

Joseph – faithful, no matter what the circumstances

Reading: James 4:7-8a “...Resist the Devil.....Draw near to God.....”

Introduction:

One of the traits that we seem to have as human beings is that we often try to find excuses to “justify” our sins. We can see an example of this very early on in the history of man - in the book of **Genesis**. When God confronted Adam and Eve after they had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil¹, both of them tried to “justify” their own actions by passing the blame elsewhere (**Genesis 3:12-13**).

- Adam blamed the woman that God had given him
- Eve blamed the Serpent for tempting her.

Now it’s easier to see the faults in others than it is in ourselves. But how often do we try to do the same thing, *i.e.* find excuses to “justify” our sin, or “justify” it on the basis of circumstances;

- “*I had no choice*”
- “*Well, I was angry*”
- “*They deserved what I did to them*”
- “*Things haven’t been going very well for me at the moment, so I couldn’t fight it.*”
- “*Well, other people are doing it. No-one says anything to them*”
- “*This is the way that I have been brought up. It’s a part of my nature*” or “*I am a product of my environment.*”

But does our righteousness really depend on our environment or circumstances? Are there times when things can be so far beyond our control that we can “justify” our sins?

In this lesson, we will look at the example of a young man found in the Old Testament, a young man who was faced with both adversity and prosperity. But under both circumstances, he remained true to God, and displayed Christ-like qualities that are an example for us.

LESSON.

1) Joseph, son of Jacob

Joseph was the second youngest² of Jacob’s twelve sons. He was born when Jacob was well advanced in years³ (**Genesis 37:3**). His mother was Rachael (**Genesis 30:22-24**), the favourite of Jacob’s two wives (**Genesis 29:30**). Because he was the son of his old age, Jacob (also known as Israel – **Genesis 32 28**) loved Joseph more than all of his children. In fact, he made a special tunic for him – the “coat of many colours” (**Genesis 37:3**). This special relationship

¹ **Genesis 2:16-17** Adam and Eve were allowed to eat from any tree in the garden, but not from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

² Benjamin was the youngest (**Genesis 35:16-18, 23-26**)

³ Jacob was 130 when he went to Egypt (**Genesis 47:9**). Joseph was about 39 at the time

- When Joseph was put in charge of the food storage (**Genesis 41:46**), he was 30.
- Then there was 7 years of plenty (**Genesis 41:47-53**) = 37
- After 2 years of famine (**Genesis 45:4-6**) he reveals himself to his brothers. =. 39

Therefore, Jacob was about 91 years old when Joseph was born

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caused a lot of friction within the family. **Genesis 37:4** states that “...when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him”⁴.

Things only got worse when Joseph had a dream and told his brothers about it, for the dream implied that they would all bow down to him (**Genesis 37:5-8**) In fact, he then had another dream with similar implications, including the potential for even his father bowing down to him.

Given what happens later in Joseph’s life, we can safely assume that God was behind these dreams, because they were very prophetic in nature. However, they did nothing to improve the relationship he had with his brothers. They hated him even more, and were envious of him (**Genesis 37:8b, 11**). However, his father “...kept the matter in mind...”, for he, too, had had dreams (**Genesis 28:10-17**).

2) Faithful in adversity

a) Joseph - sold into slavery by his own brothers

While Joseph was still quite young⁵ (he was referred to as “*the lad*” in **Genesis 37:30**, and “*boy*” in **42:22**), his brothers used an opportunity to sell him off into slavery (**Genesis 37:12-28**). Joseph had now gone from living in the comforts of home, where he had received favourable treatment from his father, to now being led away to a foreign land as a slave, not knowing what lay ahead.

He was taken to Egypt, a land that was around 400 kilometers away from his home. Its customs and practices would have been very different to what he was used to. And yet here he was, not as a willing guest, or as an interested traveller, but as a slave – a person who could be bought and sold like a piece of property. He was at the mercy of whoever became his “owner”. It could have been easy for him to think that God had abandoned him. After all, “*How could God have allowed such a terrible thing to happen*”.

b) Joseph - faithful as a slave/servant

Joseph is bought by “...*Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guard*” (**Genesis 37:36**). Now in spite of the fact that he had gone from being the favoured son at home to being a slave in a foreign land, Joseph did not begrudge his circumstances. Nor had the Lord abandoned him. It seems that Joseph was a trustworthy and conscientious worker, and the Lord blessed him (**Genesis 39:2**). Joseph found favour in Potiphar’s sight, and eventually, he put Joseph in charge of all the business of the household. Potiphar left it all in his care (**Genesis 39:3-6**), and so Potiphar’s house was blessed for Joseph’s sake. When it came to serving his master, Joseph was certainly following the principles taught later in the New Testament in **Ephesians 6:5-7**.

But the fortunes of Joseph were about to take a sudden change.

⁴ All quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

⁵ He is 17 years old in **Genesis 37:2**.

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c) Joseph - falsely accused and put in prison

We are told in **Genesis 39:6b** that "...Joseph was handsome in form and appearance", i.e. he was a very attractive and handsome young man. And these qualities were not missed by Potiphar's wife. She cast "*longing eyes*" upon him, and asked him to "*lie with me (i.e. her)*" (**Genesis 39:7**). But Joseph refused her advances. It wasn't because he didn't want to break the trust of Potiphar. It was because of his fear and respect for God. And he knew what God's position was on such matters⁶. But she persisted, day after day, asking him to "lie with her". (**Genesis 39:10**).

Consider for a moment the temptation presented to Joseph – a young man, far from his homeland. He was in a position where he had free-reign in the household. His master was most likely away from the house a good percentage of the time (**Genesis 39:6a**). And his master's wife continually extends the invitation. But right is right and wrong is wrong. And Joseph continues to ignore her.

However, one day, while she continued with these same advances, she grabbed his garment as he fled from her presence. Having been spurned again, she responded by falsely accusing him of attacking her (**Genesis 39:13-19**). As a consequence, Joseph is thrown into prison (**Genesis 39:20**). And so once again, Joseph has gone from a position of privilege, to one of very low status - a prisoner in jail, with an uncertain future.

d) Joseph - faithful in jail

I would imagine that being sent to Pharaoh's prison is not a place that you would want to be. But this was where Joseph now found himself – not because he had done something wrong, but because he had done something honourable. He had resisted evil and had done what was right in the sight of God (**Genesis 39:9b**). Joseph could have felt, "*Why me? Why has God allowed this to happen?*" He could have wallowed in self-pity. But he didn't.

The qualities of Joseph that led him to be placed in a position of trust in Potiphar's house also shone forth here in the prison. The Lord showed mercy towards him, and he found favour with the jailor (**Genesis 39:21**). Eventually, Joseph was given responsibility for all of the prisoners (**Genesis 39:22-23**), just like he had been given responsibility over all in Potiphar's house (**Genesis 39:6a**). Joseph was a God-fearing man who could be trusted to do what was right despite the circumstances.

3) Faithful in prosperity

a) Joseph – became a ruler in Egypt

Eventually, through God's providence, Joseph is released from jail and rises to become the ruler of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh (**Genesis 40:1 - 41:45**). The principle task of Joseph was to collect and store grain in Egypt during the seven years of plenty in preparation for the coming seven years of famine (**Genesis 41:46-49**).

⁶ The Old Law had not been given yet – it was still 400+ years into the future. But God had let His people know what was right and what was wrong (**Hebrews 1:1**).

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When the famine struck, it also included the countries around Egypt. People from those countries then travelled to Egypt to see Joseph in order to buy grain for food (**Genesis 41:53-57**).

b) Joseph's brothers came to Egypt

The famine included the land of Canaan, and so Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy some grain. Joseph was now in his late thirties⁷, making it about 20 years since his brothers had sold him as a slave⁸. But when his brothers came, he recognised who they were (**Genesis 42:7**). However, they did not recognise him (**Genesis 42:8**).

After he had tested them (**Genesis 42:15**), Joseph had their sacks filled with grain, he secretly returned their money, and sent them home without revealing himself to them. However, he held Simeon back until they returned with their other brother, Benjamin (**Genesis 42:9-25**).

c) Joseph shows mercy towards his brothers

After their grain runs out, the brothers are forced to return to Egypt to buy more (**Genesis 43:1-15**). It is during this trip that Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. We can see that on both this occasion, and the previous trip by the brothers, that this was an emotional time for Joseph – he wept privately upon seeing his brothers (**Genesis 42:24; 43:30; 45:2**). And rather than taking revenge, he showed mercy toward them (**Genesis 45:1-8; Romans 12:19**). In spite of his prosperity and earthly power, he did not forget God – in fact, he could see the hand of God in what had taken place in the past.

Application:

Joseph would have had his faults, just like the rest of us (**Romans 3:23**). And just like us, his life had its “ups and downs”. There were times when things were going really well, and there were times when things were about as bad as they could get. When the bad things were happening, he may have felt discouraged and been more vulnerable to temptation. But it seems that no matter what the circumstances, Joseph remained true to God. He did what was right, regardless of the situation that he was in. In fact, through hindsight, he could see how all of those trying experiences that he went through had actually worked together for good (**Genesis 45:7; 50:20**).

There will always be times when we will be faced with hardship and temptation—even Jesus experienced it (**Luke 22:44; Hebrews 4:15**). There will be times when we will feel discouraged or angry about something, causing us to be less willing to fight temptation, and use our circumstances to “justify” any sin that results from it. But sin is sin – and sin is not defined or determined by circumstances, but by the Word of God (**Romans 7:7**).

For the Christian, we have these promises from God;

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or

⁷ See footnote 3 at the bottom of page 1.

⁸ He was probably not much more than 17 years old when sold as a slave **Genesis 37:2**.

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sword?.....For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, or angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35-39)

“No temptation has overtaken you except such is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13)

In other words, God will not abandon us when things seem to take a turn for the worst (**Hebrews 13:5b**). Nor will God allow us to be faced with a temptation that is beyond our ability to control. The onus is on us to overcome it⁹.

Consider also this. **Romans 8:28-29** tells us that

“....we know that all things work together for good to those who love God.....For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son....”

God is working things out for our good. When things appear to be going bad for us, remember these verses, and rather than use the (apparent) “misfortune” as a means of justifying sin, consider for a moment that maybe God has allowed this to happen as an opportunity for you to learn something good (**Hebrews 12:11**).

Remember the example of Joseph.

⁹ But if we fail, we can be forgiven by God’s grace and mercy (**1 John 1:9**)