

Merit and Spiritual Theft – Joseph and His Brothers

By Ed Allen

The Genesis stories of Joseph and how he is betrayed, and how the Lord leads him to victories, relates to the process of regeneration from the Scripture, of how good can prevail over evil. Joseph is betrayed three times: At first, by his brothers, who threw him into a pit, took his coat of many colors, sold him into Egypt, and convinced their father, Jacob, that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast; after presenting Jacob with Joseph's coat, and after they had dipped it in the blood of a goat. The second betrayal was by Potiphar's wife who attempted to seduce Joseph, and claimed attempted rape, after Joseph rejected her advance, which caused Joseph to be imprisoned. The third betrayal was by the butler, who was released from prison and forgot, for a time, to speak to the Pharaoh of Joseph's innocence, and ask for his release. In each case, Joseph, who represents the good from truth in us, was led by the Lord to elevated more powerful positions in life. He became the head of Potiphar's house after being sold by his brother Judah into Egypt. He became a head master over the other prisoners after Potiphar imprisoned him. And he became the second-in-command leader, under the Pharaoh, over Egypt, after the butler remembered Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, and recommended to Pharaoh that Joseph could rightly interpret the Pharaoh's dreams. (Genesis 41)¹ Joseph did correctly interpret Pharaoh's dream predicting seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. Thus allowing Egypt to prepare for and survive the famine years.

Each betrayal of Joseph is a lesson in temptations. Since our temptations are controlled by our conscience, which are the spiritual truths we understand and live, without regard to the consequences to self (EFU pp. 2-3)². Our ability to combat temptations is how well we rely upon the Lord and his truths to battle our selfish-evil desires, which oppose the Lord's order of government. As each temptation is overcome, the Lord's power gives us more strength to resist evil.

Joseph benefited from the betrayals against himself. When sold into Egypt, he obeyed his master, was productive, and therefore gained a position of trust in Potiphar's house. After Potiphar's wife betrayed Joseph, he became a leader of the prisoners. And when the butler remembered Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, and informed Pharaoh, Joseph did not take credit for the Lord's merit, instead he credited God for the dream interpretations. As a result, Pharaoh freed Joseph, making him the governor of Egypt, and tasking Joseph to collect food for seven years to prepare for the predicted famine.

The first betrayal is an extreme example of hatred and jealousy. Joseph, who represents the good from the Lord's truth, was the favorite son. He was sold for 20 pieces of silver, representing the low estimation of his spiritual worth, by his brothers, who represent faith separated from charity, or worldly success (AC 4740)³. Joseph being sold represents the low estimation of the Lord's merit; the highest love is sold for greed (AC 2276, *Path* 161⁴).

The second betrayal by Potiphar's wife, was an attempt to adulterate the goods of the Lord by a lower lust (*Path*, p. 168). Why didn't Potiphar kill Joseph? Possibly he trusted Joseph, who had been honest and noble, more than his wife.

The third betrayal was when the butler forgets to ask Pharaoh to grant Joseph's freedom from prison where he might possibly be imprisoned until he dies. However, when the butler learned of Pharaoh's dream, he remembered Joseph, who was then brought to Pharaoh and correctly interpreted his dreams as representing seven years of plenty and seven years of famine.

When Jacob sent his ten older sons to Egypt to buy grain, after the famine had begun, we would think that Joseph would be revengeful, but as representative of the Lord's good, he very methodically, as does the Lord, worked to guide his very natural and sensuous brothers to repent. First, he inquired about their family, and as a result the brothers remembered their betrayal of Joseph and secretly admitted their guilt and were ashamed. Joseph filled their bags with grain, and sent them home, but kept Simeon as hostage, as incentive for them to return to Egypt with Benjamin. The brothers were surprised to find that the payment money was also in the sacks of grain. They feared that they would be accused of stealing the money. Jacob was heart broken to lose Simeon as well as Joseph. But after the food was gone, Jacob sent the brothers back to Egypt with Benjamin, as was demanded by Joseph.

Upon their return to Egypt and Joseph, Joseph rejoiced, but still did not identify himself to his brothers. He sold them grain, and sent them away to fetch their father. However Joseph had his silver cup placed in Benjamin's sack, and then accused the brothers of stealing it. At this point the brothers, even though not guilty of stealing, totally gave in to Joseph, admitting their previous iniquities and offering themselves as slaves (Gen 44:16). But Joseph asked only for Benjamin as a slave. Then, Judah, who had originally sold Joseph into Egypt, selflessly offered himself to replace Benjamin, knowing that the loss of Benjamin would break Jacob's heart. At this point, Joseph, as the good, has done his job through temptations and the resulting despair experienced by the brothers for spiritual theft – stealing the Lord's merit – of the goods and truths that are the Lord's. Here their lower natural

sensual had been stealing from the Lord for years without feeling shame or guilt. (*Path*, p. 210, AC 5747:2) Then, Joseph tenderly reveals his identity to his astonished brothers, assuring them that they are forgiven.

What is the point? Childhood's good remains and innocence can be reborn in us, even after years of crediting ourselves with the Lord's merit (*Path*, P. 214). In general, this is the story of regeneration through the life of Joseph, and his family. Jacob, the father, our natural external good, the brothers, our external sensual of taking care of self at any cost, even to giving up integrity. Joseph is our celestial love of the Lord's goodness, which recognizes that all good and truth comes from the Lord. Joseph, the good in us, never takes credit for the Lord's merit, and never is revengeful; but disciplinarian, yes; and demanding of order, yes. And the brothers, except Benjamin, who through lives of natural and spiritual deceit and theft, finally, through their own conscience reminded (by the Joseph in them) of the Lord's goodness, and through enlightened consciences, realize their iniquities, confess, and repent. They finally give up to the celestial good of Joseph, shedding their selfish wills and accepting a new will, at first by fear, and eventually, out of love for Jacob, the natural good they had betrayed, and by stealing Joseph, selling him, and then fabricating his death. In the end the natural, once repentant, was forgiven, and lovingly joined to the spiritual.

Joseph's silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack of grain caused the final despair of the brothers' temptations to steal the Lord's spiritual merit (Gen 44). The brothers fell down on their knees to Joseph, and begged to be his slaves, selflessly, to protect their father, Jacob, and youngest brother, Benjamin, who represents newly gained truths – spiritual truths. (AC 5566, *Path*, pp. 205-212.) The brothers passed the ultimate test in the process of regeneration. Out of love for others and relying on the Lord's goods and truths, they put aside their selfish past iniquities, and became charitable.

Bibliography and Notes:

1. Nelson, Thomas (Publisher), *Holy Bible* (NKJV), Nelson, Nashville, 1983. Joseph born to Rachel (Gen. 30: 22-24). Joseph's life after 17 years (Gen. 37, 39-50).
2. Pendleton, Willard D., *Education For Use Basic Concepts* (EFU) Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, PA, 19009, 1985.
3. Swedenborg, Emanuel, *Arcana Coelestia* (AC), The Swedenborg Society, London, 1947 (First published 1749-1756).
4. Childs, Geoffrey, S, *Path: The Inner Life of Jesus Christ*, Fountain Publishing, Fidler Doubleday, 2002.