

Joseph: the Suffering Servant

My van smells like tortilla soup right now and I love it.

We were actually making four crockpots worth of soup during last Wednesday's Life Group meeting to bless teachers over at Chandler Elementary before their Parent-Teacher conferences. As we were delivering them, one of the lids wasn't quite on tight enough, so it spilled out some into the back of our van. Now my van smells like a mixture of tortilla soup and a faint hint of Lysol that was just no match for it.

And I love it.

Some things happen and stick to us for a long time, and some of those things can be really unpleasant... But if we live life with the Lord we can find that even unpleasant things can bring new joy because of the meaning found in the experience. Every time I smell that soup, instead of being annoyed I just remember the blessing we received getting to support those teachers.

We're continuing on in our series in Genesis this morning. We've spent the last few months looking at major figures within this book of our origins, and we are spending our last few weeks on the figure of Joseph - a man who has all sorts of unpleasant things happen to him, yet he somehow finds blessing in all of it. Jeff Spicher got us started last week while I was away for a wedding in Kentucky. I hear it was both edifying AND lengthy - both of which are appropriate, since Joseph's narrative is both one of the most inspiring and the longest that we find in Genesis.

Last week focused on Joseph the Dreamer - a favored son who received a fancy robe along with some very jealous brothers. And Jeff foreshadowed how although Joseph would go through some incredibly low periods, God redeemed his potential in the end.

But before we get to that end, things get worse. Would you turn with me now to Genesis 39:

READING

Genesis 39:¹ Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.

² The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, ⁴ Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. ⁵ From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. ⁶ So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

⁸ But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

¹¹ One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹² She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

¹³ When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, ¹⁴ she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. ¹⁵ When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁶ She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷ Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁹ When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. ²⁰ Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, ²¹ the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. ²² So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. ²³ The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Let's Pray.

President Trump made a comment recently that was alarming to some, but viewed as tone deaf by many others. In response to the Kavanaugh hearings and accusations of sexual assault, Trump made the comment:

"It is a very scary time for young men in America, where you can be guilty of something you may not be guilty of."

Which makes sense - it IS scary to think that someone could be considered guilty when they may in fact be completely innocent. That's the whole reason we traditionally operate with an innocent until proven guilty mentality.

The comment was viewed as tone deaf by many - particularly by women, on one hand, who live with a constant awareness of whether and how they might need to protect themselves from unwanted advances from men. And on another hand, the comment was viewed with some mild shock by the black community, because in the lived reality for many people of color in this country - this fear of false accusation is nothing new.

You may have heard the statistic before that young black men are incarcerated at a rate FIVE times that of young white men. But perhaps even more alarming is the fact that although black people represent only 13% of the population, they represent 47% of exonerations in the registry.

That means that an INNOCENT black man is SEVEN times more likely to be convicted of murder than a white man - THREE and a HALF times more likely to be convicted of sexual assault.

What does any of that have to do with Joseph?

I only mention that because every time I've brought up this story to someone this week, the first thing I've heard is: "Wow, well if that doesn't speak to current events, I don't know what does!" - The FIRST thing that pops up for folks is this whole Kavanaugh/Ford thing.

Joseph is BOTH a victim of sexual assault AND false accusation of sexual assault.

But Joseph has far less in common with Christine Blasey Ford or Brett Kavanaugh than he does with someone like Emmett Till, a 14 year old African American from Chicago who in 1955 was murdered after ALLEGEDLY whistling at a white woman in a grocery store in Mississippi - whose murderers, by the way, got away scott free.

- Like Emmett, Joseph was an outsider - a minority in a foreign land hostile to his people.
 - ◆ Even prior to the slavery we'll see later for the Hebrews in Egypt, those native to Egypt had a pretty strong prejudice against Asiatic peoples like the Hebrews and Canaanites.
 - ◆ We even see it flaring up in Potiphar's wife's speech to the other servants: "Look, this HEBREW has come to *make sport of US.*" She's upset that he rejected her, so she stokes the prejudice that already exists there to her advantage. He's already come in and taken the job of head servant, now he's trying to take whatever else he wants.
- Joseph had zero ability to speak out for himself. There was no hearing, no investigation. Only punishment.

What's interesting here, though, is not that Joseph was condemned so easily, but that he wasn't killed on the spot. Potiphar was one of Pharaoh's officials, and Joseph was a foreign slave - there no real rules for fair treatment in this scenario, and the usual response would have been fatal. The fact that Potiphar had him imprisoned rather than executed shows that he likely knew even

then that Joseph was innocent - but his hands were tied because he had to honor his wife's word over that of a servant.

It was a very scary time for Joseph indeed, that he could be found guilty for something that he was not only NOT GUILTY of, but of which he was actually the victim.

So what are we to make of this text? What does Joseph's life tell us about faith in the midst of pain, suffering, unjust punishment, and betrayal?

Recently I was talking with a friend who has gone through a lot of pain in his life, mostly because of what others have done to him. He was a victim of physical and sexual abuse from a young age - and has had a string of relationships all end with heartache and being taken advantage of. He said he was just hanging on by a thread when it came to his faith.

His questions were real and legitimate: "How am I supposed to have faith when everyone keeps failing me? Why would God allow people to do this much wrong to me? If He was actually real and all powerful, couldn't God just snap His fingers and stop these awful things from happening?"

I was tempted to go into a long theological conversation about the meaning of suffering, but the truth is nothing I could have said would have made a real difference. His problem wasn't a theological issue - it was an experiential issue.

Joseph could have asked those very same questions.

To make a massive understatement: Joseph had a hard life.

It started out kinda cushy with favoritism from his dad - but that ends up making his brothers so jealous that they attack him, throw him in a pit, and just short of leaving him for dead - they decide to sell him into slavery.

Now we see that even as things briefly take a turn for the better in Potiphar's house, he's then sexually assaulted and thrown into prison for the very crime that was done to him.

Joseph will later look back and see how all along God used these trials for good.

1. If he hadn't been sold into slavery by his brothers - he'd never have made it to Egypt.
2. If he'd not been thrown into prison, he'd not later have the opportunity to interpret a cupbearer's dream and in turn be brought before pharaoh to interpret his troubling dreams.
3. And if it wasn't for that event, Joseph wouldn't have been exalted to Pharaoh's right hand and given the ability to save his whole family from the effects of a famine.

That's what enables Joseph to utter his famous line to his brothers in Egypt: "What you intended for evil, God intended for good."

Of course: Hindsight is 20/20.

Joseph didn't know any of that at the time. All that he had to work with was his current circumstances. And yet he had faith.

So here is what I want us to reflect upon this morning: What does faith look like we suffer despite doing good...or even because we do good? How are we supposed to respond?

I. TRUST THAT GOD IS AT WORK

The first thing that we can draw from Joseph's example is that we ought to always look for where God is moving and Trust that He is at work for your good.

Our text this morning goes out of the way to note twice just how much Joseph prospered even in lowly situations because God was with Him through it all.

- He moves up quickly through the ranks as a servant in Potiphar's household because God is with him in everything he does.
- Later, even in prison, he gets put in charge of all the affairs there by the prison warden, because God is with him in everything he does.

This may seem like small comfort when thinking about living as a slave or a prisoner, but Joseph seems to make the best of it.

Joseph's story reinforces for us that even while God may not prevent every bad situation from happening, He will be with us through it all - and God can use the unexpected to bring good in a bad situation.

II. PRACTICE GRATITUDE AND WORSHIP

That leads to a second takeaway: Practice Gratitude and Worship

I once heard a story about two sisters in a concentration camp in WWII Germany - Corrie and Betsie ten Boom. They were hauled away after being discovered hiding Jewish neighbors and friends.

Not long into their imprisonment, they were disgusted to find that their barracks were infested with fleas. Corrie began to complain, but Betsie insisted that they instead give thanks, quoting 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." With some persuasion, Corrie finally joined her sister in thanking God for the fleas.

Several months later, the two sisters expressed their surprise that the camp guards had never come back to their barracks to disrupt or prevent the evening Bible studies they held for their fellow prisoners. It was then that Corrie realized that the very fleas which she had so despised had actually been a God-sent protection from the cruel guards.

There are situations which seem to obviously warrant anxiety, despair, or even a lack of faith. It's completely justifiable to have that sort of emotional response. And I firmly believe that God grieves with us when we go through that kind of pain.

The biblical instruction to practice gratitude isn't about giving lip-service to God when we don't really mean it just to appease His ego. God deserves our worship, but God is not dependent upon it. The practice of gratitude is FOR YOU.

Pessimism and despair is a poison for the soul. But gratitude is a well-spring of life.

It never says explicitly in our text that Joseph practiced gratitude or thanked the Lord, but I can't imagine a scenario where he gave himself up to despair and accomplished all that he did.

Recognizing God's presence and practicing gratitude can give us the emotional and spiritual strength to fight off despair... and it can help to draw us to deeper communion with Christ in the midst of our struggle.

Joseph's life story is inspiring in it's own right, but it's even moreso when you realize how God uses him to foreshadow Jesus.

- Favored son, rejected by his own people, to the grief of their father
- Often falsely accused and rejected despite his stellar character
- Humbled but then exalted to right hand of pharaoh/then Father
- Works for the good of all people.
- Joseph provides for grain that feeds many in famine, Jesus is bread of life.
- Extends grace to reconcile with those that intended harm.

In this way, not only was Joseph honored by Egypt and by all those in his family who had turned their backs on him. He's given a special honor of prefiguring Christ's salvation for all people.

This is what Jesus has in mind in the Sermon on the Mount, when he says,

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus says when we experience hardship and persecution on account of the Gospel, we ought to rejoice - because we're in good company. It's the same sort of thing that happened to Joseph, the Prophets, and ultimately to Jesus.

HARDSHIP ISN'T AN OCCASION FOR DESPAIR OR DEFENSE; IT'S AN OCCASION FOR WORSHIP.

But that doesn't answer all our questions: Namely, how are we supposed to respond to others, especially those who wrong us?

III. USE TRIAL AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR WITNESS (relevant verses from passage).

The answer that scripture gives is simple, but not easy:

“Matt 5:44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

Building off of Jesus' teaching, the Apostle Peter says this in the 3rd chapter of his 1st letter:

¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

The biblical teaching is clear: WHEN YOU SUFFER FOR DOING GOOD, LET YOUR RESPONSE BE A WITNESS.

Our natural response to injustice against us is to seek retaliation, vengeance, and a righting of the wrong that was done to us.

How many of you get into an argument and spend hours afterward thinking about what you wish you would've said that would have put them in their place?

Scripture reminds us that true peace and justice is not found by finding victory over others but by restoring what is broken into wholeness.

I remember an outreach event I was on once on a mission trip in Las Vegas. My friend and I offered to pray for a man, to which he responded by saying we could pray he'd get some cigarettes and then proceeded to curse us out and call us all sorts of demeaning things about us.

We found a way to politely exit the conversation and found a place to pray and try and recover our bearings after the encounter. After the initial shock and bitter feelings wore off, I realized we never DID actually pray for his request. Now, I wouldn't normally pray for something that would slowly kill someone. But I felt the Holy Spirit nudging me and saying, “if this is the ONE thing standing in between this man knowing that there is a God who cares for him, then it's worth pursuing.”

So my friend went up to another lady whom she noticed was smoking and asked for a cigarette.

But then we couldn't find the guy again, so my friend Sam decides to just put it behind his ear in case we run into the man. We end up stopping to speak to another guy who is trying to pass out

his mixed tape to anyone passing on the sidewalk. Wouldn't you know it, before long this guy is breaking down saying he wants to reconnect with the Lord. And funny enough, he says, "Y'know, I wasn't even going to talk to you guys at first, but then I saw the cigarette in his ear and figured you must be cool."

Before the end of the outreach, we DID find the original guy and were able to give him the cigarette and tell him to a stunned silent response that God loves him and wants the best for him.

We COULD HAVE been offended and jaded by the experience. We COULD HAVE thought - just goes to show there are certain people you shouldn't even bother with. But by shaking off the offense and choosing the love the way God loves us, we were able to bless both this man and others that we encountered.

There is brokenness all around us. And some of it is bound to touch your life, no matter how righteously you're living. Sometimes particularly BECAUSE OF how how righteously you're living. Satan wants to bring all spiritual forces to bear to harm those who seek to do God's will.

Even practically, those who revel in their brokenness will be made jealous and convicted by a life lived with God. It shines a light on what they know to be wrong, so they'll try to bring you down. They'll act out in violence like Joseph's brothers. Or they'll covet intimacy with you inappropriately like Potiphar's wife and lash out in anger when it doesn't go their way.

But you don't have to worry about correcting their behavior. Judgment and Vengeance is in God's hands. You just need to worry about you.

Seek God's face, worship Jesus, and pray for those who would bring you harm. And maybe God will use your small steps of humility and faithfulness to change the world.

CONCLUSION

There's a poem that was said to have been found scribbled on the wall in Mother Theresa's home for children in Calcutta, India, and are widely attributed to her:

- People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. **Forgive them anyway.**
- If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. **Be kind anyway.**
- If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. **Succeed anyway.**
- If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. **Be honest and sincere anyway.**
- What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. **Create anyway.**
- If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. **Be happy anyway.**
- The good you do today, will often be forgotten. **Do good anyway.**
- Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. **Give your best anyway.**
- In the final analysis, it is between you and God. **It was never between you and them anyway.**

May that be our declaration this morning. Let's pray.