

Suffering for Righteousness' Sake

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[0 : 0 0] Now, there are times in life when perception and reality don't match, where your mind or body tells you one thing, but the reality is something different altogether.

So, take first example, flying. When you're in your seat, 10,000 feet above the ground in an Airbus 380, it doesn't feel like you're moving at all, is it?

And yet you are at, I don't know, what's the speed? 1,000 kilometers per hour or thereabouts. Or take the time when Elissa and I were walking our dog around the neighborhood.

There used to be a house with a high wooden fence, and every time we walked past, we'd hear the fiercest barking and growling behind that fence.

And so I would imagine that that would be a German shepherd or something, a large dog like that. Until one day, the owner had his gate ajar, and as I peered in, it was a terrier that looked like this.

[1 : 0 0] Small but feisty. In fact, our dog used to be a bit like that. Had the small dog syndrome. The reality isn't what I perceived. And take this last example.

Have you ever been at the MCG and it's halftime, and you're busting to go, but there you are waiting in a long queue with your legs crossed? How long does it feel to be waiting then?

Forever, right? Even though probably less than a minute has probably gone by. Well, as we look at our passage tonight and return to Joseph's coming and goings, our initial perception is that he is in actual dire straits.

He's just been disowned by his brothers, exiled to an unknown land, far from the land in which God had promised to be with his father. And on that long journey to Egypt, he would have had ample time to consider just how bad things were and not knowing where he'll end up.

And reading the first verse in chapter 39 doesn't fill us with much hope either, does it? For we hear that Joseph had been taken down to Egypt.

[2 : 1 3] Potiphar, an Egyptian, who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. He had become a slave to one of the most powerful men in Egypt with no clear way home.

Well, that's the perception. But in verse 2, we actually get the reality and how different it is. For we see that God was with Joseph so that he prospered in Potiphar's household.

Not only that, even his master could see that God was with him. Can you see? And that the Lord gave him success in everything. And so the next step in God's blessing is this.

He caused Joseph to find favor in Potiphar's eyes and puts him in charge of his whole household and entrusts everything he owned to his care. And as a result, Potiphar himself is blessed because of Joseph.

So verse 5, Now this is not what we expect, is it?

[3 : 41] For God's blessing to come in the midst of exile. And yet, that's the reality. Yes, Joseph is still a slave in Egypt, notwithstanding his standing and responsibility.

He's still far from the promised land. And yet, we read God was with him and giving him success and blessing in his work. But no sooner have we gotten this picture that we're given yet another reality.

And it's the reality of what often accompanies God's success or blessing. And that is that temptation and suffering comes as well.

I'm not sure that's something any of you would look forward to. If you're like me, your image of a successful life is one where things are smooth sailing, isn't it? How's life going for you?

When we say, well, we don't think that includes suffering or temptation. And that's often what we pray and hope for as well. That what we work towards is a life where there's no stress.

[4 : 46] Where our health is good. We've got a job. There's no conflict in our relationships at home or at work. Where we have good life, work-life balance. That's how we think a blessed life is, isn't it?

And yet, as we look at the next few verses, that's not how Joseph's life was. Even as he was being blessed by God. Instead, he's being confronted by a choice whether to give in to temptation or to remain faithful to God and suffer for it.

So to verse 7, it says, Now Joseph was well built and handsome. And after a while, his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, Come to bed with me.

But he refused. With me in charge, he told her, My master does not concern himself with anything in the house. Everything he owns, he has entrusted to my care.

No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has beheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?

[5 : 54] Now I think there are two noteworthy things to take from Joseph's words. First, Joseph didn't consider his newfound power something to be used for his own gain.

He acknowledges that there is no one greater than he is in Potiphar's house. And yet, he knew that with this power comes responsibility, to care for what has been entrusted to him.

Which isn't sort of how many people think today, is it? Because whenever they find themselves with privilege and power, what do they often do? And over and over again, whether it's sexual exploitation or financial misconduct and corruption, more often than not, sinful humans end up using power for their own advantage, don't they?

To enrich themselves with other people's money or to satisfy their own desires by using others. And some of you may even have seen that in your own workplaces.

And there may come a time when you yourself may have that power. And trust me, temptation will come when you do. And it's part of being just someone with authority.

[7 : 09] That you will be given authority and then be tempted to abuse that power or that privilege. And Joseph, even though he was in the prime of his manhood, if you do a bit of reading back and forth, you know that he's in his 20s.

That's why he's tall, dark and handsome. We're telling you, he turns 45. A bit like me. But yet, Joseph is still able to resist that temptation.

Because the second thing he says is that if he gives in, then he's not only betraying his boss, he's also sinning against God. Verse 9, How then can I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?

Joseph knows exactly who he's accountable to. He's accountable God. And he calls it for what it is. There's no euphemisms here, like, oh, it's just a momentary lapse or a slight indiscretion.

No, he calls it for what it is. It's a wicked thing if he sleeps with Potiphar's wife. And notice too, the strength of Joseph's resolve.

[8 : 16] For this woman didn't give up, did she? Verse 10, Day after day she asks. But he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

Now, I think Potiphar's wife is probably someone that is not used to getting no for an answer. And so, she decides that if she can't persuade him, then she'll force herself upon him.

And poor Joseph, he's got nowhere to run. Because he still has to turn up for work, doesn't he? He still has to manage Potiphar's household. So, verse 11, One day he went into the house to attend to his duties and none of the household servants was inside.

She caught him by his cloak and said, Come to bed with me. But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants.

Look, she said to him, This Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us. He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.

[9 : 24] She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story, That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me.

But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house. Poor Joseph. He's not having much luck, is he? Or success with his cloaks.

Last time around, it was the ornate cloak, wasn't it? That got him into trouble. Led to his exile. And now, here's another cloak that leads him into trouble. And on both occasions, it's sort of ripped off him, right?

It's used as evidence in a plot of deception. And notice how he goes from being in charge of the servants to being undermined by her in front of them.

She refers to him simply as this Hebrew. And then later on, to the husband, that Hebrew slave. And what does Potiphar do? Well, you know, we sort of, Alyssa and I do marriage counseling and we always say it's important to trust your spouse.

[10 : 28] But this is probably one incident where Potiphar shouldn't have applied that principle. Verse 19, when his master heard the story his wife told him, he said, this is how your slave treated me.

He burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. You see, Joseph wasn't given a chance to plead his innocence, was he?

Just as in the pit, his voice now falls silent. Potiphar never verifies the facts, although he could have easily done that, but simply executes judgment and wrongly at that.

So not only was Joseph framed for a crime he did not commit, he was also punished without a right of defense. And so in the midst of success and blessing, Joseph, a godly man who does everything right, finds himself subject to temptation, being framed for something he didn't do, and then finally being unfairly punished as a result.

But just in case you thought God had now abandoned Joseph, that, you know, perhaps he had a good time for a while, but God's now turning his back on him, we read right in the next verse, verse 21, that actually the reality is God is still with him, that even though Joseph is in prison, the Lord was with him.

[12 : 00] He showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those he held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there.

The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did. You see, the story is deliberately taught in such a way that we see that the temptation and suffering that follows was actually something that God had allowed.

It was part of God's plan that would ultimately lead to blessing and salvation for Egypt and Canaan. If you look at the handout that I've got, you see how the same things and phrases are repeated between the time Joseph was in Potiphar's house and the time that he was in prison.

So verse 21 says that God was with Joseph just as it was in verse 2. Verse 22, he was put in charge of the prison just like Potiphar's household. Verse 4.

And he was successful in everything he did. Verse 23. Just as it was in verse 3 and 5. Joseph found favor in both Potiphar's and the warden's eyes.

[13 : 16] And they each did not concern themselves with anything under Joseph's care. This pattern is repeated so that we can see that God has allowed this temptation in Joseph's lives and he's allowed Joseph to go through the suffering because God will use it to bring his plan to save the world into fruition.

And although it would only be revealed over the next two chapters, we actually see a little inkling of this in verse 20. A small, seemingly insignificant detail and yet crucial because we're told that Joseph is in the same prison which the king confines his other prisoners because this is where he will meet the cup bearer of Pharaoh who will then take him into the presence of the king and it's there that he will then prepare the land of Egypt for the famine which will ultimately save his family.

And because his family gets saved, Judah's son, Peres, which we saw last week, gets to have children and his children get to have their own children all the way until God finally sends his son, Jesus, as a descendant of Judah to save the world.

And that, my friends, includes salvation for you and me. Joseph's faithfulness, you see, is part of God's plan that leads all the way to Christ and to us and our salvation.

Which is why I've got this quote from Don Carson who when he was preaching on this passage said, Humanly speaking, you and I are Christians today saved by the blood of the Lamb because Joseph kept his zipper up.

[15 : 12] Now I know you're going to tell me that there are no zippers in those days. That's fine, but you get his point, don't you? Joseph's faithfulness in the face of temptation changed the world.

Now of course, as humans, it's true too that we can't foil God's plan. And so hypothetically, if Joseph had not kept his zipper up, salvation would have still come through another means.

And yet the point is, for our part, as humans, it matters that we are positive agents of God's plan rather than working against what God intends for this world.

It matters that we're acting in alignment with what God wants to achieve rather than going against his plans. Now that sort of sits rather uncomfortably with me because, I don't know about you, but as I look into my own life, I know that I fail God more than I care to admit.

I know I've given in to temptation. And often, I've simply not done what I ought to have done. I've kept silent when I should have spoken up, and I've turned a blind eye when I should have acted.

[16 : 28] And so, I have to look at my own lives and realize that I've not actually been a positive agent of God's plan. Well, thankfully though, that's not where the story ends because before we see Joseph as an example for us to follow, Joseph is also a precursor or type pointing us to Jesus.

And that's under our fourth point, second bullet point. Joseph is a shadow of what Jesus becomes in full. So, like Joseph, Jesus too was tempted but did not sin.

But whereas Joseph was tempted in just one respect, sexual immorality, the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way in chapter 4 of Hebrews and yet did not sin.

Like Joseph, Jesus too was betrayed, some really tried and sentenced unfairly. Like Joseph, he suffered punishment in silence. But whereas Joseph merely saved Egypt and Canaan from a physical famine, Jesus saves all of us from eternal death.

And that's what it means for Joseph to be a type of Christ. Jesus is the real deal but in Joseph we find echoes preparing us for Jesus. And so he points us to Jesus as God's ultimate savior and it's in Jesus that we find salvation.

[18 : 00] Even when we failed God in our own temptation, even when we've been unfaithful to him. And so friends, if you find yourself your conscience pricked right at this moment and you remember exactly how you failed God, given in to temptation, then the good news is that we have Jesus to look to.

He's our representative who has been faithful on our behalf. And so if you've not done that already, by turning to him in faith, God no longer then counts our sin against us because of Jesus.

But for those of us who have done that and put our trust in Jesus, then this is the position of faith, this bedrock of grace as it were, found in Jesus, it is from this position that we then see Joseph's life as a pattern for our own.

It's here then that we see that we too can align our lives to God's plan by faith, just as Joseph did. by being faithful to God even in the midst of temptation and suffering.

And in fact, we see in Joseph the fact that leading godly lives will more often than not lead to suffering. Now if you remember my illustration from last week, remember that wheel alignment thing that I did at the end?

[19 : 30] How our lives as wheels are meant to be aligned to God's plan in the direction that God is steering the car? Well this week we find that the road that we're actually traveling on is a bumpy one.

God has called us not to be on a road that's like a super highway, sort of sealed, the roads are level and the ride is smooth, but rather our life is often like off-road travel, where the terrain is rough.

And every time we are buffeted by temptation and trials, it's like our wheels are being bumped along on this terrain. It threatens to throw us off course.

And as we look at the culture around us, I have to say that the ride that we're going to be in for is likely to get even bumpier still. And that is true for us as individuals, as we're out at school, at work, and also as a church, as we seek to be a witness here in Doncaster.

The values of the world that we lived in is increasingly at odds with ours and with the Bible's. And I think the risk isn't so much that we give in to the initial temptation because I think we can see it when it comes.

[20 : 46] Our conscience alerts us that this is not right. Rather, I think the risk is that like Joseph with Potiphar's wife, it's the day-after-day pestering that wears us down.

Where the world just wouldn't let up. They'll keep calling us to come to bed with her. And the risk is, as we keep hearing this nagging pestering, we grow tired.

You know, we hate to be always in conflict, don't we? We want to be left in peace. And so we might think, if only we just went along with that just for once, whether it's their lifestyle, their views on sexuality, or compromise on our integrity at work, well, if we just do that once, maybe they'll just leave us alone.

They'll stop targeting us. And maybe the conflict will stop. But as Joseph shows us, that compromise is not worth taking. Because he says it's a wicked thing to do.

It's a sin against God. And ultimately, it will throw us out of alignment with God's plan. Instead, as our second reading tonight said, the apostle Peter urges us to do right, even if we suffer for it.

[22 : 02] So I've got it on the screen. It says in verse 13, he's rather optimistic at the start. Who's going to harm you if you're eager to do good? Meaning, I think ordinarily, that good is likely to be rewarded by others.

And yet, even if it's not, and as Christians, we suffer for what is right, Peter says we're blessed because we're approved by God. Later on, he will say we're merely doing what Christ did.

He died to bring us to God. So he says we're not to fear the threats of those who will persecute us or be frightened, but we're to speak graciously with a clear conscience so that even those who slander us may be ashamed.

For it's better, verse 17, if it's God's will to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. evil. And I guess that's the thing that's not often appreciated, is it?

That often we think that if we give in to temptation or we give in to evil, that actually we'll have peace and comfort. But the reality is often it doesn't.

[23 : 08] If you think about it, if Joseph had slept with Potiphar's wife and he was found out, do you think he would have escaped suffering? He wouldn't, wouldn't he?

And so that's the same with us as well. Often we think by giving in we might escape suffering, but actually we might end up suffering anyway. And so if you're going to suffer anyway, Peter says, why not suffer for doing good rather than evil?

So brothers and sisters, don't see temptation and suffering in your life as signs that God has left you. On the contrary, he's probably using it for a reason, to bring his purposes and plans to pass.

Now we may not see this right away, just as Joseph couldn't, but our call is to remain faithful even in suffering, so that we might be useful to God and stand firm in righteousness.

Well friends, we're going to end a little differently tonight. Instead of ending with prayer, I'm just going to put two questions up on the slide. And I'll give you a few minutes to just reflect on them, to pray in your own hearts over them.

[24 : 23] So the first is, are there areas in your life where you have given in to temptation or failed to be faithful to God? If so, take the opportunity to confess them and put your trust again in Christ.

And the second, are there things in your life where you know that you are struggling to be faithful to God with? if you are, ask God to help you to stand firm against the constant voice of temptation.

So let's take a moment to do that, to pray, and then we'll end together with a prayer of confession. will you join me in this prayer together?

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we admit we have gone our own way, not loving you as we ought, not loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and in what we have failed to do. We deserve your condemnation. Father, forgive us help us to love you and our neighbor, and to live for your honor and glory through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[25 : 33] Amen.