

Lessons from Joseph: Intended for Evil, Used for Good Sunday, 10/11/20

We started this series with a story about an old donkey at the bottom of a well.

Remember that one? We're ending it with a story of an old runaway horse that set into motion a series of unexpected events in the life of a farmer and his son. The ups and downs of the farmer's fortunes are reminiscent of the timeline of Joseph's story, and perhaps your own life as well. When something unexpected happens, just how much can we really know about what that means for tomorrow? None of us are the masters of our circumstances, but all of us can take comfort in God's presence and plan for redeeming our days.

On our journey with Joseph over the last month, we've learned some valuable lessons in how we can be more resilient in the face of troubles. There is some trouble that we can just shake off like the old donkey at the bottom of the well, trusting in God, and taking a step forward. For all trouble, we need to be reminded of God's good character and God's history of faithful love and blessing, trusting that God will redeem our pain, making us like the coffee beans boiled in water, bringing blessing to those we share our journey with. And in every circumstance, we need to keep the big picture in mind, not letting the events of each day cloud what we know is God's plan to redeem creation and the significant part that each of our lives has to play in it. Today, we'll take one more look at Joseph's life, and the lives of his brothers, and ask God to strengthen us for the tribulations that every one of us is experiencing in these days.

The part of Joseph's story we're reading today really causes my eyebrow to crease, because it doesn't play out the way I want it to. Joseph is the hero among the twelve brothers, right, and so he's supposed to do heroic things, isn't he? And so when Joseph first recognized his brothers, I really wanted to skip ahead to chapter 45 and get to the happy reunion. Instead, we get three chapters of complicated deception and drama, set about not by Joseph's brothers this time, but by Joseph himself. What's up with that?

Joseph's deceptions included pretending not to recognize them, not letting on that he spoke their language, secretly returning the brothers' money in the tops of their grain sacks- not once, but twice- and then framing his younger brother, Benjamin, as a thief by planting his silver cup in his grain sack. Why is Joseph suddenly such a drama llama instead of a forthright man of God? If you did your homework reading for today, perhaps you asked

yourself the very same question.

To understand the rest of Joseph's story, you have to go back and recall the first part of it, because his encounter with his brothers in Egypt forced all of the brothers to go back and revisit the events of years earlier when they were still a family. Joseph must have been wondering so many things: Could he forgive and trust these brothers who intended to kill him and then sold him into slavery? Were his parents and his younger brother still alive? What purpose might God have in bringing his family to Egypt? And the ten stepbrothers, not recognizing Joseph, were nevertheless caught up in an increasingly complicated trap of Joseph's devising. Forced by his questioning to recall their evil treatment of him, they wondered if there was any way out of what they became convinced was God's punishment for their sin.

In many ways, the ordeal that Joseph put his stepbrothers through is reminiscent of the downs and ups that Joseph himself had travelled in Egypt, including being falsely imprisoned and the threat of being made into slaves. Their ordeal is also not that different than the story we just heard: *Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?* The brothers found the grain they needed for their families to survive. Was that good luck? Bad luck? Who knows? But as a result, they were forced to leave Simeon behind as a hostage to ensure their return to Egypt. Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows? Joseph sold them more grain and released Simeon so they could all return to Canaan with Benjamin. Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows? After leaving with their grain, they were immediately detained, and Joseph's silver cup was found in Benjamin's sack. You get the idea. There are more ups and downs in these chapters than in a typical daytime soap opera. Was it good luck? Bad luck? Or something else entirely?

It wasn't luck that was on the mind of Joseph's brothers, but rather guilt. The reminder of their treatment of Joseph weighed heavily on them, and they assumed they were enduring divine judgment, with each unexpected reversal of fortune underscoring their sin. And perhaps they were being punished: by God, by Joseph, or by both.

Joseph certainly knew that luck had nothing to do with it, and upon recognizing his brothers, he immediately recalled the two dreams he had when he was a child. Do you remember them? In the first dream, he saw his brothers as bundles of grain bowing to him, a

dream that would seemed to have come true on the occasion of this first meeting with his stepbrothers, except that his full brother, Benjamin, was missing. In the second dream, it his mother and father, as the moon and the sun, as well as all his eleven brothers, as stars, that bowed low before him. He must have been aware that the dreams hadn't been fully fulfilled yet. Were his elaborate schemes more than revenge, and perhaps his way of helping God's plan forward? The answer to that question comes by reading the rest of the story. I'm continuing now in Genesis 45, reading the first 15 verses in the New Living Translation.

{Read Genesis 45:1-15 NLT}

Can you imagine what Joseph's brothers must have been expecting at the moment Joseph revealed his identity to them? Didn't their hearts just drop to the bottom of their chests? Weren't they probably expecting to be imprisoned, enslaved, or even put to death? They might even have seen that as a just punishment for themselves. Surely they couldn't yet see what Joseph had come to learn, that God's will is greater than the bitter betrayals and failings of people. And so it wasn't punishment, but blessing they received instead!

Joseph's attitude in this situation is quite remarkable, isn't it? I might have still been moping about in an Egyptian prison cell. But somehow, Joseph was able to take his eyes off of his own plight and see God's plan for delivering his family from the famine. The facts were the same for Joseph and his brothers, but where his brothers saw divine judgment, Joseph saw divine blessing. That's a pretty sobering contrast, isn't it?

Which of those perspectives would you be most likely to take? When things don't go your way, are you more likely to call it bad luck, God's disregard for your well-being, or perhaps even God's punishment of your sin? Or maybe you're more likely to get stuck in anger, resentment, and bitterness, forever holding a grudge against those who have done you wrong? Nobody really enjoys living like that, but so often that's where we find ourselves.

God offers us the alternative of Joseph, who understood his suffering as the birth pains of something better, delighting in the surprise of God's deliverance. I want to be more like Joseph, confident that God is at work to bring good out of evil, even when I can't see or understand how and when that's going to happen.

I'd like you to think of a recent disappointment in your life. It might have something to do with the way COVID-19 has changed your life. It might be a health issue that you or a

loved one is enduring. It might be a person that has let you down or done you wrong. God gave us the capacity to dream and hope, and that means that inevitably we'll also face disappointments in life.

What do we usually do with those disappointments? Sometimes we toss and turn at night, letting worry or anger eat us alive from the inside-out. Sometimes we complain to those we love, which helps to unburden us but leaves our loved ones carrying the weight that we temporarily shed. Sometimes we punish ourselves, telling ourselves that we deserve whatever harsh treatment we've received. Sometimes we even try to get even, although I think we all understand that crossing that particular line does violence to the most basic commandment of Jesus that we love one another. Isn't there a better way?

The witness of Joseph is that we can choose our own response to the events of our life: we can choose bitterness or forgiveness; resignation or hope; self-centeredness or God-centeredness; small picture or big picture. We don't have to be glad when things don't go our way, and there's nothing wrong with grief and sorrow. But it's our trust and faith in God's presence and work in the world that ultimately sustains us. Joseph's story makes it clear that when we frame reality from God's perspective, everything changes. May we all have the courage to see the events of these days through the eyes of God, and through the eyes of faith. Amen.

Please take a minute now to reflect on what Joseph's example can teach you today. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



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