

**“Giving Thanks in the Land of Affliction”**

“God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction” (Genesis 41:52).

2023 has been a grim and disheartening year. This year set a record for natural disasters in the United States as floods and fires occurred with shocking consistency. And so far in 2023, there have been 611 mass shootings in our country. This year we have also become accustomed to daily images of suffering and loss from two terrifying wars, and even in our own lives, 2023 has brought the uncertainty of illness and the sting of death. Sorrows and tragedies like these are reminders that this isn't the way life is supposed to be; that when God created the world it was perfect and without suffering. But, of course, we all know the story of the Fall, and we also recognize in our own hearts and lives the corrupting consequences of sin, and these realities leave us with a desperate desire for life to be different.

And, because this is true, a day like Thanksgiving can stir a real sense of conflict inside of us because as we give thanks for God's provision we also see diseases that go unhealed, and we experience rifts in relationships that remain unreconciled, and we miss people who died too soon, and on a day like Thanksgiving, this tension between the ideal and the real can leave us in a place of dissonance where the devil tempts us to ignore brokenness and suffering and instead to indulge without thinking about anything that might ruin the good feelings of the day. And that is why today's text is so important.

Today, we will learn from the life of Joseph – not the Christmas Joseph, but the Old Testament Joseph whose coat of many colors became the flashpoint for one the greatest stories in the Bible. As you probably remember, Joseph was one of Jacob's twelve sons, and he was his father's favorite. This fact was not lost on his brothers and because of Jacob's gift of an elaborate, multicolored robe, combined with Joseph's dreams of his brothers bowing down to him, their frustration with Joseph turned murderous. After throwing Joseph in a pit to die, the brothers soon discovered that they could actually get rid of Joseph and also put a little money in their pockets by selling him into slavery. So they pulled him out of the pit and sold Joseph to a caravan of Ishmaelites who carted him off to Egypt where Joseph was ultimately imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. For thirteen years, Joseph was a slave and prisoner in an Egyptian jail until one day when Joseph interpreted the dreams of the Pharaoh. As a result of this encounter with Pharaoh, Joseph was released from prison and given a position of leadership as Pharaoh's second in command.

Joseph's rise to power is an amazing story that ends in a prosperity that he could have never predicted and can only be described as a miracle. And as Joseph reflected on the path that took him from prison cell to throne room literally overnight, and as he pondered how God had so abundantly blessed him, Joseph was still haunted by his brothers' betrayal. In fact, we get a sense of this from the name Joseph gave to his firstborn son. In today's text, we are told that Joseph named the boy Manasseh (which means “to forget”) and then Joseph said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.” In this statement, Joseph seems to have put his traumatic past behind him and embraced his new and prosperous life in Egypt.

And yet, as it is with so many of us, the events of the past lingered in Joseph's mind, and even with all of the wealth, power, and honor he had experienced in Egypt it was also clear to him that this material success was not his true identity nor was it the essence of his life. And this understanding of his past was reflected in the name Joseph gave to his second son. The name was Ephraim. At face value the name Ephraim means “fruitful” and yet what Joseph says on the occasion of his christening tells us

much more than we could ever know from this simple name. You see when he named his second son, Joseph proclaimed, “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” In these cryptic words, Joseph confessed the truth that in reality Egypt was not the land of promise and prosperity, but rather it was the land of slavery and imprisonment. To put it simply, Egypt was not his home, and Joseph’s proper identity and the essence of his life was actually back in the Promised Land, in his father’s house.

Egypt was the land of his affliction and it made absolutely no sense that Joseph should have power and wealth in this foreign land. But God, in His grace, had taken the bleak and broken reality bestowed on Joseph by his brothers and He had blessed Joseph in unexpected and unimaginable ways. And this truth has great meaning for us today. You see, it’s easy for us to forget that this is a land of affliction. We have the best medical care mankind has ever known, and technology allows us freedoms that just a few years ago would have been inconceivable, and even with all of its problems, our country is still a place where a person can work hard and make a living. But don’t think for a minute that this place is your identity or the essence of your life.

Today, God calls us to remember that this is a broken and cursed land, and that neither this world nor this country is the place where our lives will be truly fulfilled. This is a fallen world and, if you think about the scope and span of human history, the cosmetic comforts and material happiness we experience today are chance exceptions in a creation that has always groaned for redemption. The only way to properly appreciate this temporary and transient existence is to understand that everything we have or use or enjoy in this life is an undeserved, unmerited, and unearned gift from the Lord. Or in the language of Joseph, that God has made us fruitful in the “land of our affliction” (Genesis 41:52).

It is completely unreasonable and makes no sense that a holy, just, and all-powerful God would bless us sinners with good things. So why does He do it? What causes God to give sinners like us anything but punishment? The answer to this question is life-changing and it is life-giving. *He does it because of Jesus!* He does it because Jesus, our brother in the flesh, offered himself as a substitute for us; He does it because Jesus, our brother in the flesh, stood in our place as the sacrifice for sin; He does it because Jesus, our brother in the flesh, took the punishment we deserved on the cross and there, afflicted, and alone, He died for us. And because of this unimaginable and undeserved act of love, our sins are not counted against us – no matter how shameful, or willful, or awful they may be. Today, in the cross of Christ Jesus, God sees you as the perfect, righteous, and holy child He created you to be.

Today, through the story of Joseph, we understand that every inch and ounce of the prosperity and security we may have experienced in this life are always and only gifts of God. And as we recognize the provision of God in the midst of this broken world, today we can give thanks in humility, and tomorrow we can reach out to help others in their needs, and we can give out of our abundance and out of poverty because our identity and the essence of our life are not found in the things of this world, but in God’s promise of the world to come. And in Christ Jesus, our future in our Father’s house is certain...even as we live in this land of affliction. Give thanks and go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

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