

Key Events in History - The Faithful Servant

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Genesis 37 - 39

God promised Abraham He would make him a great nation; that his descendants would be without number, just like the stars of the sky (Gen 15.5). However, Abraham saw little fulfillment of that promise in his lifetime. He and Sarah waited until he was 100 years old for Isaac to be born. Isaac and Rebekah would wait 20 years until Jacob and Esau were born. However, Jacob, who would be renamed Israel, would become the father of 12 sons, and the nation of Israel began to multiply.

Very likely, the best known of Jacob's 12 sons is Joseph. He was the central figure in the pivotal move of Jacob and his family to Egypt. It was in Egypt where the population of Israel would greatly increase over the next 400 years. The process by which Joseph was taken to Egypt and the rest of his family some 22 years later is filled with intrigue. The account also contains a number of **Nuggets of Truth** that are very instructive for us.

The Favorite Son

Joseph was the first son from Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. Thus it was no surprise that Joseph became Jacob's favorite son. Choosing a favorite child usually has negative consequences and that was certainly so in this case. Because Joseph's brothers saw he was their father's favorite, they resented Joseph; he bore the brunt of his father's poor choice (Gen 37.4). Their hatred for Joseph only intensified when Jacob gave Joseph his notorious coat of many colors (37.3). Jacob's favoritism and that of his parents Isaac and Rebekah serve as a vivid example to all parents of the perils of choosing favorites from their children or treating them unequally. It may be difficult at times for parents to be fair and love all their children equally, especially when one child excels over another, or one makes poor choices while another, only commendable choices, but that should be our ambition.

The toxic family environment escalated when Joseph related two of his dreams in which his brothers bowed down to him. It all came to a head one day when Jacob sent Joseph to visit his brothers who were shepherding sheep and to check how they were doing. When Joseph's brothers saw him in the distance, probably easily identifiable by his robe of many colors, they began to plot to kill him (37.18 – 20). But before he arrived, Reuben, Jacob's first-born, persuaded them to throw Joseph into a pit, or dry well, instead of killing him. Reuben intended to return later and rescue Joseph from the well (21 – 22). When Joseph arrived, his brothers immediately stripped him of his robe of many colors and threw him into the pit (23 – 24). However, when the brothers saw a caravan of Ishmaelites approaching, their unrelenting bitterness towards Joseph inspired a diabolical plot that would haunt them for decades; rather than kill Joseph, Judah suggested they sell him to the Ishmaelites and profit from their treachery (25 – 28).

Bitterness can exercise great influence in a person's life. It is little wonder God counsels us to put it away, or get rid of it.

Ephesians 4:31 (ESV) Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

Bitterness starts off small and may seem relatively harmless, but if left unchecked it spreads and becomes a destructive force.

Hebrews 12:15 (ESV) See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;

Bitterness usually begins with an offense, sometimes a very small one. However, if not dealt with immediately it begins to take control. The offended person begins to recite to himself or herself why it is right to feel offended. As time passes, bitterness takes root and the offended person shares his or her offense with others seeking to gain sympathy and support. As bitterness increasingly takes hold, it clouds a person's reason and distorts their judgment. It is unrelenting in its control and the person controlled by bitterness fails to realize how they are held under its dominion. It generates one bad choice after another. If left unchecked it entirely controls a person as was the case with Joseph's brothers. Despite their unconscionable crime, the brothers were unmoved as Joseph pleaded with them.

Not unexpectedly, getting rid of Joseph didn't rid them of their resentment against him, but it added guilt that would plague them for decades. It was yet at the forefront of their minds some 20 years later when they arrived in Egypt searching for food and Joseph toyed with them.

Genesis 42:21 (ESV) Then they said to one another, "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us."

One sin leads to another as the brothers, in an effort to conceal their treachery, killed a goat and dipped Joseph's robe in its blood to deceive their father with the lie that Joseph must have been killed by a wild animal. The belief Joseph was dead caused Jacob's inconsolable grief for more than 2 decades.

One **Nugget of Truth** to be gleaned is **We Must Set Aside Bitterness**. We must be on the alert to identify any bitterness that creeps into our lives. We need to be mindful of times when we are offended or experience disappointment. It is easy to allow offenses and disappointment to take hold and dominate and control our lives and direct our responses. If they are grievous we need to follow the Bible's direction to resolve them with the person who offended us. If that isn't possible, or the extent of the offense doesn't justify doing so, we need to draw upon God and His enabling strength to let go and move on. Otherwise, it will gradually infest our lives, and perhaps that of others, and will certainly hinder our walk with the Lord.

The Foreign Slave

The Ishmaelites, after buying Joseph, continued on their journey to Egypt. Someone young and handsome, as Joseph was, would easily generate a profit on the twenty shekels of silver they paid for him (37.28). They bound Joseph in shackles and put an iron collar around his neck (Ps 105.17-18) and led him to his new home. This treacherous act which the demonic realm surely intended for evil, God would use as the first step in His people migrating to Egypt to escape an unforeseeable famine.

The Bible gives no information about Joseph's destination other than, "They took Joseph to Egypt" (37.28). Perhaps it was to Memphis which served as Egypt's capital for many years, today's Cairo. If so, Joseph would have seen some of the pyramids as he arrived in chains, not knowing what his future held for him. It would have been understandable for him to be fearful of what lie ahead and entertain doubts about God's care for him. The dreams that once filled his mind seemed out of reach and no more than the fantasy of a teenager. The Ishmaelites, or Midianites as they were also called, quickly sold Joseph as a slave to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh (37.36; 39.1).

Joseph could have chosen to feed the cancer of bitterness and plot revenge. He had plenty of reasons to be angry after being sold by his spiteful brothers into slavery. Rather than dwell on his unfair treatment and be angry at God for allowing this to happen, he energetically took on his next role.

The Faithful Servant

Chapter 39 begins with a wealth of information.

Genesis 39:1–6a (ESV) 39 Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. 2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. 5 From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. 6 So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

It is apparent, Joseph forgave his brothers for their evil deed and rather than be immobilized by unforgiveness, Joseph chose to serve the Lord faithfully. It is important for us to realize that when we are a victim of an offense or injustice, whether big or small, we are left with a decision. We decide how we will respond, whether we will address it with the offender where that is possible, or dismiss it and victoriously press on. Forgiving an offense means rather than nursing the wrong, we let go of it in the depth of our being. Joseph certainly had cause to take offense, but

his response stands in sharp contrast to his brothers who allowed bitterness to take hold of them.

Despite being only a teenager, Joseph displayed a great degree of maturity. Joseph clung tightly to the God of his great-grandfather Abraham, his grandfather Isaac, and his father Jacob. He had heard about the faith of Abraham who had left Ur and Haran in response to God's call upon his life. He knew what was foremost in those who went before him was their unwavering faith in God and His provision for them. They all made some missteps, like Jacob's blatant favoritism of Joseph, but despite their shortcomings they trusted the Lord, and so would he.

Joseph knew his relationship with the God of the universe was not dependent on how many possessions he had, nor whether he was a slave or free, or whether he was surrounded by family and friends or a slave in a foreign country with a different language and culture; it was solely dependent on his unquenchable faith in the sovereign God who knew about everything that had happened and would happen.

Joseph knew that the thing to treasure most was his relationship with God, and so he, like his predecessors, would keep his eyes focused on Him. After Joseph absorbed the shock of what happened, he came to grips with his new reality and decided if God permitted this to happen, God would care for him throughout. Joseph decided he would do all he could to faithfully serve the Lord and honor him as best as he could. It is one thing to believe or say God will care for us; it is quite another to live it out, especially after we have been betrayed or disappointed. Joseph decided if he was going to be a slave, he would be the best slave in Egypt. If he was going to live in a foreign country, he would learn the language and the customs. He would serve Potiphar faithfully as his service to the Lord.

The Lord blessed Joseph and in order to do so, the Lord blessed Potiphar. Have you ever thought about how many people and organizations who have little or no regard for the things of God receive blessings from God only because they have faithful Christians working for them? Such was certainly the case with Potiphar.

Here is another **Nugget of Truth, No Matter What! Always Determine to Faithfully Serve the Lord**

The Fleeing Saint

Despite the betrayal of Joseph, things seem to be turning out fine; Joseph had achieved a position of trust and significance. But as you know there is another chapter in the life of Joseph, a very unexpected one. Even though a person is faithfully serving the Lord and honoring Him doesn't mean that the Lord will not allow him or her to be tempted. Faithfulness doesn't make us immune to temptation; in fact the reverse is more likely true. Satan doesn't need to concern himself with immobilizing people who lead compromised and self-focused lives; they present little, if any threat to the realm of darkness. However, followers of Jesus who are Spirit-

filled and characterized by intentionality to please the Lord, that is another case. The realm of darkness sought to derail Joseph with Potiphar's seductive wife.

Potiphar placed Joseph in charge of all of his affairs and carrying out his responsibilities put Joseph in the crosshairs of Potiphar's wife. Joseph was young and handsome and she was undoubtedly accustomed to getting whatever she wanted. She set her sights on Joseph and sought to seduce him. Evidently her pursuit of him went on for some time, but usually Joseph had the benefit of other servants in the vicinity so it was easy to dismiss her advances.

Genesis 39:6b–10 (ESV) 6 Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. 7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 8 But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. 9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" 10 And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

Joseph could have rationalized yielding to her. However, Joseph's underlying commitment to the Lord and his desire to please the Lord governed his behavior. Note the insight in his reply to her when he told her to betray Potiphar's trust in him was more than just a sin against his master, but more importantly it would be a sin against God (9). In a similar situation, some may argue, "*Who will know? This is just between the two of us. No one will ever find out.*" Such responses ignore that nothing is hidden from God's sight and He is the One to whom we will give an account.

Potiphar's wife wasn't about to be spurned. One day when she was alone in the house with Joseph, she grabbed him by his cloak and he fled leaving his cloak in her hand. She knew she had been denied and so she accused Joseph of trying to seduce her. Potiphar of course believed her false accusation and had Joseph imprisoned (39.11 – 20).

As we reflect on this incident, one point is apparent; even when God's children are in the center of His will and faithfully serving Him, He will allow them to be tempted. He will allow Satan and those who serve him to try to disrupt and derail God's children. Remember the warning of Scripture,

1 Peter 5:8 (ESV) Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

God permits temptation for a variety of reasons, but one is surely to test our faith to reveal places where it needs to be shored up. Temptation serves to expose places where we are careless or inattentive, places where we are vulnerable. Temptation also allows our faith to be tested and proven. It is easy to be faithful when everything is unfolding in an orderly and desirable manner. It takes little faith when everything is going along smoothly. However, it is quite another thing when trials and

temptations appear. Sadly, the roads of life are strewn with innumerable people who abandoned the faith they professed when they encountered hardship. Jesus highlighted them in His well-known Parable of the Sower.

Matthew 13:20–22 (ESV) 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, 21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Trials and temptations reveal the genuineness of our faith. Scripture points out that trials come . . .

1 Peter 1:7 (ESV) 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes temptation happens in the most unlikely places. Who would have thought Potiphar’s wife would set her eyes on a slave? She enjoyed great privilege as the wife of one of Pharaoh’s officers. She surely had all the possessions she wanted and her needs were cared for. But despite all the material possessions and power she wielded, she had an emptiness within that she tried to fill. She, like multitudes today, rather than turning to God and embracing His truth and the provisions He offers, would try to fill the void within with sensual pleasure.

For those of us who have placed our faith and trust in Jesus Christ as God’s provision for our salvation, Scripture assures us that when we are tempted, the Lord always provides a way out.

1 Corinthians 10:13 (ESV) 13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

In Joseph’s case the way out was very simply to flee – to run from her.

Refusing to yield to temptation is not always easy and often comes with a cost. In Joseph’s case it would be an enormous cost. He would be falsely accused of doing the very thing he refused to do. The consequences wouldn’t be minor, but he would be imprisoned for a crime he didn’t commit. Being in prison was no hotel type of experience, but a place of horror and hardship. When we faithfully walk with the Lord, He often blesses us and protects us from danger and hardship, but sometimes it is our steadfastness for Him and His truth that brings hardship and persecution. Countless believers in the first century were tortured and some martyred. However, persecution of believers wasn’t limited to the early centuries of the Church, but

remains common in the world today. Christians face untold reprisals and persecution for no reason other than their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

A final **Nugget of Truth** I will draw attention to is, **Resist Temptation, No Matter How Appealing It May Be, or How Many May Sanction It.**

The Forgotten Sufferer

I conclude today's message with Joseph locked away in an Egyptian prison for a crime he wasn't guilty of. His faithfulness to God put him there. However, once again Joseph remained faithful. Just as he decided when he was made a slave, he would be the best slave in Egypt, he then decided if he was to be a prisoner, he would be the best prisoner in Egypt. Joseph set aside bitterness and anger in favor of trustworthiness and faithfulness. The Lord chose to honor Joseph and before long Joseph was put in charge of the prisoners.

Genesis 39:21–23 (ESV) 21 But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. 22 And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. 23 The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed.

But even in prison Joseph was betrayed once again. After he interpreted the dreams of two of pharaoh's servants, the cupbearer who was restored to his former position forgot Joseph languishing in prison.

Genesis 40:23 (ESV) Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Conclusion

Three **Nuggets of Truth** to deduct from the account of Joseph, the first of Jacob's sons to arrive in Egypt are:

1. Set Aside Bitterness
2. No Matter What! Always Determine to Faithfully Serve the Lord
3. Resist Temptation, No Matter How Appealing It May Be, or How Many May Sanction It

As you reflect on these **Nuggets of Truth** listen to the hymn, *Search Me, O God* written by J. Edwin Orr in 1936. It is sung by George Younce and Glen Payne

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rY8bMkUipM&ab_channel=BnCSGMusic