

Finishing the Race

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I believe that God calls every Christian into some form of Christian service. We are all called to serve Him in some capacity or "ministry." Some of these ministries involve visible skills and abilities. The apostle, the prophet, the pastor, the teacher, and the evangelist all speak very publicly for the Lord. Then there are the less visible areas of ministry such as those who administrate, minister to the sick, extend hospitality, show mercy and so forth (ref. Rom 12:6-8).

Yet despite this life-long ministry call, every believer experiences times of seeming inactivity. There are times when the Lord "puts you on the shelf" and seems to forget about you. Such periods are common to all who in any way serve the Lord. These times of inactivity are usually times of inward deepening in the Lord. If the Lord has you in this place of quiet deepening, keep on keeping on! But I want to direct this teaching to another group. My concern is for that group of Christians who have become so discouraged that they have ceased to serve the Lord in an active way.

Most to be pitied are those I occasionally encounter who say, "I used to be active in the Lord's work" then immediately begin to explain why they no longer are. Some of the reasons sound very valid. But, in my mind's eye, their explanation can be summed up this way: they have been knocked out of the race. They are no longer in the Lord's service. The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of this possibility for he wrote:

...I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:12-14 NIV).

Why Do Some Not Stay In the Race?

For years I pondered this question -- especially after an encounter with one who had quit or dropped out of the race. The usual answer is "simple" but not very revealing: they failed to overcome the obstacles. I believe a thoughtful examination of the life of Joseph will clarify why some seem to be able to overcome every obstacle in their path and others do not. The story of Joseph is found in Genesis, beginning in chapter 37. In the interest of space I will give an overview of Joseph's story rather than include the lengthy passage of Scripture.

Joseph's Story

Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob. Because he was the son of Jacob's old age, Joseph was his favorite. Understandably, this favoritism evoked great jealousy from his older brothers. To make matters worse, Joseph had a dream in which his father, his mother, and all his brothers bowed down before him -- and he was foolish enough to tell the dream to his family.

One day Jacob sent Joseph to gather news from his older brothers who were tending herds some distance from Jacob's

tent. Overcome by their jealousy and hatred of Joseph, they mistreated him and ended up selling him as a slave to a caravan going to Egypt. To cover their evil deed they told their father that an animal had killed him.

But in Egypt, God's favor rested on young Joseph. He became the servant of Potiphar, Pharaoh's captain of the guard. God blessed everything he did. Potiphar promoted him to chief steward over his household. One day Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. Joseph nobly refused, escaping her clutches by leaving his robe in her grasping hands. Angered by his refusal, she then accused him to Potiphar who had Joseph thrown in prison.

Even in prison, God's favor rested on Joseph in such a manner that the jailer made him overseer of the other prisoners. Two of Pharaoh's servants were also in prison. One morning both of them shared puzzling dreams they had had the previous night. Joseph interpreted their dreams accurately. To the one who formerly was Pharaoh's cup bearer, Joseph told him he would be restored to his position as cup bearer. Joseph asked the cup bearer to remember him to Pharaoh upon his release. It appears that Joseph was seeking release from the injustice of his imprisonment. But once restored, the cup bearer promptly forgot all about Joseph.

One night Pharaoh had two troubling dreams. He sought the interpretation of these dreams from his magicians but they were powerless to give an accurate interpretation. The cup bearer then remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh about his ability to interpret dreams. Joseph was promptly ushered into Pharaoh's presence. Very quickly he gave the correct interpretation of Pharaoh's troubling dreams.

The dreams predicted seven years of agricultural plenty and seven years of famine. Joseph then began to tell Pharaoh how to store up the excess grain of the seven years of plenty to carry the nation over the years of famine.

Pharaoh was so impressed that he appointed Joseph overseer of this project since it was Joseph who had interpreted the dream. In fact, Pharaoh gave Joseph authority over all Egypt! He was second only to Pharaoh himself.

During the seven years of famine Joseph's brothers came to Egypt begging to purchase grain. They didn't recognize the now middle-aged Joseph who was about 17 when they sold him into slavery. Yes, during the process of making their purchase, they did bow down before Joseph! After all, he was the highest officer in Pharaoh's court.

Isn't it amazing how 17 year-old Joseph's dream came to pass? Isn't it wonderful to see how God promoted him? But it was years later, wasn't it? This is quite often the way God operates. He gives us a glimpse of what He has in store for us then sets in motion the events necessary to bring the vision or dream to pass. This usually takes years. It can often take decades. And often we, like Joseph, are a different person by the time it does come to pass. To those looking on from the outside, the tendency is to focus only on the end result. But...

What Did God Do To Get Joseph There?

Let us equate Joseph's dream with God's call to service. When God calls us to service we are often just like Joseph in that we see only the end. "Glory to God! All these people are bowing down to me!" we say as we visualize a "successful" ministry. How many young evangelists have seen themselves standing before thousands "just like Billy Graham!"?

But a lot happened in Joseph's life between the dream at age 17 and its fulfillment years later! It was during those years that God performed the necessary adjustments in Joseph's life that enabled him to fulfill God's call. In His infinite wisdom God sees the place He wants us to be but He also sees problems in our character that would get us into trouble if the vision was immediately fulfilled. It is the correction of these problems that leads us into pain and tribulation.

To further complicate matters we are incapable of seeing the hindrances in our own hearts and lives that inhibit our walk with the Lord. Only God sees them clearly. Soon after the ministry call, He begins to set in motion His plan to remove those hindrances. Let's look at how God worked in Joseph's life and see what we may learn.

1. Other People

In our eyes, problems in our Christian walk are often caused by others; their lack of consideration, their failure to recognize our obvious talent, their sin, and so forth. And this includes others in the church. Some of them are outright rude and unkind. None of us like to deal with such unpleasant people. It's much easier to be spiritual all by ourselves, isn't it? It's just me and God -- He is so compatible, so easy to get along with. God is so wonderful!

It's those other people that make life so hard. There are times when our brothers and sisters in the church treat us just as Joseph's brothers treated him. It's hard when anyone tells lies about you, falsely accuses or cheats you...but it's so much more difficult when your Christian brothers and sisters do it!

Yes, those who mistreat you are in sin. Yes, they are wrong. And, yes, they must answer to God for their wrong doing. But we too have a responsibility before God in such matters. That ugly thing that rises up in our hearts that wants to vindicate self and see those who have wronged us punished must go. That ugly thing is our own sin.

God has made provision for the removal of this kind of sin and it can be reached only through the door of forgiveness. We must forgive if we want to be free of it. We must forgive even if the lies continue. While hanging on the cross of Calvary, with the jeers of His accusers assaulting His ears, Jesus cried, "Father, forgive them!"

The issue is not whether they deserve forgiveness, or whether they have repented, or whether they have asked for our forgiveness. These things are not even to be considered. Absolute, unconditional forgiveness is God's demand. But you say, "It will take years for me to get over the hurt." That may well be true of the hurt, but the forgiveness can be immediate. Forgiveness is an act of the will. Leave the rest with Jesus. Joseph clearly forgave his brothers, didn't he? For when they

came to Egypt for grain Joseph wept with joy at seeing them. Yes, God often uses people, our brothers and sisters, to purify our hearts.

2. Slavery, Our Instructor

Joseph was sold into slavery, a system that viewed him only in terms of his monetary value. The world views us in much the same way. The demands of the world are similarly pressed on us involuntarily. Sometimes these demands are harsh and unfair, and even harmful to us. And they seem endless. The world does not care that you are "Christian." In fact, when it learns that you are a Christian, the pressure often increases.

Often, like Joseph must have felt, we think there is no end in sight. The world says you will always be a slave to it. The future holds nothing pleasant. It will always be this way. There are no means of escape. Like Joseph, you may well be promoted to "head slave" but you can't escape the fact that you are a slave!

But that's not all...it gets worse!

3. Along Came Mrs. Potiphar

One day we begin to accept the fact that even though we are in the world, we are not really a part of it. We are alien captives in it, our true home is with the Lord in the heavenlies. We know that we are different. You see, the Holy Spirit is working in us. He has in-worked the purity of the Lord through the Word and His progressive sanctification.

As a result of the inward work of the Holy Spirit a spiritual light begins to shine from within us. A light that is pure but it is also a light that reveals the sin and darkness of the world. The darkness doesn't like the light. It doesn't want to be revealed for what it is. Darkness then invites the light to join in the deeds of darkness and thereby extinguish the light. The world says, "Come join us. Why don't you be like us? We'll have lots of fun. Come on...." But true light refuses to do so. What happens when this refusal is firm? Darkness then aggressively attacks the light. It viciously wants to extinguish the light's revealing rays.

Darkness often tries to extinguish the light by defilement. If that which is unholy can defile the holy, the light can be extinguished. Joseph's light was shining brightly in Potiphar's house. He clearly recognized this principle and firmly refused Mrs. Potiphar when he told her, "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Gen 39:9 NIV emphasis added).

Like Joseph, there comes a time in every servant of God's life when he or she makes a choice: Am I going to allow myself to become defiled by the world, or am I going to remain pure in my walk before God? Defilement isn't always sexual sin, or alcohol, or the more obvious sins. Defilement comes in many forms. One may sell out through the love of money, a desire for things, a desire for power over others, and so forth. And, to state the obvious, church leaders are certainly not immune from these forms of potential defilement. Every single one of us must guard our hearts and minds against such temptations.

No, the Mrs. Potiphars of our world don't like it when we refuse their invitations. When we refuse to participate in their

sin and thereby become defiled, they turn on us. In fact, once the world turns on us it will try its best to put us...

4. In Prison

There are seasons in our lives when things just seem to go wrong. If only we could go back and undo, or relive our recent days or weeks or months or even years. But even if we could do that, perhaps we are powerless to change anything. The events were beyond our control. Now everything has crashed down upon us. Here we are in prison. There is no way out of this mess we are in. None. This is the absolute worst!

When a person is in prison, he has lots of time to think. He or she begins to review the events that landed him in prison. Let's hold inventory, along with Joseph, and see what we did to end up like this. Let's see, we 1) had a call from God to serve Him which we gladly accepted, 2) We started out to serve Him the best we knew how, and 3) Our brothers turned on us and sold us into slavery. But we forgave the wrong and continued serving the Lord. 4) While being in the world, but not of it, we made a firm decision to avoid the world's defilement -- only to see things get worse!

We think to ourselves, "Why has God allowed this? Is this what we get for always trying to do the right thing? Is this what we get for serving God? That 'dream' we had years ago of serving the Lord seems so far away...so impossible. Those days are gone. We will never enter into that place. After all, it was just a dream...."

Then we begin to think God isn't going to help us. "Forget about that far away dream. I'm going to do what I have to in order to get out of this horrible place I'm in! I didn't do anything to deserve this. I'm going to break out of here!"

5. The Escape Attempt

None of us like unpleasant things or hardships in our lives, do we? Human nature does all it can to avoid them. Joseph was no different. One day while he was in prison he thought he had a golden opportunity. He saw his fellow prisoner, the former cup bearer, leaving the prison to return to Pharaoh's side. "Remember me when you see Pharaoh! Remember, I did you a favor...you owe me! You have to get me out of this place!" But it didn't work, did it?

We must learn that there are no short cuts in God. We must run the full course. As with Paul, we are called to finish the race set before us. You see, God usually does not bless our "self-promotion." God has His purpose for putting us "in prison" and until that purpose is fulfilled we are there to stay. For, as the Lord said to Isaiah,

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Is 55:8-9 NIV).

What are we to do then? We can't give up.

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. (I Pet 4:19 NIV).

If and when we learn these principles we are then very near:

6. God's Deliverance!

What possible reason could God have for allowing Joseph to be thrown in prison? Joseph loved God. Joseph was true to God. Joseph did all he knew to please God. Yet there he was, after years of faithful service, in jail.

You see, during all those hard years, God was doing two very important things:

a. God Was Setting His Plan In Motion - God was setting Joseph up to be recommended to Pharaoh by one whom Pharaoh trusted, the cup bearer.

I'm quite sure the devil was pleased with himself when Joseph landed in prison. I can imagine the devil saying something like this: "Well, I wasn't able to defile Joseph, but it turned out for my good anyway! Mrs. Potiphar was great! She lied about him and her husband threw him in prison! Ha! I'd far rather have him there than where he was. He was making Potiphar happy with his 'God-blessed' labors! Anyway, Potiphar could have introduced him to Pharaoh any day, and he no doubt would have been promoted again. Yes indeed, things have worked out very well...."

Furthermore, when Satan sees us in such unpleasant circumstances he comes and taunts us! "If God really loved you, why has He let this happen? Why aren't you a success like brother so-and-so? Look at how well he is doing. Why aren't you that good? Why isn't God blessing you like that?"

When we find ourselves in similar situations it's so easy to become discouraged. Especially as we listen to the devil's taunts. But we may rest assured that God is quietly, patiently and secretly working His plan in our lives. A plan which often places us in a prison of some sort for a season. In His infinite wisdom, God knows he cannot tell us what He is doing for we would surely spoil it. So, in order for His plan to work, we must be kept ignorant.

What are we to do in such cases? Joseph knew what to do. Remember what Peter wrote. I'll quote it again:

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. (I Pet 4:19 NIV emphasis added).

b. God Was Allowing Man's Plan To Die - The Bible speaks of hope as a good thing. But hope must be in something. The Bible teaches us that our hope is to be in God. As long as hope is in God it is good. It keeps the heart alive in times of despair. It provides energy to continue when there seems to be no reason to do so. This is the way God intends hope to work in the human soul.

The devil doesn't mind you having hope...he simply switches the object of our hope. The devil has perverted hope.

He gives us hope in the world and its systems! When our hope is in the world it is false hope. While Joseph was in prison, God was systematically destroying any and all false hope he had in the world.

We see Joseph placing his hope in the cup bearer. "Remember me to Pharaoh..." Two years passed from the time Joseph placed his hope in the cup bearer until the time God delivered him. Can't we imagine Joseph's hope in the cup bearer dying? And can't we also imagine that in this disappointment process his hope became more fully anchored in God? Our hope must shift from the world to God before He can move.

Conclusion

Suppose Joseph had given up his hope in God? Suppose he had said, "God doesn't love me. God doesn't care what happens to me. I am wasting my time and my life serving the Lord. I'm going to do something worthwhile with my life. Those 'dreams' I had back when I was young were just my imagination."

Such thinking is error. If Joseph had allowed these kinds of thoughts to take root in him mind, surely he would have dropped out of the race. But the Bible plainly tells us "for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." (Rom 11:29 NIV). God hasn't changed His mind. The circumstances of life are powerless to revoke God's call. Everyone of us are called to serve Him. We may be called to be a world renown evangelist. Or our call may be to be a quiet, stay-at-home prayer warrior who can truly move mountains when we pray. Regardless of our ministry, all are called to finish the race set before us and to blossom into a fully matured minister of God's plan in our generation.

So, if you find yourself in a set of circumstances which seem hopeless, if you are in "prison," take heart! God is at work:

...for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Phi 2:13 NIV).

There are times of testing, yes. But the prize is worth all we go through.

Heavenly Father, it is my prayer that all whom You have called to service in Your kingdom finish the course You have set before them. I pray that You instill a determination in every heart, a determination that says, "I shall serve my God with all my heart, all my soul, all my strength, and all my life!" Father, as to those who are "in prison"...those who are "suffering according to your will" please grant them a strong hope in You. Please work to shorten the time of their suffering and quicken the coming of the time when they may rejoice with You and hear the precious words, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant!' Amen."

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