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This lesson provides us with the opportunity to discuss one of God's lesser acknowledged attributes, the ability to find good and growth in adversity.

Joseph's situation

We don't know much about Jacob's 11th son, Joseph, except what is specifically stated in the scriptures. But his penchant for rubbing his brother's noses in his dreams didn't win him any "best brother ever" points. He had two dreams wherein not only his brothers bowed to him and gave him obeisance, but his parents as well. And instead of keeping such things to himself, he felt compelled to share this information with the whole family.

If he was the oldest son something like this might almost be expected, since he should get the birthright and would take over as head of the family when daddy died. But Joseph was at the bottom of the patriarchal chain; almost at the bottom. Not only was he a nothing in the inheritance line of things, but he was daddy's favorite son, being the first born of his favorite wife.

If there was one thing Jacob never learned how to do, it was not showing evidence of favoritism. His favorite wife was obvious to the whole family, as also was his favorite son. So the sons of the less favored wife, and those from his concubines, didn't take the pampering Joseph received well. They hated him. They couldn't even speak civilly to him. Yet for all of this, Joseph still felt a need to reveal his dominance dreams to them, which made them hate him all the more.

Joseph was given a coat of many colors, which was probably just a long coat with long sleeves. Wearing this coat announced to everyone in the family his favored status with their father.

Good things don't last

As long as they were at home no one dared to lay a hand on Joseph, but when Jacob sent Joseph out to report on the activities of his older brothers, who were a few day's journey from home, the gloves came off. When they saw him coming they decided to kill him. Fortunately, Ruben, the eldest, convinced them to just throw him into a dry pit. He was planning on coming back for him later and bringing him safely back home. After all, as the eldest he would be answerable to his father for the boy's safety.

But when Ruben wasn't around, his brothers decided to sell him into slavery to some passing merchants. To cover their behavior they took his coat, dipped it into fresh blood, and cut gashes in it to make it look like a wild animal had gotten Joseph.

This lesson only covers the first half of Joseph's story, but it is the most important part of the story, because it is where Joseph proves himself to the Lord. By the time he rises to power in Egypt he has already proven his loyalty to the commandments of God.

Let's review

Joseph was a favored son of the prophet. He was the firstborn son of the favored wife. In many respects life was sweet for Joseph, right up to his seventeenth year when his brothers sold him into slavery.

What was Joseph guilty of so far, besides lacking the sense to keep quiet about his dreams? Nothing really. He was innocent. He was abused by his brothers, mocked by them, and sold into slavery in a distant country. As far as Joseph was aware he would never see his father, mother, or little brother Benjamin ever again.

Joseph was sold to Potiphar and Potiphar was quick to see that anything he put Joseph in charge of doing prospered in the most wonderful way. Before long he gave Joseph charge of his own home and all of his personal affairs. In fact, he trusted Joseph so much that in Genesis 39:6 it says that Potiphar had no clue as to what he owned or what transactions were going on in his house while Joseph was in charge. All he knew is what was on the table each day at mealtime.

> 6 And he left all that he had in Joseph's hand; and he knew not ought he had, save the bread which he did eat. And Joseph was a goodly person, and well favoured.

When trying to determine the kind of young man Joseph was, think of Daniel of lion's den fame, or perhaps the three brothers who were thrown into the fiery furnace. Joseph worshiped God and honored the commandments. He lived the life he had been taught to lead in his father's tent.

What's next?

So far he seems to have handled his adverse circumstances well, and rose above his initial station in life to become the overseer of Potiphar's house. But then Potiphar's wife decided she liked what she saw. She started to make advances to Joseph. She talked openly of her infidelity and desire to have Joseph, but Joseph remained true to the trust Potiphar had placed in him.

So, in true Hollywood fashion, when Potiphar's wife's blatant attempt to seduce Joseph failed, leaving her with Joseph's cloak in her hand, she framed him, and out of revenge, and maybe a little bit of shame, had him thrown into prison. This doesn't make Potiphar look like a very good judge of character. Either that or he recognized that he would have to live with her and it would be better to lose his best servant than to have to deal with a resentful wife for the rest of his life.

In any event, we have a repeat of circumstances in the prison. Joseph is so blessed of the Lord that the keeper of the prison sees that he would have to be crazy not to turn everything over to this man who is blessed above all others in anything he touched. Soon Joseph was running the prison.

Lessons to be learned

What right did Joseph have to complain or feel sorry for himself? Would any of us have felt betrayed, abused, picked upon, forsaken, or perhaps abandoned by God and man in these same situations? Did he have the right to feel sorry for himself, to be angry with those who had so unjustly treated him? How many of us would have gone into a major funk and stopped praying and reading the scriptures, launched and hosted our own pity parties, or become angry with God for our situation?

Perhaps you are familiar with Viktor Frankl. He was a Jew who spent time in the concentration camps of World War II. Everything was taken from these people in the camps. They were lucky to have any food at all, let alone clothes on their backs. The guards could do anything they wanted to them and they could do nothing about it. Then, to top it all off, they were subjected to mass executions. There was little to live for, and there was great despair.

Viktor discovered some basic gospel truths in these circumstances. He didn't name them as such, but that is what they were. Here is a quote from one of his books.

> "The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action... There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in numbers, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way... It is this spiritual freedom – which cannot be taken away – that makes life meaningful and purposeful."
> – Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning

In Abraham 3:25-26 the Lord makes a statement as to why we have been sent to earth. He then answers the implied question.

> 25 And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them;
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> 26 And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same kingdom with those who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever.

God tells Abraham we were sent here to be proven to see if we would do "whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them." The question that first pops into the mind is "Why?" His answer is found in the next verse. He says that those who do prove faithful to the commandments in this life will have glory added upon them forever.

Joseph understood what Viktor Frankl learned in the concentration camps. He understood that no matter how much was taken away from him, and no matter how tough things got around him, his personal obedience to God was always his own choice. And he chose to worship God.

Joseph seems to have understood that man has his own moral agency, and that in the end the Lord will settle all accounts and set all things straight. So man can make a mess of their own personal moral agency, like Potiphar's wife, and Joseph's brothers, but in the end their decisions only provided opportunities for Joseph to grow and become more dependent on the Lord. His very circumstances drove him to the Lord and bonded them closer than ever. Joseph came to understand his dependence on God for daily strength and sustenance.

This Godly virtue of being able to take even the worst of circumstances and making good come from it is one of God's crowning abilities. This is why we have to learn to suffer in this life. This is what we have come here to master. When we can face even the most dire of trials in this life, and still recognize that God loves us and supports us, and that all trials are for our betterment and growth, then is when the Lord can trust us with the things of eternal significance.

It is then that we learn that it is possible to see beyond the immediate circumstances of mortality and see that it is possible, and even better, to live as though we are still in eternity. It is then that our choices are based on eternal principles and perspectives, not those that clamor for our attention in our mortal extremities.

Joseph lived his life without vengeance, anger, malice, or spite. He forgave his brothers and leaned on the Lord for support in his loneliness and heartache. Joseph did not hold a grudge against Potiphar for his unjust treatment. He trusted that God had a purpose for him, and was determined that he would be faithful to the Lord so he could be prepared for that purpose. And he was.

Final Thoughts

Sometimes Joseph seems almost like a wet rag, or someone who is spineless. We never see him railing against the injustices acted against him. We never see him take vengeance on those who supposedly hurt him. Instead, we see him forgive and love. We see him give the glory of all that was good in his life to God. And when we get to the second part of his story, we will see that his love for his brothers was almost more intense than even he had any idea.

We all face trials. Most of us are, at some point or another mistreated, misjudged, and suffer at the hands of another. Our challenge is no different than Joseph's challenges. It is all in how we view our situation. As Viktor Frankl stated,

> " ... everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way... It is this spiritual freedom – which cannot be taken away ... "

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How Can I Do This Great Wickedness?

Week 11