

Sunday June 13, 2021
 Lesson 2: In The Master's House
 Scripture: Genesis 39:1-40:23

Context:

This week we continue our new series for the summer entitled: Respond. The focus of the series will be on what we receive from God and how God can intend things for good. Today's lesson continues the narrative of Joseph we began last week, found in the later half of the Book of Genesis.

Where we last remember seeing Joseph is his reception into the hands of slavers on a caravan to Egypt. As he is brought into Egypt, he is sold to a prominent member of Pharaoh's court, to a man called Potiphar. Potiphar is the most visible agent in this text as the Hebrew slave is catapulted to the peak of the empire.¹ He will direct much of the action as the text focuses on his agency in what will be done to Joseph as the house becomes embroiled in a conflict.

Yet the main player in this narrative is the Lord. The affirmation that the Lord is with Joseph is made twice at the beginning and twice at the end.² Throughout the narrative, God continues to show loyalty to Joseph even in the midst of trouble plaguing the house. In response, there is a kind of humanity which fully relies on God and which fully engages human experience; Joseph is a man who receives "loyalty" from God and who lives loyally in relation to his Egyptian master.³ As such, we see how God works in the midst of the tension.

Between these two characters, there is Joseph. Joseph is confronted with the ways of the empire; he has to resist temptation from the seductive woman out of loyalty to his master and fear of God.⁴ Yet this event will cost him. Disagreeing with the principalities of empire will lead to a person falling down and perhaps giving it all up for their integrity and convictions.

The character of Potiphar's wife is one to represent the empire. She knows what she wants and she will go to any means to procure it. She represents the seductress figure we see in other parts of the Bible such as the woman in the book of Proverbs who seek to destroy those who follow her. Her attempt to seduce Joseph not only represents carnal relations as it also represents the ideals of the empire. Seizing power by any means is the way to secure one's self in the world and Joseph is given the opportunity to do so. Yet we see what happens when Joseph chooses to not sleep with Potiphar's wife. As the narrative ends though, we are reminded the Lord is with Joseph.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 316.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 320.

⁴ Ibid.

Application

Once again, Joseph finds himself in a place where the circumstances are less than ideal. He is away from home with people he doesn't know and there is heartache as just as he gets his feet on the ground, conflict and drama emerge. Before he can adjust to new circumstances, the mat is brought from under his feet. Just because Joseph has received God's grace does not mean tough times will be eliminated.

In this case, Joseph is faced with a dilemma. He can bow to empire and compromise his morals and integrity, yet maybe still somehow thrive. Or he can say no to empire, and have his life shattered again with the only hope of how the Lord might redeem him. Both have costs and both emerge in this story as questions for us to ponder in our own lives.

Before we dive into our quandaries though, we are faced with the character and nature of God in this text. The major question to appear over and over again in scripture and in our own lives is: "How can a good God allow bad things to happen to good people?" If you find anyone with easy answers, my guess would be those individuals have not experienced a depth or pain or they are trying to deny any pain in their own lives. The question of God's will is not one to nicely wrap up in a solo scripture verse or some cliché such as: "Everything happens for a reason." To speak for why God wills things is a human attempt to control and say how God works.

In this text, we do not read of God controlling everything to happen to Joseph. We do read though in this narrative of God promising to be with Joseph from the start and the finish. This promise might be a better place for us to look in our own stories. Even in pain or tragedy, the questions will come. And who better to stand there in the unknown than God who cries and mourns with us.

For Joseph, the decisions in this case seem hazy. Like Joseph, we are all given temptations to pursue. The Potiphar's wives are out there, seeking to garner our attention and loyalty so as to take us away from our convictions and integrity.

Recently, I read in a church leadership article about how easy power can seduce clergy and laity alike in a congregation. A prominent lay woman will puff up a young associate telling them all their wonderful gifts only to ask them to have private meetings with individuals with an agenda against the senior pastor. Or a clergy person will only attend to the needs and concerns of those with the most money in the congregation. In both cases, one could rightly argue of how the moral ethics were grey and one could see justification in certain behavior.

The secular world is no different. When I asked someone in the corporate world about what seductions they have seen, they can recount the struggle to cut corners to get quicker results. The corporate world also has no regards in blatantly treating people poorly when trying to force a result.

In both the secular and church world, there is the temptation to coopt what you believe because you don't want it to negatively affect your position, children, status, and the list goes on. It is much easier to sacrifice other things in order to move forward. A temporary fix is better than an adaptive holistic way of being.

Yet as we read in the case of Joseph, this kind of thinking and behavior entices us to worship empire instead of God. When we think only of ourselves and use any means to get ahead, we neglect who God has called us to be. We neglect the call to be loyal,

faithful, and genuine to ourselves and to the Lord.

It does not mean it will not cost us. The young associate will find themselves a target when they don't acquiesce to the power players. The clergy person might have to actually deal with the discrepancies of wealth in their congregation and community and reflect on systems. In both cases, comfort is given up and the individuals might be left with new quandaries to meditate upon.

Yet as we see with the Joseph story, God is at work in those hard moments. While God does not eliminate every obstacle to come our way, God does remind us we are never alone. Our Lord has given us grace and in our deepest, darkest moments we are given hope to face the future. Like Joseph, our Lord will not forsake or abandon us.

Have you ever felt God's grace even as you went through a difficult situation? What is a time where you felt your Christian witness was put to the test? Why do you think it is important to do the right thing even if it will cost you?

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