

Message for Week 2: Drop the Distractions

Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Joseph in Slavery and Prison

Our story from last week ended with Joseph being sold as a slave. Betrayed by his brothers, he was alone, trapped in a strange land. He couldn't understand anyone around him, and they couldn't understand him. He was forced to labor for someone else's dream, to increase someone else's wealth and power, while he suffered the grief and loss of betrayal and banishment from his home and family.

In this time of adversity Joseph shows his true character. He doesn't have the freedom to pursue his dreams, but still he does his work honestly, faithfully and with complete integrity. We find out that God is with Joseph, even in this unfortunate situation, and God makes everything prosper that Joseph puts his hand to in the service of his master. Joseph's master Potiphar recognizes the good work of Joseph, and puts him in charge of his whole estate, not even checking up on him to see what he does because he trusts Joseph completely.

Potiphar's wife also admires Joseph. Is it because he's handsome? Is it his strength, his wisdom, his character? Is it the mystery of a stranger with an unknown past and a haunted but compassionate look in his eyes? Is it because she feels oppressed by her husband and sees in Joseph a companion in suffering?

We will probably never know what caught the eye of Potiphar's wife, or whether Joseph found it difficult to resist her attempts to seduce him. Probably at the very least he knew that he was caught between his master and his master's wife, and that displeasing either one of them could cost him his life. He told her that to be with her would be a sin against his master and against God. She grabbed hold of his garment, eager to have him, but he slipped away, leaving his garment in her hand. Later, she told her husband that Joseph had tried to rape her and Potiphar had him thrown in prison.

Perhaps he had thought as a slave that things could not be much worse, but now they were. Joseph had no reason to think that anyone would even remember that he was in prison, still alive but pining away. He had no family or friends in Egypt who might plead his case, and who would want to help someone who had been imprisoned for rape?

Still, Joseph's character showed itself even in prison. Joseph was dependable and trustworthy, and eventually the warden of the prison put him in charge of all the other prisoners. Two of the prisoners were personal servants of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. The baker provided the king with the bread, and the butler or cupbearer provided his wine. Both of them had offended Pharaoh in some way. Now they, like Joseph, were in prison. One night both the butler and the baker had dreams. The butler told his dream to Joseph: "In my dream I saw a grapevine with three branches that budded, blossomed and produced grapes. I squeezed the grapes into Pharaoh's cup and put it into his hand."

Joseph said, "the three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will restore you to your position in his court. When he does, remember me and help me get out of prison, for I have done no wrong."

The baker, thinking he might also receive a good interpretation said, "I dreamt there were 3 baskets on my head and the baskets were full of holes. The top basket was filled with bread but birds came and ate it all up."

Joseph answered, "The three baskets are three days. In three days Pharaoh will take your head from your body and hang you on wood." Three days later, on Pharaoh's birthday, the butler was restored to his position and the baker was put to death, just as Joseph had predicted.

Can We Identify with Them?

Once again we should reflect on the various characters in this story, and ask ourselves which ones we identify with. Have you ever been falsely accused of doing something wrong? Have you ever been in the position of finding that your daily work is pure drudgery? Have you felt that you were trapped and going nowhere? Have you ever found that in trying to do what is right you just get yourself into trouble? Perhaps there's part of you that is like Potiphar, enjoying the benefits of others' labor and the work, without having to pay too much attention to what those people are sacrificing for you, or what is going on behind the scenes.

Then there's the part of us that is like Potiphar's wife. Forget the rules! I just want to enjoy myself. Yes, I want to love and be loved, but let it be love on my terms, at my convenience, for my pleasure!

We don't know what the butler and baker did to make Pharaoh angry enough to put them in prison. Why was the butler somehow cleared of any wrongdoing? Was the baker's crime much worse than the butler's? The fact that the lower baskets were empty, that the baskets had holes in them, suggests that the baker was not fulfilling his role very faithfully. Which of these is you? When you've made a mistake can you learn from it, and once again take up with your work with renewed integrity? Or is there something in your life that is like the baker, something in you that has to die? Are there desires or habits or attitudes that you have to recognize as harmful to yourself and your relationships?

Temptations Are Necessary

In this story we see Joseph in difficulties again. His brothers hated him and threw him in a pit. They sell him as a slave. In a foreign country, he goes to prison for a crime he didn't commit. Then the one person who might speak up to rescue him forgets that he's there. It doesn't seem fair that Joseph, who had done nothing wrong, who had always acted with integrity, should suffer. But the path to love is not easy. Genuine love can be attained only through struggle. It is only through exhausting exercise that our muscles become strong. It is only through working out problems and puzzles that our minds become sharp. We don't learn to become patient by getting everything we want right away. We can't develop unconditional love if we never experience unfavorable conditions. It is impossible to feel compassion for another human being if we have never known suffering. We can't know our need for God if we never come face to face with our weaknesses. We can never experience the sweetness of being forgiven if we have never caused anyone any harm. In order to become the best that we can be, the most loving, the most compassionate, the most courageous, the wisest, we must go through trials and challenges not just once or twice, but again and again and again, because each time our love grows stronger. Each time we gain a little more wisdom and compassion. Each time

we reach a point of despair we learn a little more humility and gratitude. Consider this passage from *Secrets of Heaven*:

"People uninformed about human regeneration suppose that a person can be regenerated without temptation, and some that he has been regenerated after he has undergone a single temptation. But let it be known that no one can be regenerated without temptation, and that he suffers very many temptations, following one after another. The reason for this is that regeneration takes place to the end that the life of the old self may die and a new, heavenly life may be instilled. From this one may recognize that conflict is quite inevitable; for the life of the old self stands its ground and refuses to be snuffed out, and the life of the new self cannot enter except where the life of the old has been snuffed out. From this it is evident that fierce conflict takes place between mutually hostile sides, since each is fighting for its life. Anyone thinking with enlightened reason can see and perceive from all this that a person cannot be regenerated without conflict, that is, without spiritual temptation, and also that a person is not regenerated by undergoing a single temptation, only by undergoing very many of them." (Secrets of Heaven 8403.2-3)

Joseph went through many years of struggle, first with his brothers, then as a slave and finally as a prisoner. Many of us find our own lives are like that, filled with challenges.

Joseph's Coat

This is the second time Joseph's garment was torn from him; it is a very symbolic act. We invest in our hopes for love with many colorful images and stories. Every myth and fairytale tells us that love is possible, magical and good. We learn it when mommy kisses our scraped knee and daddy takes us out for a walk. We take it on when we hear the golden rule, and learn that in heaven everyone is loving. We wear it when we discover that Divine Love came into our world to be with us. These stories are clothing for our dreams.

When Jesus was transfigured, His clothes began to shine like the sun. When a woman came behind Him in the crowd and touched just the hem of His garment, she was healed. His garments are symbols of His truths, His Word, His stories. There is power in the stories about love. They make us aware of love and transmit love's power.

Now not everyone appreciates the stories that are the clothing of love. Jesus' clothing was torn from Him at the crucifixion, and in our story Joseph was stripped of his colorful tunic. And how often do people similarly despise the stories that give a colorful clothing to love? "Those are just fairy tales! They're for children! There's no such thing as magic." "You can't believe what it says in the Bible." "There's no such thing as heaven." "If God existed, there wouldn't be so much pain in life." "Nobody cares about you."

It's not just that somebody *out there* wants to kill my enthusiasm, and then "see what will become of my dreams." There is a cynical *part of me* that does that to my own dreams, that tells me I can't be loved, stripping away every memory that friendship is possible.

False Accusation

Our task for this week is to grow in adversity. When you are tempted to find love through indulgence rather than through firm resolve, can you resist the impulse and so grow stronger? Potiphar's wife took hold of Joseph's garment. We may be eager to experience love as pleasure rather than as service, so we take hold not of love itself but of the trappings, the appearance, while true love entirely eludes our grasp. Like Potiphar's wife, we feel affronted. We go from desire to rage, from confidently enjoying our own pleasure, to being the plaintive victim. When people show signs of love, we turn those very signs against them. "You say you love me, so you should make me happy. If you loved me, you would give me what I want."

Again and again, we find ourselves in a mental prison, stuck in a pit because of false accusations. Once in a while these false accusations come from people around us. Far more often they come from within us. It's as if there is part of us that just wants to be honest and faithful and do the best we can, while another part of us is saying, "You are worthless! You are hopeless! You are not compassionate, wise or helpful. You're just pretending." As we reach more advanced spiritual states we may realize that such voices with which we so frequently accuse ourselves are not truly our own, but are borrowed from chance criticisms and comments of past friends and enemies, and kept alive by the influence of demons from hell who always stand ready to muddy our minds with shame.

Part of me knows that those accusations are false, but another part of me believes those voices from hell, and I fall into a funk of doubt, trapped by this feeling that I just can't be loving or lovable.

The Baker Must Die

In those times of trial I become aware—much more keenly aware—that I am riddled with faults and imprisoned by shame. If my misery has a purpose I don't know what it is. I feel out of touch, disconnected and unloved. Yet there is a reason for such misery. In times of trial there are a couple of changes that take place. One outcome is that we learn to let go of our emotional baggage. How long must we carry our resentment like a heavy weight? We haul it around, holding it during each conversation, snuggling up to it in bed at night, not knowing that resentment will kill us. Or maybe our particular baggage is lust, rage or shame. Whatever negativity we are holding onto, we have to let go of it, and let it die. Those emotions feed us. They feed our despondency, more than any baker feeds any king. The "baker" in us has to die.

The Butler Has a Use

Just as we let go of our emotional baggage, at the same time we can hold on to what we've learned from our mistakes. We gain something precious in times of trial: self-awareness, humility, patience, perspective, wisdom and hope. The God of infinite love allows us to go through challenges just so we can gain these attitudes. These are the lessons we learn in adversity. Like the butler, they come alive with us out of the prison trials, and have a place in regulating our future life. And like the butler they satisfy our thirst for wisdom.

Joseph's Integrity

When Joseph was a slave he resisted the seductive advances of Potiphar's wife. It may seem as if his integrity got him thrown in prison, but in actual fact it was permitted by God to

bring him to a position of power. The key to our spiritual growth is to trust God and do what is right, even when it may seem to put us at a disadvantage.

Your task this week is to drop the distractions. We must resist the false promises and false accusations from selfish desires (symbolized by Potiphar's wife), and we have to let go of the emotional baggage symbolized by the baker. Dropping these distractions to focus on keeping the Lord's commandments will keep us on the Path of Integrity.