

## Joseph: Cultivating faithfulness

**PP** Who can tell me where this quote is from? : *“Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get.”* [Forrest Gump]

Well, up to this point Joseph's life seemed a bit like the Forrest Gump's saying - “life is like a box of chocolates”; his life had taken varied and unpredictable turns. Though as a young boy, he knew God destined him for greatness, he had so far endured betrayal, slavery, sexual temptation, false accusation, and imprisonment. These are pretty horrible things to experience, and hardly the kinds of things that would lead us to think Joseph was actually on the path toward greatness as God promised.

As we think about this, it may be that some of us have experienced a similar 'box of chocolates' way of life. You, like Joseph, have faced horrible seasons; seasons you did not expect would form part of your journey as a follower of Jesus. Maybe you've had to live in hard places. Perhaps you've been working a job that utilised very little of the gifts and talents God has given you. Seasons like these can drive us to impatiently wonder: *Where is God? What purpose could he possibly have for this difficult season of life?* As time goes on, and these impatient questions fade, and perhaps we find wiser questions guiding our thoughts. Questions like: *As a person who believes in God and follows Jesus, what attitudes and characteristics are worth cultivating during this difficult season of life?* I believe Joseph's story has a great deal to teach us about answering this wiser question of cultivating attitudes and characteristics when life is hard.

### Introduction:

Let's begin by reminding ourselves that Joseph had been a successful, loyal and faithful servant of a high ranking Egyptian official. Yet through a false accusation of sexual misconduct, he was thrown in prison. So, in addition to having been abandoned and sold into slavery as a young man, life had taken yet another undesired turn for Joseph. And it's here in this difficult season of life – when Joseph's in prison on false charges – that we learn of God's nearness to Joseph. Listen to these words: **PP** (Genesis 39:21) *“But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison.”* That is a remarkable statement about God's disposition toward his people when they experience difficult seasons in life.

## Cultivating Faithfulness

Now our passage is dealing with Joseph's time in prison as he experienced the steadfast love of God. And what we find is that Joseph used this time to cultivate 'faithfulness'. And by "cultivate" I simply mean Joseph kept plugging away at doing the right thing, even though, as you and I could well imagine, doing the exact opposite would be far easier; and may even feel more natural.

Here's what I mean: When people treat us unjustly our temptation is to respond in similarly unjust ways. *If you're mean to me, I'll be mean to you. If you slander me, I'll be sure to repay you the same.* That's our natural impulse, right? There's a saying which sums it up nicely: "If you can't beat them, join them." In other words, when others mistreat you, why not respond by mistreating others yourself?

But Joseph was different. He did not get stroppy or make life hard for others. Instead, as one who cultivated faithfulness, he was helpful and responsible. Instead of repaying evil with evil, Joseph did good towards others. See this in verse 4: **PP** "[when two new prisoners joined Joseph] *The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them...*" It's not easy, but this is one of the great and world confronting things that Jesus' followers are called to do. In writing to Christians who, like Joseph, were treated unjustly, the Apostle Peter said: **PP** (1 Peter 3:9) "*Do not repay evil for evil... but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.*" So if you learn nothing else from this message, I am asking you, if you are a follower of Jesus, put into action one of the most revolutionary teachings of Jesus: To "*love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" We see something of this profound wisdom of Jesus to confront evil with good, in Joseph.

### Specifics:

We can also detect other specific ways in which Joseph cultivated faithfulness while wrongly imprisoned? Let's take a closer look. Two new inmates joined Joseph - Pharaoh's cupbearer and his baker. These men were tasked with keeping the Pharaoh in supply of safe drink and food. Through some unknown misconduct, the Pharaoh sacked and imprisoned them both. And these inmates find themselves on the receiving end of Joseph's cultivated faithfulness. Here's how:

## Joseph was: PP

1. ...mindful of others (v6). [not caught up in himself, which is so easy to do in difficult seasons.]
2. ...motivated to engage in conversations about God with unbelievers (v.8).
3. ...making use of his God-given gifts (12-13, 18-19). [he interpreted the dreams]
4. ... yet Joseph also experiencing that cultivating faithfulness does not provide immediate release from an unjust situation (v. 14, 23)

These are all ways in which cultivated faithfulness expressed itself in difficult seasons of Joseph's life. But let me just say a few things about that last point. When facing unjust hardships in life, we may be tempted to think if we just do the right thing and honour God with our faithful conduct, God will surely take our hardships away that we might prosper [by which we usually mean a comfortable lifestyle and material wealth]. But take a look at Joseph. We know God was showing him steadfast love while in prison; and Joseph responded with unrelenting integrity and faithfulness; and yet his hardship remained. In fact, Joseph would stay in prison another 2 years before tasting freedom again. So all I'm trying to say is, don't cultivate faithfulness in order to trade it with God for an easy life. You may not get an easy life, and yet faithfulness is still what you are called to do as a follower of Jesus.

That's a hard lessons for us. So hard, some of use raise the question: If faithfulness doesn't get me what I want out of life, if faithfulness doesn't necessarily mean a shortening to my hard season of life, what's the use?. Why bother with faithfulness if it doesn't produce immediate results?

### **In faithfulness, blessing is given**

That's a question worth exploring, I think. And looking in the Bible, we find that cultivating faithfulness is worthwhile – even if it doesn't produce immediate results – because faithfulness provides a foundation for future blessing. Jesus said it this way: PP (Luke 16:10) *“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much...”* It seems a fact of Scripture, that learning faithfulness in small things is foundational to faithfulness in larger things. See how routinely this fact is also played out in other sphere's of life – we have to crawl before we walk; you have to be a junior accountant before being a senior accountant; you're an apprentice before becoming a tradesman.

My point is this: Sometimes, we discover that faithfulness in the hard seasons was God's way of preparing us to faithfully handle a future season of life. For Joseph, a future season of life out-of-prison positioned as the second most powerful man in all Egypt was coming. But to prepare him for that season, he lived the wisdom of Jesus by being faithful in a tiny sphere of prison-life in order to be faithful in governing the Egyptian empire. Furthermore, if we go forward a chapter, we can see how Joseph's faithfulness in prison actually directly translated into faithfulness when he governed the Egyptian Empire: **PPx3**

1. Remember, in the small sphere of prison Joseph faithfully cared for two prisoners. In time, this faithfulness flourished in his care for an entire nation in a time of famine.
2. Remember Joseph was motivated to engage lowly prisoners with conversation about God. In time, this faithfulness flourished to the point he was able to evangelise the most powerful man in the known world, the Pharaoh of Egypt.
3. Remember, in prison Joseph faithfully exercised the gifts and wisdom God gave him. In time, this faithfulness flourished as Joseph continued to use the gifts and wisdom to manage the affairs of an entire country.

And now listen to this: If Joseph had not been in this horrible position – having been sold into slavery, wrongly imprisoned, and yet having demonstrated long term faithfulness in prison – he would not have risen to the rank he did in Egypt whereby he would eventually rescue his own family from starvation, preserving them so that one day the Jesus would be born.

So let's get something else fixed in our minds. Cultivating faithfulness in small arenas over the long haul, however small and insignificant that may seem, can have profound affects far beyond our estimation. I'm sure Joseph could not possibly conceive that cultivating faithfulness in a prison would one day lead to the preservation of multiple nations during extreme famine. So please, do not diminish or ridicule the small acts of faithfulness you are able to perform today. For instance, getting up and preparing for church. Singing praise. Praying. Hearing the Bible read and preached in community. These are small steps of faithfulness you took today. Who knows what unimaginable consequences for good that routine step of faithfulness will yield?

**Lessons:**

So where to from here? Some of us have been terribly delinquent in our faithfulness. We pray little, we attend church little, we fellowship little, we think of God little, we give little, we barely open our Bibles – if ever. If you're following Jesus, he's calling you to faithfulness. First in little things, and then perhaps much more. So step one, some of us need to do some repentance and ask the Lord for mercy and strength to cultivate faithfulness in small areas of our lives.

Secondly, some of us have been faithful over the long haul. We've kept plugging away at doing the right thing. In the little we have, we've enjoyed honouring Jesus by being routinely faithful. God knows. He delights in the fruit of your devotion to him. He sees the character that he is shaping in you, and whether you get to be faithful in more is up to God. But know this: Small, yet routine steps of faithfulness has the potential to yield far more than we may see in our lifetime. This was true for Joseph. His faithfulness meant the preserving of Jesus family tree so that one day this Jesus would be born.

And why does that matter? Because this Jesus is the redeemer of his people. He takes away their sin. He transforms their lives. He makes them love God and others in ways they could not possible do without him. And he sends them as ambassadors of his coming Kingdom with a message of reconciliation with God through him.