

Falsely Imprisoned Sunday, 9/27/20

So how do you respond to adversity? Are you like a carrot boiled in water that loses its strength and becomes all mushy? Are you like a boiled egg that loses its soft heart and becomes inflexible? Or are you more like the coffee beans, making the most of the situation to bring about as much good as possible? I think we'd all like to be more like the coffee beans, and I've seen so many of you show that kind of grace under pressure. But even the best of us are imperfect people, and there do come times when the pressure is too much, and we lose our strength, our soft hearts, or both. And that's why we need to be walking as close to Jesus as possible before the hard times hit, relying on God's strength and love when our own strength and love falls short.

Last week we read about the devastation that Joseph faced when he was betrayed by his brothers, actually thrown into a dry well, and then sold into slavery in a foreign land. That's the kind of story you wouldn't expect to have a happy ending. And indeed, it really doesn't have the kind of happy ending that we're used to seeing in Disney movies. If you fast-forward the story, you'll find Joseph's descendants in Egyptian bondage for 400 years. But Joseph's story really doesn't have an ending. The story is still playing out today in our lives. Instead of Disney ending, we get something even better: a clear testimony of God's redeeming love. Instead of allowing himself to become weak or calloused, Joseph used God's gifts to bless those he lived and worked with, enhancing his days in the midst of hardship rather than giving himself up to despair. These days we might say that Joseph became a "cool drink of water" to all who knew him, but let's stick with the earlier metaphor and say that Joseph was like some perfectly roasted coffee beans, bringing a cup of aromatic coffee out of the hot water of hardship.

But alas for Joseph, just as last week Joseph went from the frying pan of the dry well into the fire of slavery, as we continue reading in Genesis 39, we'll see that it wasn't long before that difficult situation became worse.

{[Read Genesis 39:6b-20 NLT](#)}

Ouch. As if slavery wasn't bad enough! Imagine being an imprisoned slave, falsely accused of inappropriate behavior with your master's wife! For a few brief paragraphs, things seemed to be really looking up for Joseph. But now, it's really hard to see anything

good coming out of this for poor Joseph.

Let's take a closer look at what happened and see what we can learn about being resilient in the face of temptation and false accusation. Notice that Joseph said "no" to what might very well have been a tempting situation. How is it he was able to do so, where so many others might have failed the test?

Joseph cites the best two reasons possible for saying no: It wouldn't be just to his relationship with Potiphar, and it wouldn't be just to his relationship with God. Thinking about this scene through a modern lens, you might be tempted to offer all kinds of reasons it would have been a bad idea for Joseph to sleep with Potiphar's wife, like the complicated nature of workplace relationships, or the possibility for abuse in a relationship between people with unequal power. But Joseph doesn't go for those kind of rationalizations, but instead speaks right to the heart of the matter. Long before the Shema was given to Israel, and even longer before Jesus gave the two great commandments, they're on full display in Joseph's compass for living: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Joseph was firmly anchored in what he believed, and while he was flexible enough to adapt to his new life in Egypt, he was strong enough in his faith to know when compromise would hurt him and those around him.

One of the most famous bridge accidents in US History happened in Tacoma, Washington in 1940. Some of you have seen black and white film of the accident, possibly in a high-school or college physics class. This suspension bridge was used for less than two months before its dramatic demise. Years earlier, while still under construction, workers gave the bridge the nickname of "Galloping Gertie" because of its tendency to move up and down during windy conditions.¹ The bridge had been built in record time with less steel and a dramatically lower cost than usual. Unfortunately, on the fateful day of July 1, 1940, the winds across Puget Sound caused the bridge to twist and buckle itself to destruction. You can see in the photograph how the bridge deck where the man standing is both sunken and badly torqued. Eventually the bridge deck collapsed into the waters of Puget Sound.

Joseph faced his own "high wind" situation with Potiphar's wife and had to decide

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacoma_Narrows_Bridge_\(1940\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacoma_Narrows_Bridge_(1940))

whether he would twist with the wind, “going with the flow,” or remain firm, true to his convictions. Either course seemed to risk destruction: consort with his master’s wife or incur her wrath, someone with an infinitely higher amount of power and status than himself. And he had to make that choice over and over again, as she persisted in her advances, and the wind buffeting Joseph became stronger and stronger.

Have you ever faced a similar dilemma? Tempted to take an action you know is wrong, and at the same time fearful of the consequences of not acting? That’s probably not the time to begin to work on building up your moral fiber. We prepare the foundations of our character in the days, weeks, and years leading up to those moments, either planting God’s Word in our hearts and practicing them diligently, or not. Moments will inevitably come when we’re all tempted, and that’s when the fruit of our discipleship is revealed.

Joseph passed the test of character, but his courageous faith cost him dearly, and he wound up in prison, falsely accused. Everybody knows what that’s like to some degree, right? But few of us are imprisoned as a result, and seldom if ever are our very lives on the line. When we imagine being falsely accused, it’s more likely to involve an accusation of gossip or infidelity. For Joseph and so many people of color today, the threat was existential.

In this country, most of us start out with an automatic advantage of skin color. According to the National Registry of Exonerations², black people are seven times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of murder than white people in the United States and twelve times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of drug possession. Of those who are eventually exonerated of their crimes, black people spend an average of three years longer incarcerated than white people. Joseph was a foreign slave, and his odds in prison were as bleak as they could be.

So how did Joseph fare in the hot water of prison? Was he more like the carrots, the egg, or the coffee beans? Let’s find out as we finish that part of the story. I’m picking up in verse 21. **{Read Genesis 39:21-23}**

This plot should be starting to sound familiar. Calamity falls on Joseph, Joseph stays faithful to God, and God blesses Joseph and those around him. Rinse and repeat. Notice that

² <http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/Race-and-Wrongful-Convictions.aspx>

the Scriptures repeatedly say that God blessed Joseph, even though God didn't deliver Joseph from his brothers, from slavery, or prison- at least not yet. To use the suspension bridge analogy, the winds buffeting Joseph had not gotten any more gentle. Isn't that the kind of Sunday School ending we'd rather read, for Joseph and for ourselves? Something like, "God blessed Joseph and showed Potiphar it was all a mistake." But that's not what happened. Instead of a dramatic rescue, we get the steady as you go, faithful love and blessing of God. It's not always so flashy, but it is ultimately dependable.

I suspect Joseph knew that about God's character, his faithful love and blessing, which was perhaps Joseph's most valuable source of resilience. Joseph is never recorded crying out to God for deliverance. Instead, he trusted that God would redeem his situation, and he became like the coffee beans boiled in water, bringing blessing to the prison warden.

Please understand me, I'm not saying it's wrong or unfaithful to cry out for God's deliverance. Jesus himself did that. What I am saying is that sometimes God's plans of redemption require that we walk through the fire instead of around it. Is that you today? Do you feel like you're walking through tribulation, wondering where God is? I believe God is right there with you, loving you and offering you blessings. You might be hurting so much that you can't see that right now, but just like Joseph, God has not abandoned you.

I hope you're curious to what happens next, because Joseph's trials of resilience aren't over yet! Your homework for next week is to read Genesis 40 and 41 to prepare for worship next Sunday. If you haven't been reading along, it's not too late to go back and pick up with the beginning of the story in Genesis 37.

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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