

## Message for Week 7: Celebrate the Blessings

*"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits!" (Psalm 103:2)*

### Joseph's Progress

Over the past 6 weeks we have seen a great change in the relationship between Joseph and his brothers. In the beginning Joseph's brothers hated him. They were jealous that their father loved Joseph more than the other brothers. They wanted to kill him, and in the end, they sold him as a slave in Egypt, . And made their father believe that he'd been killed by wild beasts. There was a change in Joseph over the next years that he was a slave and imprisoned. He experienced rejection from his family, isolation in prison, and years and years of hoping and praying that he could be taken out of this very difficult situation. But the Lord was with Joseph and through his time in prison he learned patience and compassion and grew in his knowledge that even in very bad situations the Lord is present and takes care of him.

Joseph would not have become a leader of Egypt if he had not gone through the experience of slavery and imprisonment. We learn through struggle that things we want and need may not come to us right away. Now Joseph had become king over Egypt and collected grain from all the people for the 7 years of plenty. He gathered up so much grain and it was like the sand on the seashore. Then the famine hit. Joseph's brothers began to be in need, and they came down to Egypt seeking food.

When Joseph's brothers arrived in Egypt, Joseph's longing to see his family again was rekindled. He sees that the brothers recognize that they were wrong in failing to have compassion on him, so Joseph wants to test them to see if the change is genuine. Joseph tells the brothers that they must bring Benjamin the youngest with them to Egypt the next time they come, or they will receive no food. With great hesitation and fear, the brothers come again for food, this time bringing Benjamin with them.

Joseph welcomed them, but then he set up a test for the brothers, to see if once again they would be willing to profit themselves by allowing their younger brother (Benjamin this time) to become a slave.

Judah then offers to give his own life in exchange for Benjamin, to become a slave in place of Benjamin, so that Benjamin can go free. Jesus said greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do whatever I command you" (John 15:12). This was the kind of love that Judah had shown towards Benjamin. The brothers hearts had changed, partly as a result of the test that Joseph had put them through. Now Joseph could no longer restrain himself, and revealed to his brothers who he wants. "I'm Joseph, I'm your brother." Joseph told his brothers what he had been through and offered to take care of them and their families during the five years of famine that were still coming. He sent them back to Canaan to gather their families and their father and bring them down to Egypt to see Joseph there.

### Everything Becomes Joseph's

During the following five years of famine, Joseph provided food for all the Egyptians. At first they bought food from Joseph. When they ran out of money, they traded livestock for grain. When they ran out of livestock they traded their land and labor for grain. In the end Joseph had

obtained ownership of the whole land and everyone and everything in it for Pharaoh. On a literal sense it seems as if Joseph was unfairly taking advantage of his monopoly over the grain supplies during the famine. Spiritually, though, the Egyptians turning everything in their lives over to Joseph symbolizes us turning everything in our lives over to the Lord. The Lord allows us to go through temptation and trials so that we can recognize how much we need that Lord. In our times of doubt and despair we come to see that “without Him we can do nothing” (John 15:5), and that “we can receive nothing unless it has been given to us from heaven” (John 3:27). The Lord’s goal is for us to completely turn over our will and our life to the Lord so that He is in control although in appearance we continue to act on our own initiative.

One of the qualities we receive by regeneration is gratitude. As we practice giving thanks for things we receive each day, we come to recognize more easily and quickly how many ways the Lord is blessing us. At first we may feel gratitude mostly when something very good happens to us or we narrowly avoid some tragedy. With time and wisdom, though, we come to see that there are blessings even in the worst moments. In every painful or devastating situation there are ways that the Lord is present with us, turning the bad things toward good purposes and helping us through suffering to grow in compassion, courage and patience. As a result of growing gratitude the consequence of turning our lives over to the Lord is that we become aware of countless blessings, feelings of richness and overflowing abundance even in lean times. This was the Egyptians’ response to Joseph--not complaining about how much he was taking from them, but gratitude: “You have saved our lives,” they said to Joseph.

### **Ephraim and Manasseh**

During the seven years of plenty when Joseph was gathering grain to prepare for the famine, he married and had two children. When the first was born he named him Manasseh, which means “forgetfulness.” He said, “God has made me forget all my toil and all my father’s house.” He had forgotten the pain of being rejected by his brothers, and had forgotten those years of being in prison and slavery. The second son he named Ephraim, which means “fruitfulness,” saying, “God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.” These two sons represented for Joseph the new life that he found in Egypt after his troubles, and for us they symbolize the new life we gain through spiritual struggle and rebirth. Manasseh represents our new will (all the new desires and joys that result from learning to truly love others) and Ephraim our new understanding (our new awareness of God, and new perspective on life).

Two decades later, Joseph had reconciled with his brothers, reunited with his family, brought his father down to Egypt to live in comfort, and successfully brought the Egyptians through the famine. At this point Joseph brought his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh to his father, Israel, to be blessed, Manasseh on Jacob’s right and Ephraim on his left. But Jacob crosses his arms, putting his right hand on the younger son, Ephraim, and his left hand on the older Manasseh. Joseph is upset at this reversal, but Jacob insists. Perhaps Jacob was thinking about the reversal that took place with Reuben and Judah, that since Reuben, Simeon and Levi had behaved badly, Judah had taken over the role of firstborn. He may also have been thinking of Joseph and his brothers, in that Reuben and Judah, the brothers who took charge in the beginning, later humbled themselves before Joseph, the almost youngest. Jacob could also have been thinking about his own beloved Rachel, who was younger than her sister Leah, the firstborn, but had taken first place in Jacob’s heart. And Jacob may have been thinking of

his own conflict with Esau, his elder twin, and the way Jacob had wrestled Esau in the womb and later wrested the firstborn's birthright and blessing from him. Two of Jacob's grandsons, the twins Perez and Zerah, had also struggled together for the place of Firstborn; Zerah reached out his hand to claim the status of firstborn, but then Perez somehow pushed past his brother and came out first.

There is a perennial struggle in between our heads and hearts, both vying for first place in our lives. At times our hearts become selfish and our heads have to take charge to get us back on track. Eventually, though, the heart reasserts itself, and what we love most of all determines the direction of our lives. In reality the heart always takes first place, but the appearance is that the head comes first with some people and in some states, so Jacob supplanted Esau, Perez broke through before Zerah, and Ephraim, the second-born, received the first-born Manasseh's blessing.

Is it better to be right, or to be kind? The real answer is that it is always right to be kind. Yet there will be times when the true kindness of certain actions is not apparent. It may *seem* unkind to correct those who go astray and to insist on following the rules. At those times it appears as if it is more important to do the right thing than to do the kind, nice, appealing and codependent thing. We then have to let this appearance stand, and do the right thing (follow the rules) though in reality it is right only because in the long run and for the greater number of people it is actually the kinder thing.

This disagreement should not stand in the way of our feeling blessed. When we follow the path of integrity, we come to a place where we *want* to do both what is kind and what is right, even though we may not always know how to reconcile the two.

### **Making Progress**

As we look back over the past six weeks we may see where the path of integrity took Joseph and where it has taken and can take each of us. We begin with a Joseph's dream--really the Lord's dream--that the Lord's love can be more present in our lives, and in fact can rule it. We struggle to let go of the selfish desires and emotional baggage that get in the way of our spiritual progress--a struggle that may seem like slavery or prison. We create positive experiences, learning from the Word, collecting insights, building on small successes, like Joseph gathering grain. Yet these efforts may bring us to a recognition that we cannot overcome selfishness all by ourselves. We need the Lord. We have to humbly ask for His help, just as Joseph's brothers had to ask Joseph for food. Still, asking the Lord to help us does not take away the need for us to act responsibly, to make every effort, *as if* it everything depended on our choices and actions. So Judah stepped forward to take responsibility for Benjamin, which ultimately led to his feeling compassion for Benjamin, and even to becoming a slave so that Benjamin could go free. So we must be willing to feel compassion and be willing to serve one another. Only then will we find the reconciliation that Joseph found with his brothers. Only then will we come to the point we celebrate today, recognizing that the Lord has richly blessed us with opportunities to be of service, to love and be loved. Ephraim and Manasseh were children Joseph would not have had if the Lord had not led him on the difficult path that he followed. We too have been blessed with new understandings and perspectives, and new motivations and intentions, that we have as a result of going through life's challenges.

***Your task for this week is simply to celebrate the blessings.*** Notice the good things the Lord has done in your life—count your blessings. Reach out to bless those you love, with gentleness and compassion. This is the conclusion of our treatment of Joseph and the Path of Integrity, but not the conclusion of our individual walks along that path. Today's task, and all the tasks we have focused on, are ones that we can return to again and again, continuing to practice them for years to come.