

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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**THE MAN FOR THE MOMENT:
JOSEPH IN CHARGE**

Genesis 41: 33-42, 46-57

If you have a pulse, you have probably heard that President Barack Obama was recently named the winner of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. In case you missed it, it was in the news. The announcement of President Obama's selection set off a firestorm of controversy, with both supporters and critics of the president weighing in with their reactions and opinions. That has been in the news, too.

While many Nobel Peace Prize winners in addition to President Obama have been household names – think Mother Teresa (1979), civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964), or South African Bishop Desmond Tutu (1983) – some Nobel Prize winners have had much less notoriety, even if their contributions to the world have been huge.

Before we think together about Joseph and the lessons from his life, I want to tell you about a modern-day Joseph you've probably never heard of who won the Nobel Peace Prize. His name was Norman Borlaug. I had never heard of him, until I read about his death last month (September 12, 2009) at the age of 95. Borlaug received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his dramatic contributions to the world in agriculture and food production. What did he do? He "rose from his childhood on an Iowa farm to develop a (new) type of wheat that helped feed the world, fostering a movement that is credited with saving up to one billion people from starvation" (Associated Press, September 13, 2009).

According to Josette Sheeran, executive director of the United Nation's World Food Program, Borlaug "saved more lives than any man in human history." The *Wall Street Journal* described him simply as "the man who fed the world" and noted that when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970, the Nobel Committee said that "more than any other single person of this age, he has helped provide bread for a hungry world." Biographer Noel Vietmeyer called him "the mild-mannered maverick who fed a billion people."

In the late 1960s, many experts were warning of imminent global famines in which millions, if not billions, of people would die. The most famous of them, Paul Ehrlich, wrote in his 1968 bestseller *The Population Bomb*: "The battle to feed all of humanity is over." Ehrlich was convinced that in the 1970s and 80s, hundreds of millions of people would starve to death.

In large measure due to the efforts of Norman Borlaug and his team of agricultural scientists, Ehrlich was proved wrong. Borlaug was known as the father of the "Green Revolution" which transformed agriculture through the development of high-yield crop varieties and other innovations, helping to more than double world food production between 1960 and 1990. The result? Perhaps as many as one billion lives saved.

Even if most of us never heard of him, Norman Borlaug was unquestionably “the man for the moment.” And God used him in an extraordinary way.

They didn’t give out the Nobel Peace Prize back in Joseph’s day. But if they did, don’t you think Joseph would have won it? Since it has been several weeks since our last look at Joseph, let’s review some of the facts. Born in Canaan, Joseph was the 11th son of Jacob, the first son born to the love of Jacob’s life, his wife Rachel. He grew up as Jacob’s most favored son, and all his brothers knew it. They resented him so much that when Joseph was 17, after giving serious consideration to just killing him, his brothers decided to sell him to some Midianite traders who were on their way to Egypt, where the Midianites sold him to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials. Though he served Potiphar faithfully, Joseph ended up in jail when Potiphar’s wife accused him – falsely – of trying to assault her. The Bible doesn’t tell us exactly how long Joseph remained in jail except that it was more than two years (see Genesis 41:1).

Joseph’s big break came when Pharaoh had a dream – two dreams – that none of his wise men and counselors could interpret for him. Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer finally remembered how Joseph had explained dreams the cupbearer and Pharaoh’s chief baker (his chef) had had while in prison for offending the king. In both cases, the men’s dreams were fulfilled just as Joseph said. Things turned out for them exactly as Joseph said they would (41:13). When the cupbearer told Pharaoh about Joseph, Pharaoh immediately sent for him.

When he was brought before Pharaoh, not only did Joseph explain his dreams – both of which foretold seven years of great abundance and prosperity to be followed by seven years of terrible famine – he also told Pharaoh what he should do. Beginning in verse 33, he said: “Now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these good years... and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine” (41:33-36).

Pharaoh saw in Joseph the wisdom and discernment needed to govern Egypt during this critical time, and he made Joseph his prime minister. Pharaoh said: “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?” (41:38).

What a meteoric rise – from prison to the palace in a single day! Just 30 years old when he took charge of Egypt, Joseph was God’s man for the moment. God would use him during those years of famine to save hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives. And not just in Egypt. Look at verse 57: “All the countries (of the world) came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world.”

Though still a young man, Joseph was God’s man for the moment. He was the Norman Borlaug of his day. Perhaps it would be better and more accurate to say that Norman Borlaug was the Joseph of the 20th century.

YOU'RE NOT TOO YOUNG OR TOO OLD

Some people would think Joseph was too young to be the man for the moment. Some people would think Moses – 80 years old when the Lord appeared to him in the burning bush and sent him back to Egypt to rescue the people of Israel – was too old to be used by God. In both cases, of course, they were wrong. Whatever your age, don't think that you are too old or too young to be used by God. As Chuck Swindoll points out, "Youth does not preclude usefulness." Nor does gray hair (or no hair). God can and will use whomever He desires to carry out His plans. And He can use us right here in northern Virginia, if we will give Him our whole hearts and not be content with a comfortable Christianity that is unwilling to do hard things for the sake of Christ and His kingdom.

Are you willing to let God use you in ways you may not even imagine today? Are you willing to do something hard in the name and power of Jesus? God can use you whatever your age, just as He used Joseph and Moses. You are never too old or too young to serve God's purposes. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. That is one lesson we can learn from the experience of Joseph.

BE PREPARED

A second lesson is the importance of being prepared. "Be prepared" is not just the Boy Scout motto. It is the Christian's motto, too.

In Matthew 24 (and again in Mark 13 and Luke 12) Jesus Himself talks about the necessity of being ready for His return. He says: "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him" (24:42-44).

When I was growing up I remember seeing a rock on the side of a country road not far from where we lived with a hand-painted message which said: "R U PREPARED?" Did you ever see a sign like that? Jesus said: "Make sure you're prepared." How? By turning your heart to Him in repentance and faith. By trusting Him with your life. By yielding your life to Him and allowing Him to live His life in you. By serving His purposes as long as you live. By living your life to the glory of God. By keeping your eyes on Jesus.

R U prepared for the return of the Lord Jesus? If you're not, or you're not sure, don't leave here today without asking the Lord Jesus with sincere trust in Him to make you ready.

Paul tells Titus to "remind the people... to be ready to do whatever is good" (Titus 3:1). We who belong to Christ through faith have been created in Christ to do good works (Ephesians 2:10) as the natural expression of our faith. Genuine Christian faith drives us to action, to service in the name of Jesus, in both the church and the world.

So the question is: Are you “ready to do whatever is good?” Are you ready to serve God wherever He puts you, or wherever He sends you? Are you ready to serve Him whenever He calls?

Joseph was ready. God had prepared him in those 13 years since his brothers sold him to the Midianites. And when God’s moment came, Joseph was ready. He didn’t miss the moment. He seized it.

The apostle Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:13 to “prepare (our) minds for action.” In *The Message* it says: “Roll up your sleeves (and) put your mind in gear.” Why? Because God does not want any of us to miss the moment of opportunity to serve Him or to do good in a world full of evil. God does not want any of us to miss the moment of opportunity to be instruments of His grace or messengers of the gospel. In fact, in 1 Peter 3:15, the Bible says: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have (in Christ). But do it with gentleness and respect.” Always be prepared. Always. Paul told Timothy to “be prepared (to preach the Word) in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2). Which means there is never a time when you and I should not be prepared to tell others about Jesus and His saving love.

When God’s moment came in his life, all his setbacks and hardships notwithstanding – or maybe because of them, Joseph was ready. He was prepared to take charge of Egypt. And God used him to save the lives of millions of people.

Are you prepared to let God use you, whether it is in a small way or large? Can He count on you? You may be surprised at what He can do with your life.

BE HUMBLE

There is a third lesson I think we can see as we look at Joseph, which is the importance – the blessedness – of humility.

Maybe you know about the preacher who stood before his congregation one Sunday and said: “My sermon today is on humility, and in my opinion, it is one of the finest sermons ever written.” How is that for humility?

God *does* want us to be humble (and most of us have a lot to be humble about), but He does *not* want us to be proud of our humility! That, of course, is a contradiction in terms.

Joseph could have easily fallen victim to pride when Pharaoh put him in charge of Egypt. He could very easily have bought into a puffed up, inflated view of himself. He could easily have thought more highly of himself than he ought to think. And he could have taken advantage of his new position and power to pad his own pockets, perhaps, or to steal the affections and loyalty of the people.

But what did Joseph do? He governed Egypt with great wisdom and skill, looking out for the best interests of the people in times of abundance and famine alike, so that when the years of

famine came, there was food in the land of Egypt (41:54). He was the man for the moment, the “go-to guy,” the man the people turned to in their need, “the master of abundance in the midst of famine” (Swindoll). But he did not let it go to his head. He demonstrated genuine humility, the kind of humility God desires to see in the life of every leader. And every Christian.

The Bible tells us that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Proverbs 3:34; cf. James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5-6). God wants each of us to humble ourselves before Him (James 4:10) and to clothe ourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5). I see that kind of humility in the life of Joseph. And God was with Joseph at every turn, even in his setbacks and suffering, and gave him grace sufficient – which He will do for you and me, too, when we humble ourselves before Him and put on the garments of humility in our relationships with one another.

Listen to the testimony of a rocker named Scott Weiland who did some time in prison for drug possession. Weiland was the lead singer of the rock band called the Stone Temple Pilots. When asked how being in jail impacted his life, he kept repeating the word humility. He said: “It’s not me thinking less of myself. It’s me thinking of myself less. A lot of my ways of thinking have backfired on me. My stubbornness. My pride. My arrogance. The difficult thing is that those defects of character become assets in... the rock & roll world. It’s great being a rock star,” he continued. “But you know what? Being a rock star doesn’t give you the license to view yourself as more important than anybody else” (From *Rolling Stone*, 6-8-00).

That is a valuable lesson for each of us to learn, including those of us who are not and will probably never be rock stars. Joseph understood. Pride and arrogance can backfire on you. God has had it with the proud, but He lavishes His grace on the humble. The humble He crowns with salvation (Psalm 149:4).

Every one of us, regardless of our age or position or standard of living, needs God’s grace. And His salvation, which is a gift of His grace. But only the humble, only those who recognize their need and despair of their own ability to earn it, can receive it.

God gives grace to the humble. And He uses people who humbly depend on Him. God uses people like Joseph and people like you and me, people who simply say to Him: “Here I am, Lord. Use me. Wherever and in whatever way You choose.”

Have you said that to the Lord? Will you say it to Him today in a spirit of humility?

CONCLUSION

You are never too old and never too young to be used by God.

God wants you to be prepared, to be ready and willing at every moment, to serve His purposes.

And real humility makes God smile. He opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Will you, like Joseph, be God's man or woman, God's boy or girl, for this moment, in the place where God has put you?

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.