

Tempered By Trials

Sermon # 3

Joseph: Learning That God Is Always Near

If anything characterized the life of Joseph is was the statement “the Lord was with Joseph.” But it should also be recognized that while it is true that the Lord was always with Joseph” it certainly did not always appear so.

Joseph was raised in what has to be “the” classic dysfunctional family. Joseph’s family was so unbelievable that it could not even be made into a soap opera for television. He had three stepmothers, ten step-brothers and a step-sister all living in the home at the same time. Just try to imagine the turmoil in this family. Jacob, Joseph’s father was polygamist, with several blended families trying to co-exist together. Not surprisingly Jacob’s wives were jealous and insecure. You have heard the old saying, *“If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy!”* Well in Joseph’s home there were four unhappy women.

Joseph is his father’s favorite child and Jacob, his father, is unwise enough to openly display his favoritism. The result is that Joseph’s brothers are jealous and they grow to hate him. His brothers scheme until when given the opportunity, they devise a way to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt and convince their father that he has been killed by wild animals. One minute he is a seventeen-year-old boy with all of his life ahead of him and in the next a slave who’s only prospect is a life of drudgery.

First, God Was With Him In The Pit - Sold in Slavery. (Gen 37:23-28)

“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.”

His brothers threw him into a cistern and would have deserted him to die had they not come up with the great idea of selling him as a slave. Can you imagine what Joseph must have felt in that pit? Here he was literally in the middle of nowhere with no help. Was his life going to end here, like this? He must have tried to climb the sheer sides of the cistern only find that it was impossible. There was no way out! And what was worse was no one cared. The worse thing about being in trouble as Joseph was, is to find out that no one cares! According to (42:21)

recounted some 22 years later the brothers heard him pleading for his life and would not listen. "Then they said to one another, "We *are* truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear..."

Would you have given up? We will find that when faced with adverse circumstances that we are tempted to do just that.

Things are not always as they seem on the surface. Joseph could have looked at the walls of the pit and come to the conclusion that his life was over. The God he had trusted and who had tried to live for had proven untrustworthy. The dreams of the future were overwhelmed with the nightmare of the present. But God reminds us to look beyond the outward circumstances.

The temptation is when trials come in our lives to cry out, "Why me?" But we have no right do so because we never asked God, "Why me?" when we were in the midst of blessing.

Joseph learned something significant during this time of adversity. Joseph learned that God cared and He was in control. In Acts 7:9 we find out, "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with Him" Notice that it says "*but God was with him.*" You see we must always remember that God is in control even when it may not seem like it. Even when we find ourselves thrown in the pit by life, God is still there. As the writer of Hebrews (13:5-6) has said, "...For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."(6) So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear What can man do to me?" Even when things look bleak we have the Lord's promise that he will be with us. No matter what the circumstance may look like God is still in control and still working out his plan. The plan for the believer's life is outlined in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Now notice with me that it does not say that all things are good, instead it says that, "all things work together for good." He goes on in verse 29 of that same chapter to further elaborate what that plan is when he says we are, "... to be conformed to the image of His Son." God hammers out the characteristics He desires in our lives on the anvil of adversity.

God Not Only Was With Him In the Pit but

Secondly, God was with him in Palace – A Slave in Potiphar's House. (Gen 39:1-3)

"Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there. (2) The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. (3) And his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all he did to prosper in his hand."

In Egypt Joseph is bought by a man named Potiphar. Years have passed since Joseph has been sold into slavery and he has worked his way into a position of responsibility as head of

Potiphar's household. Here we read that "the Lord was with Joseph" and "gave him success in everything he did" (vv. 2-3, 5).

In the course of time, Potiphar's wife decides that she wants a sexual relationship with Joseph and began to pursue him (39:7). Ultimately the matter comes to a head one day when she grabbed Joseph and demanded that he sleep with her (39:12). When Joseph refuses her and flees from her presence leaving his cloak in her hand she became angry. She decided to protect herself should this get to her husband and at the same time get revenge on Joseph. She began to scream, she screamed that Joseph had assaulted her, after all she had his cloak in her hand (39:12).

God was not only with him in the Palace but ...

Third, God was with Him in the Prison – A Prisoner in Pharaoh's Prison. (39:19-20)

"So it was, when his master heard the words which his wife spoke to him, saying, "Your servant did to me after this manner," that his anger was aroused. (20) Then Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were confined. And he was there in the prison"

When her husband learned of his wife's accusations, he became angry and had Joseph thrown into prison.

Prison comes in different forms for different people. We can be imprisoned by our circumstances, trapped in situations that we are powerless to change. You can be imprisoned by the expectations of others. You may be imprisoned by guilt. Many of us are walking around with a load of guilt, from things that may have happened years before. Others may have forgiven us but we have not forgiven ourselves. Regardless of what "prison experience" we may find ourselves facing, Joseph can provide us with insights for coping.

One of the things that we must keep in mind as we examine Joseph's life is that *God is not as much interested in our circumstances as he is of our response to our circumstances.*

Now that Joseph is in prison we learn that although Joseph did not deserve to be in prison he responded to it beautifully. What is important was the way in which his character grew during his imprisonment. In similar circumstances another man might have become harsh, bitter or withdrawn. Not Joseph. Prison actually strengthened Joseph's character.

Psalm 105:18 refers to Joseph's imprisonment, "They hurt his feet with fetters, He was laid in irons." The iron collar around his neck and chain around his ankles scrapped his skin and must have made it difficult to even sleep. An interesting alternate translation of this verse says, "His soul entered into iron." Turning that around rendering it reads, "Iron entered into his soul." This would seem to indicate that this was more than a physical impairment this was a time of maturing spiritually.

C.S. Lewis in his book "The Problem of Pain" says, "*God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.*" We have two choices, we can become bitter and disillusioned or we can use our difficulties as a means of displaying our hope and trust in God.

Verse twenty-one reads, "But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. (39:21)"

In this verse read although the circumstances have changed this truth remains the same. Where is God when Joseph is thrown in the dungeon? Does His silence mean He's absence? We're not left to wonder. According to verse twenty-three, "The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper." The Lord was with Joseph in the palace of Potiphar and when Joseph went to prison, the Lord went there too. The only thing that severs us from God is sin.

False accusations put Joseph in prison, but it was the Lord who stayed near him and nurtured his soul while he was there. When a dungeon experience comes, the quickest and easiest response is to feel that God has forgotten us. When fear threatens to over-whelm us we need to stop and remember that the Lord is still with us. No promise of scripture is more comforting than "I will never leave you nor will I ever forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5). In spite of our feeling to the contrary God uses painful experiences to mature us. And spiritual maturity is learning to walk by faith regardless of present circumstances.

One of the tragedies of our day is that some Christians are teaching that if a Christian merely has enough faith, they will never suffer, for they say that the death of Christ provides deliverance from all adversity and affliction. Had Joseph believed that if he only had enough faith he could instantly be deliver from his trouble his faith would have been devastated by the fact that his troubles did not go away. The truth is that God is not obligated to make us wealthy, or well liked or free of trouble. God has promised to be with those who belong to him wherever they find themselves and to bring them to maturity, but he does not promise to pamper us or to jump through our hoops.

While he was in prison two of the kings chief officials, the kings cupbearer and the king's baker, were also thrown into prison for displeasing the king. The two men both had dreams and were distressed as to there meaning. Joseph volunteered to interpret their dreams. The cupbearer was to be restored to his former position and the baker was to be hanged. When Joseph interpreted the cupbearer dream (40:14), he had asked the Pharaohs cupbearer for a favor, "But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house."

But as is the case so often in life things don't work out like we as we would wish. In Genesis 40:23 we read, "Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him."

And it is a full two full years before he again remembers Joseph. In Genesis 41:1 we read, "Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream; and behold, he stood by the river." Those two full years as far as we know were neither exciting nor eventful. They represented a long, dull, monotonous grind, month after month, of the same old prison walls. Sometimes we just seem to just wait, and wait, and wait.

The butler did not remember him but God had not forgotten him. In fact God had used his circumstances to put Joseph in the place to interpret Pharaoh's dream.

The king's dream deeply "troubled" him. Pharaoh therefore consulted with the wisest men of Egypt but no one could interpret his dreams. Then in the middle of all the panic in the palace the cupbearer suddenly remember his prison experiences and told the king of the young captive Hebrew. He said,(41:9-13), "Then the chief butler spoke to Pharaoh, saying: "I remember my faults this day. (10) When Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, both me and the chief baker, (11) we each had a dream in one night, he and I. Each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream. (12) Now there was a young Hebrew man with us there, a servant of the captain of the guard. And we told him, and he interpreted our dreams for us; to each man he interpreted according to his own dream. (13) And it came to pass, just as he interpreted for us, so it happened. He restored me to my office, and he hanged him. (14) Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him quickly out of the dungeon; and he shaved, changed his clothing, and came to Pharaoh."

Joseph was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon, cleaned up and brought into the Pharaoh's presence. The king immediately told him of his distressing dreams and how he had heard that Joseph could interpret them. Pharaoh then recounts his dreams to Joseph (vv. 17-24). Pharaoh says that he has consulted with the wisest men of the realm but none could interpret the dreams (v. 24). Joseph not only interpreted the dreams he went on to give wise discernment on how to deal with the coming famine (vv. 33- 36).

Genesis 41:37-38 tells us, "So the advice was good in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of all his servants. (38) And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find *such a one* as this, a man in whom *is* the Spirit of God?" The wisdom of his words was so obvious that not only the Pharaoh but his pagan advisors as well could not resist the truth of his words.

The end result is seen in Genesis 41:39-40, "Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. (40) You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you."(41) And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt."

Perhaps to the casual observer that Joseph's life is nothing more than some very fortuitous events. But Moses allows us to see that God has been at work the whole time, step by step, working out his own infinite plans. Joseph probably had little or no idea of what God

was doing in his life but he did understand the God had a plan bigger than Joseph himself. It was more than just elevating and rewarding Joseph's faithful-ness, it was all a part of a great plan and all of Joseph's circumstances flowed out of that plan. Each circumstance in Joseph's life advanced that plan. Joseph excelled because he accepted that God had a plan for his life, and that the circumstances of his life flowed from that plan, and he gave himself to the business of using whatever his circumstances were to honor and glorify God.

Conclusion

There was one great constant in his life and we see it shining through in each situation that Joseph encounters. What was this abiding constant in Joseph's life? It was God. In every situation encountered by Joseph we see him give priority to God in his life. Joseph had hope beyond mere earthly hope. His faith was in God, not in Potiphar, not in the cupbearer, not even in the king of Egypt. When men failed him, he knew that God was still with him, even in prison. The forgetfulness of man should cause us to reflect upon the faithfulness of God. The prophet Isaiah (44:21) reveals that God has promised, "... you will not be forgotten by Me!" This is what enabled Joseph to endure in the midst of deep sorrow and distress and to never waver from his belief that *"the Lord was always with him."*