



"True faith drops its letter in the post office box and lets it go. Distrust holds on to a corner of it and wonders that the answer never comes."

—A.B. Simpson

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The Faith of Joseph (Part One)

If we were to do character sketches of all the people in the Bible, it is doubtful that we would find any with such a record as Joseph—with the obvious exception of [Jesus Christ](#), of whom Joseph is a type. Joseph's story covers 20 chapters, and in that considerable space Joseph receives less criticism and more praise than any of the other patriarchs, and probably than any other non-divine being in the Bible.

Joseph lived 110 years, during which he exemplified honesty, integrity, [faithfulness](#), [patience](#), grace, restraint, [wisdom](#), and numerous other excellent qualities. He endured slights, wrongs, and assaults that were undeserved. For much of his youth, his circumstances were outside of his control, and he bore it all without complaint or bitterness. Yet, out of all the remarkable events in this man's life, [God](#) draws our attention to a single one in the "[faith](#) chapter" of Hebrews 11. The incident that God marks out as being the pinnacle of Joseph's faith happened literally at the very end of his life—though it had its genesis much earlier:

By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones. ([Hebrews 11:22](#))

Joseph's faithfulness throughout his long life is above question, but it was this final act of faith that God emphasizes and sets before us as an example. Why were these last words of Joseph more important to God than the many remarkable qualities and experiences from the rest of his life?

The verse reads that Joseph "made mention" of the departing of the children of Israel, and the margin says that he "remembered" it. At the time, though, Joseph was still in a position of high honor and esteem, if not authority. The families of his brothers were likewise in a good position, and there probably was not any inducement for them to leave. But Joseph "remembered" something that made him mention that this large, extended family would one day leave Egypt.

Verse 22 also relates that Joseph gave commandment concerning his bones. This is interesting in light of the culture of Egypt at the time. In Egypt, the Pharaohs were considered to be essentially gods. Joseph was not a Pharaoh, but it is quite possible that his position under Pharaoh might have earned him a place in a royal mortuary. At the very least, he would have been entitled to the Egyptian equivalent of a state burial, with all of its ceremonies and trappings. Were he a materially-minded man, he might have been obsessed with the size and grandeur of his tomb, or which Pharaoh his tomb was next to. He might have fretted over his legacy, and over his place in history, wanting to make sure that future generations gave him reverence. He could have taken his place with the kings of old, but *because of his faith*, he left instructions for his remains to be removed rather than glorified.

[Genesis 50:24-26](#) contains the story of Joseph's final instructions before his death:

And Joseph said to his brethren, "I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to [Isaac](#), and to Jacob." Then Joseph took an

oath from the children of Israel, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." So Joseph died, being one hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

Notice Joseph's confidence in these verses. He says twice that God would *surely* visit the children of Israel. There was no doubt in Joseph's mind that his brethren would be led back to the land God promised to his fathers. His trust in God's future deliverance prompted him to make the children of Israel swear that whoever was alive at that time would carry his bones with them as they left Egypt and returned to their ancestral land.

When Joseph says that God would visit them, he is not using that word in the sense of a social call—it is not used that way in reference to God. God "visited" Sarah when she miraculously conceived Isaac ([Genesis 21:1](#)). God decreed that He would "visit" the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Him ([Exodus 20:5](#)). When God "visits" someone, it may be with either benevolent or with punishing intent, but God is always shown *acting* or *performing a work*. Thus, Joseph signifies that God would be acting on Israel's behalf when He brought them out of Egypt and back to the land of their fathers. By faith, Joseph made mention of this, and the reason is found much earlier, in the story of Abraham:

Then He said to Abram: "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in [peace](#); you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." ([Genesis 15:13-16](#))

[Romans 10:17](#) instructs us that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by *the word of God*." There is no record of Joseph personally hearing words from God, nor did he have the written Word of God as we do. Instead, God's words *to Abraham* were relayed to Joseph either by his father, Jacob, or by his grandfather, Isaac, whose life overlapped Joseph's by a number of years.

Joseph believed those words to his fathers and acted on them at the end of his life.

This is what God promised Abraham, and this is what Joseph heard from his father, if not his grandfather. If we add to this the other promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, particularly concerning the land, we can understand the "word of God" that Joseph heard and which made up the basis of his faith.

Joseph believed the words that God spoke to Abraham concerning what would befall Abraham's children, and he believed that God would judge the strangers whom they would serve. He also believed that God would bring them out of that strange land and into the Promised Land. These words to Abraham, handed down through Isaac and Jacob to Joseph, formed the trust and confidence in his mind that God would "visit" the children of Israel in a positive way, and then they would be led to their ancestral lands.

Next time, we will see that Joseph's command regarding his remains involved much more than just peace of mind that his bones would be laid to rest on the family farm.

- David C. Grabbe

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

Of all the biblical patriarchs, Joseph receives the least criticism and the most approbation, a sterling record of character and human accomplishment surpassed only by Jesus Christ. Considering the the competitive, polygamous family structure into which he was born, it was truly a miracle he turned out so well. A major factor in Joseph's integrity was the receiving of Jacob's distilled wisdom after the death of Rachel, a time when Jacob, in his grief

and reflection, transferred his affection to Joseph, spending quality time with him, teaching about his experiences (both disappointments and successes) at overcoming and growing.

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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