

## "The Power of Faith In The Promise Of God"

Often when I talk with people about what faith would look like in their situation I get push back in the form of reasons and excuses as to why trusting God, doing what God calls them to do and forgiving others, is too hard in their case or in light of their situation and emotions. *"If you knew what my children, my husband, my family, my partner did to me you would understand!"* - *"If you knew the injustice I have suffered...."* The thing is I get it. I know how I also struggle whenever I feel I am suffering unfairly or worse, have in some way been betrayed. In Genesis Joseph faces both. I think unjust suffering and personal betrayal are two of the toughest things to face. In fact I believe if you learn to deal with these challenges well you will find that in doing so you have gained the wisdom and strength to stand with light in your eyes and love in your heart no matter what.

What does it take to do that? I wish I had a clever way to lead up to the answer and surprise you with it but I don't. *The answer is faith.* It is often frustrating for struggling people to hear that but don't tune it out. An old Scottish preacher said: *"It's one thing to have a creed but another thing to have faith."* A creed is what you say you believe. That's important. Your creed needs to be right. But your creed is not your faith. ***Faith is believing what you say you believe when it matters most.*** The book of Genesis ends with the story of Joseph. Joseph is a man who learns to live what he says he believes even when suffering injustice and betrayal.

In our series on *The Story of God and the Struggles of Life* we started with *How the World Began* in the first chapters of Genesis and then moved to *The Struggle to Believe*, for the story of Abraham and his descendants. God chose Abraham so he and his family could be a source of blessing for the whole world. God said, through them, the promised Savior would one day come. The God who fulfilled his promises in the life of Abraham was at work in the life of his son Issac and his grandson Jacob who was Joseph's father. At one point Jacob he had a profound experience with God. God appeared to him in the form of a man. Jacob wrestled with him demanding God bless him. He left that experience with permanent limp but that limp was a symbol of a persevering dependence on God. His name Jacob meant schemer but God changed his name to Israel, which means he who struggles with God. In time, Jacob's sons became the twelve tribes of Israel.

We won't understand the verses we are looking at today unless we review some of Joseph's strange story also. Joseph was His father Jacob, or Israel's, favorite son. His father gave him a beautiful coat and God gave him prophetic dreams and his brothers hated him for it. They really hated him. They planned to kill him but they changed their minds, they stripped off the coat, threw Joseph down a well, and then later, in the first case of human trafficking in the Bible, they hauled him up and sold him as a slave to a caravan headed for Egypt. Sold into slavery he is then accused of immorality and assault and thrown into prison. And God doesn't keep Joseph from experiencing all these things but God is with him in the midst of all these things.

Then in God's time, from this place of darkness and forced humility, God gives Joseph favor in the eyes of his masters. God raises Joseph up through a prophetic gift that enables him to interpret dreams. Joseph is raised up to be the second most powerful man in all of Egypt. He is given control of all the food and grain. Because of the blessing, wisdom and revelation of God he is able to save food for a time of famine and his actions not only save the people of Egypt from starvation but his own family. His own family is forced to go down to Egypt to get food. When they come to Egypt they don't recognize Joseph at first. But Joseph eventually tells them who he is. He reveals Himself, tells his story, forgives them and takes care of them. At the end of Genesis Jacob, or Israel, dies and Joseph's brothers come to him afraid that his forgiveness was just for his father's sake. Jacob weeps at their lack of faith in his forgiveness. He reveals his heart to them and, as he does, God reveals to us the power of faith.

The heart of this story is found in the three statements Joseph makes to his brothers in **Genesis 50:19-21**. 1.) **Verse 19**, *But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?"* 2.) **Verse 20**, *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.* 3.) **Verse 21** *So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones."* Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

*The first statement teaches us that...*

**I. IF WE BELIEVE WHAT WE SAY WE BELIEVE WE WILL BE CAREFUL NOT TO TAKE THE PLACE OF GOD.**

Look at **verse 19**: But Joseph said to them, *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?"* This is an issue that goes all through the Bible.

***We say we believe that God alone is God then we act as if we have the right to take God's place in judging and punishing others.*** If we truly believe what we say we believe we won't do that. Joseph's brothers were understandably afraid that he is angry and wants to get even. He says, *No, I'm not going to hold a grudge against you, Am I in the place of God?*

We're human and we get wounded. If someone hurts you and harms you, you may not trust them like you once did, you probably shouldn't, but you cannot hate them, nurse a grudge against them or climb up into a throne of judgment to render final verdict on them. God says, *"Get out of that chair! That's my chair".* **Romans 12:17-19:** *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*

***One reason the Bible warns us not to take the place of God is that we are not able to do so without damaging ourselves.*** That's an important issue and it doesn't matter whether we're talking about something big or small. With Joseph on the one hand what had been done to him was huge on the other hand *and* he ended up in a position to absolutely destroy his brothers but C. S. Lewis points out that none of that changes the core issue. In *Mere Christianity* he writes:

One man may be so placed that his anger sheds the blood of thousands and another so placed that however angry he gets he will only be laughed at. But the little mark on the soul may be much the same in both. Each has done something to himself... Each of them, if he seriously turns to God, can have that twist in the central man straightened out again.... The bigness or smallness of the thing seen from the outside is not what really matters. <sup>1</sup>

In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Mere mortals cannot use the ring of power, even in the cause of goodness, without it corrupting them. You have to give it up, throw it in the crack of doom, or it will corrupt you. Bitterness, a grudge is like that. It is so powerful you cannot use without it damaging your own soul. Tim Keller said *"The irony is the quickest way to become like Satan is to try to be God."* The Bible encourages us to be godly in our character but it never tells us to play God or put ourselves in the place of God. *If we believe what we say we believe we will refuse to take the place of God.*

*That's the first statement. The second statement teaches us that...*

## **II. IF WE BELIEVE WHAT WE SAY WE BELIEVE WE WILL TRUST THAT THE HAND OF GOD IS GUIDING OUR LIVES.**

**Genesis 50:20** *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Joseph doesn't excuse what they did or why they did it. He says: You intended to harm me. Joseph was a real person, I'm pretty sure he not only felt rejected by his brothers but was tempted to feel abandoned by God. But Joseph saw that even in the harmful choices of human beings God can be working out a purpose that serves a higher good and helps others in such a way that he is glorified in our lives through the very things that look like a mistake, a disappointment or a tragedy to us.*

***What Joseph believed in was the providence of God.*** *The Westminster Confession Of Faith* defines providence. It says,

God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. (*WESTMINSTER CONFESSIO OF FAITH, CHAPTER V, Of Providence*)

That's a creed – a confession. That's important but what has to happen is we have to believe what we say we believe when real life happens.

***God providence always serves his promises.*** We tend to see these Bible stories through the lens of our personal experience and understandably looking for practical help with our lives. And that is all there to be found in the story but there is a larger lens also. The book of Genesis gives Joseph's story more space and time than any of Genesis' other main characters. This is remarkable because the promised seed comes through Judah not Joseph. Why is so much time spent on Joseph? Because Joseph's story shows how God colors outside the lines in surprising ways to providentially protect his promise. Throughout Genesis there have been three recurring threats that endanger the promise that God would bless the world through Abraham's descendants. In the closing chapters of Genesis (37-50) all the threats converge creating a seemingly dire situation. 1.) There is relational division and violence in the family

reminiscent of Cain and Abel <sup>2</sup>that threatens to destroy the family. 2.) There is spiritual compromise and evil <sup>3</sup> as the children of Abraham intermarry with foreign and pagan nations the spiritual purity of the family is at risk. 3.) There is a global famine <sup>4</sup> that threatens to endanger the physical survival of the family. God works in the Joseph story to resolve every one of these issues. 1.) Joseph chooses reconciliation instead of revenge and preserves the family unity by offering grace and forgiveness. 2.) Joseph settles the family in Goshen, where they are shielded from the larger pagan influences of Egypt. It helps that the Egyptians are prejudiced against the Jews and don't want to intermarry or mix with them. 3.) Joseph, having risen to high position is able to preserve his family in spite of the severe famine. God is working to unravel the threat of violence through forgiveness, unrighteousness through separation, and hunger through wisdom. Not only does God's providence preserve Joseph and his family but, just as he promised Abraham, God blesses the world through Joseph's wise administration of food in the famine. The Joseph story isn't just the last story in Genesis. It is the resolution of the Genesis story. It is showing us that God will work providentially to secure his promises no matter what.

The *revealed truth* - the creed - Joseph had available to him was much smaller than what we have. Alexander MacLaren wrote this.

Incomplete as his creed was. Joseph may have been a better Christian than some of us, and was so, if what he knew nourished his spiritual life more than what we know nourishes ours, and if his heart and will twined more tenaciously round the fragments of revelation which he possessed and drew from them more support and strength than we do from the complete gospel which we have. (MacLaren, *Genesis*, p. 316)

When I was a younger Christian and I would hear a message or read a book that told me I needed to believe more I would struggle with how to do that. It was frustrating, "*how do I believe more?*" I looked for answers and discovered there weren't any that satisfied me. I was quoted **Romans 10:17**, which says *faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ*. That was helpful but still left me with the reality that I knew people who knew the Bible well but struggled to believe it when it mattered most. I had the same struggle. I wanted someone to give me three steps to greater faith but I discovered that neither psychiatry nor theology could tell me how to believe more. But then at some point it struck me that the Bible that continually tells

that we need to believe never tells us how to do it. That became a clue for me. Perhaps believing is at the same time so simple and so complex there is no way to tell someone how to do it.

What if I told you to take your hand and place it over your heart. And you said to me, *How do I do that?* How could I explain it? How do you get your brain to send a message to your nerves so that muscles move? On the one hand it is too complicated to explain on the other hand it is simple. Why is it that Jesus never hesitates or stops calling us to believe and yet never takes time to tell us how? Maybe because it isn't something that can be explained like that. I realized that by asking how do I believe I was asking a question that had no end or answer. If the person said, you have to trust deeply, I could just ask, *How do I do that?* Well, you have to have faith and rest in God, *How do I do that?* At some point my frustrated questions came to be recognized as a huge distraction from the deeper work to which Scripture and Jesus called. Believing is such a deep, innate movement of the soul that there is nothing underneath it that can serve as steps for how to do it. So begin where you are today, and with whatever matters most right now. Fight for your faith. You learn by doing, you stumble like Abraham and wrestle like Jacob, but you don't give up. I'm sure Joseph had to fight many inward battles. If anyone had good reason to be bitter, and cynical Joseph did but what you see in his story is that ***because God is faithful to fulfill his promises we can believe what we say we believe.***

*We can trust that the hand of God is guiding our story. The third statement is in verse 21, Joseph says: So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.* The words He spoke kindly to them in Hebrew are literally, he spoke to their hearts. They had been cruel to him. They tried to ruin his life. It looked as if they had. They had been enemies more than brothers. But he is loving his enemies with practical love and kindness.

*So the third lesson is this...*

### **III. IF WE BELIEVE WHAT WE SAY WE BELIEVE WE CAN TRULY SHARE THE LOVE OF GOD.**

There is a great little commentary on the book of Genesis by a Scholar named Derek Kidner. Listen to what he says about this:

“Each statement of the threefold reply is a pinnacle of Old Testament and New Testament faith. To leave all the righting of

wrongs to God (v. 19), to see God's providing hand in man's malice (v. 20), and to repay evil not only with forgiveness but with practical affection (v. 21). These are attitudes which anticipate Christ-likeness.” (Kidner, Genesis, p. 224)

***God embedded, in the story of Joseph, the pattern that would be more completely fulfilled in the life of Christ.*** There is betrayal, unjust suffering, faith and submission through it all, and then out of the depths of what seemed a hopeless situation, an incredible resurrection, and exaltation, and as a result salvation for the very people who caused his suffering. Joseph standing before the brothers who had sinned against him, speaking to their hearts to reassure them of his forgiveness is a powerful picture of Jesus Christ.

***This story calls us first of all to identify with the brothers and receive and believe in the grace we are offered.*** Jesus is the beautiful, blessed and highly favored Son of God. We're all a part of the sin problem in this world. We've all committed big or little betrayals and or caused suffering. We've all sinned against God more than we want to know. We have every reason to expect harsh judgment from him. But he offers us kindness and grace. He saves us. His suffering pays for our sins. His kindness offers us reconciliation. You have to receive it. The brothers were driven to Joseph by a famine. You are facing something just as serious. A spiritual famine. He is the only one you can turn to who can ultimately give you what you need. So humble yourself and turn to him. You can't earn and you don't deserve what he has to give you. So don't try just turn and trust.

***Once we have received grace, empowered grace we can identify with Joseph and share the grace we've been given.*** We are found in the favored Son, clothed in his righteousness we can afford to show kindness. We are blessed so we can be a blessing. You may think in your case your anger or bitterness is *righteous* anger, or righteous bitterness (does that exist?) But the very thing you think makes it “righteous” to be angry, that the very thing you are called to forgive.

## CONCLUSION

Because God keeps his promises you can believe what you say you believe. You can refuse to take the place of God. You can see his hand guiding your life. You can truly share the love of God.

**Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. and amp. Ed (New York; Harper San Francisco, 2009), 93

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 37; cf. Genesis 4

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 38; cf. Genesis 12:10-20

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 42:1-2; cf. Genesis 12:10, 26:1