and finally, the enemies say to him, “Oh, we know why you’re building that wall – because you want to be governor; you want to receive the salary of a governor.”

Nehemiah responded, in effect, “I have not and I will not receive all of the benefits of being a governor.”

They could not figure it out. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were scratching their heads, outside the wall, and thinking, “Now what makes Nehemiah tick?”

The Egyptians must have been thinking, “What in the world makes Joseph tick? We can’t figure this guy out.”

Ladies and gentlemen, when you are unaccountable; when you have every opportunity; when you are alone with yourself, are you honest?

Desire to serve others unselfishly

4. The fourth thing that strikes me is Joseph’s desire to serve others unselfishly.

Look at chapter 47, verse 23a.

Then Joseph said to the people, “Behold, I have today bought you and your land for Pharaoh; . . .”

The people have become, in effect, tenement farmers. This was something like a feudal system of the middle ages. Note what Joseph does in the last part of verse 23.

“. . . now, here is seed for you, and you may sow the land.”

It is interesting that when this country comes to the end of their famine, the people still have their dignity and their self-respect because Joseph was serving the people with them in mind. He says, in verse 24,

At the harvest you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own for seed of the field and for your food and for those of your households and as food for your little ones.

This is a twenty percent tax. It is interesting that many liberal commentators will poke at Joseph concerning this account. In fact, many literatures, given to scriptural exposition, will begin chapter 47 at verse 27. They will skip this whole passage because they are just convinced that Joseph is now out for himself. Yet archaeology, once again, has helped us in discovering that neighboring countries excised more than fifty percent tax. It was often demanded of people to give half of their produce, half of their money to the kings. Joseph is, in a sense, saying, “I’ll take just twenty percent. That is enough to handle the administrative affairs; to keep this system going. We’ll take care of your cattle; we’ll provide the seed, you give us one-fifth.”

In light of what was taking place, Joseph was amazingly compassionate and unselfish. He served the people with them in mind. In fact, verse 25, says, in case there is any doubt,

So they said, “You have saved our lives! . . .”

They did not say, “You have been uncompassionate.”

They did not say, “You have been desirous of taking all that we have.”

No. The people say to Joseph,

“You have saved our lives! Let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh’s slaves.”

In other words, “We will serve you faithfully.”

One of the greatest marks seen in the character of Jesus Christ was shown that day in John, chapter 13, when He was in the upper room and the big thought

on the disciples’ minds was the question, “Lord, who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom?”

What they were really wondering was, “What does God consider great? What is the mark of character that He really takes note of? Who will be among us, then, the greatest?”

In that room as they had already reclined to eat, the slaves were not there and no one wanted to wash the feet of the other, and they did not even wash their own feet, which strikes me. As you may know, Jesus Christ takes a towel and takes His gown and girds it up around Him. He then goes to Peter, takes his feet and puts them in the basin, and says, “Peter, I want to wash your feet.”

Peter, in the text, literally draws his feet up and says, “No, You can’t wash my feet.”

The Lord gives him a theological lesson in being “in Christ”.

Finally, Peter acknowledges His sovereignty and allows Him to wash his feet. Then, Jesus Christ goes around the room and washes twenty-four dirty feet.

I would imagine, in that room, you could have heard a pin drop. I would imagine you could only hear the splashing of water in that basin – and the dropping of tears as they ran off the ends of the noses and cheeks of the disciples as they sat there and watched true greatness.

The world measures greatness by how many people serve you. God measures greatness by how many people you serve.

Transparency to grieve openly

5. Another mark that strikes me is that Joseph had the transparency to grieve openly.

Look at chapter 49, verses 29 through 33. Jacob is now on his deathbed.

Then he [Jacob] charged them and said to them, “I am about to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site. There they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah, there they buried Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and there I buried Leah – the field and the cave that is in it, purchased

from the sons of Heth.” When Jacob finished charging his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

What will Joseph do now? Great man that he is – a man who has trusted God in His sovereignty in unwavering faith – how will he respond? Will he smile and say, “Wonderful, he’s with his fathers now. Glory, I’m going to see him one day in heaven.”?

No. He has the transparency to grieve. Look at chapter 50, verse 1 and 2a.

Then Joseph fell on his father’s face, and wept over him and kissed him. Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. . . .

Joseph wanted to give his father the greatest burial Egypt had ever seen. Continue to verse 3.

Now forty days were required for it, for such is the period required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days.

Forty days were required for the embalming period, but note that the Egyptians mourned and grieved for Jacob an additional thirty days.

Continue to verses 7 through 8a.

So Joseph went up to bury his father, and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household and all the elders of the land of Egypt, and all the household of Joseph and his brothers and his father’s household . . .

Skip to verses 10 through 11.

When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed seven days mourning for his father. Now when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, “This is a grievous mourning for the Egyptians.” Therefore it was named Abel-mizraim [weeping], which is beyond the Jordan.

The world would say to something like this spectacle, “That is weakness.”

Christianity would say, “That’s unspiritual.”

I tend to believe there are people within the body of Jesus Christ who need a good cry. They are bottling things up – difficulties, resentments, deaths –

and have been told by the spiritual side, “Oh, chin up.”

I remember being at my father-in-law’s funeral and my mother-in-law was sitting in a chair holding a tissue. A relative come in, who supposedly knew the Lord, and said, “Now look, there’s no need to cry. Get a hold of yourself.”

I wanted to punch the guy.

We have missed what Joseph had. He was secure enough in his faith in God that he was able to grieve and weep.

You may remember that Jesus Christ wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He also looked over the city of Jerusalem and said, weeping,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . (Luke 13:34a)

It is strength to reveal those emotions, not weakness.

Capacity to forgive graciously

6. Sixth, Joseph also had the capacity to forgive graciously.

One of the most beautiful texts in the book of Genesis is found after Jacob dies. Joseph’s brothers are afraid that now, Joseph will have a vindictive attitude and put them to death. They come to Joseph, in verse 17a, saying,

“Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.” . . .

Continue to verse 18.

Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.”

Now note Joseph’s response, in verses 19 through 21a.

But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” . . .

Remember, ladies and gentlemen, the capacity to forgive like this is dependent upon our ability to see God at work in the lives of other people. When someone impacts us in a certain way; when someone criticizes us; when someone says something to tear us

down; when someone attacks us; when someone is less than gracious, they are tools in God's hands to develop us.

Joseph viewed his brothers as tools in the hands of God to bring about a great result.

Confidence to die as a visionary

7. Finally, Joseph is great and it is seen in his confidence to die as a visionary.

I love this. Look at verses 22 and 23.

Now Joseph stayed in Egypt, he and his father's household, and Joseph lived one hundred and ten years. Joseph saw the third generation of Ephraim's sons; also the sons of Machir, the son of Manasseh were born on Joseph's knees.

In other words, Joseph saw his great grandsons. He was there. Continue to verse 24.

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob."

I would stop at this point and say, "Come on, Joseph. God gave a covenant promise to Abraham that he would be a great nation and Abraham had one son. He repeated that covenant promise to Isaac, 'I will make you a great nation,' and he had two sons. Then to Jacob, He repeated it again, and he had twelve sons. In three generations, there was a tribe of seventy, and you are holding to this?"

Joseph died a visionary. I know two things about his vision.

- First, Joseph had a vision of God's faithfulness.

He made his brothers swear, in verse 25a.

Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely take care of you . . ."

- He also was confident of Israel's future.

Note the last part of verse 25. Joseph says,

". . . and you shall carry my bones up from here."

I love that! He said, "Look, when God finally fulfills the promise of the land, don't leave me in

Egypt, bring my body. I want to be there. God will fulfill His promise."

How could Joseph die with such vision? Because Joseph lived with such vision.

Application

Would we like to die like Joseph? The actual question is, do we live like Joseph?

As one person said, "Or are we chained to the status quo – afraid to try, to risk, to change, to go, to do something that we feel God may want us to do?"

Where is our vision? Living a life with vision will determine the way we die.

I have a book in my study that I read periodically. It reminds me of the brevity of my own life. Let me read the last words that several men spoke on their deathbed.

The first man was an unbeliever named Berlioz. He was a dramatist and a composer who spoke and wrote like Shakespeare. Before he died, Berlioz wrote,

Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury. Life signifies nothing.

A man who lived fifty years prior to Berlioz, was Isaac Watts. He wrote the hymns, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* and *Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past*. Let me read Watts' dying testimony,

It is a great mercy that I have no manner of fear or dread of death. I can lay my head back and die without terror this afternoon.

He then, did just that.

Martin Luther was a monk who shook the world and conceived Protestantism. You and I benefit from that today. As Luther was lying on his deathbed with his closest friends about him, he repeated three times,

Into Thy hands I commend my spirit; Thou hast redeemed me, O God of truth. Into Thy hands I commend my spirit; Thou hast redeemed me, O God of truth.

Then as he breathed his last, he repeated John, chapter 3, verse 16, and his favorite verse, Psalm, chapter 68, verse 20,

Our God is the God of whom cometh salvation; God is the Lord by whom we escape death.

I want to die like that. Do you know what it takes? It takes:

- living like that – allowing the Holy Spirit to stamp upon our character the marks of true greatness;
- using authority, for those who have it, wisely as a parent or as an employer;
- administrating honestly;
- serving others;
- grieving openly;
- forgiving graciously.

Greatness, men and women, is not developing great empires, but developing great and godly character. Greatness is not in leading men, but in leading our lives in such a way that God is pleased. Greatness is not, as measured by our world's standards, in receiving the applause of men; but is in receiving the approval of God.

The last verse of chapter 50 says,

So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed [temporarily] in a coffin in Egypt.

End of chapter; end of a book that I have come to love, but not the end of the story – because the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph is alive. He is just as available to stamp upon your character and mine, the marks of true greatness.

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