

KEEPING THE FAITH

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Scripture: Genesis chapters 37-44

As I was praying about what to share with you today, I went through a gamut of different passages of scripture, different thoughts; and then finally came back to today and the kind of environment that we are in. These are extremely difficult days. These are days when we find that we are stretched in many ways. We look around us at social media, newspapers, WhatsApp messages, and so on, and we see pictures of sickness and death, and hopelessness, helplessness all around us. We see videos showing many people waiting to be buried, or cremated. We see reports of shortage of oxygen and ventilators, and all of that.

Also, we are finding that it is now knocking on our front doors as well, coming into our homes. We are experiencing this virus in our own environments. We are caring for our sick, caregivers are stretched. We are burying our dead. No longer do we hear skeptics ask: Does anybody who you know have or had Covid? I remember these were questions that were being asked earlier. Those questions have absolutely no meaning now; they are laughable questions really, in today's scenario.

Yet, the question that faces us today is: How do we navigate through these times? How do we move through these times with a certain amount of equanimity, a certain amount of balance? How do we face every day with hope? How do we get over sadness and grief? How do we overcome loneliness and all of what we are facing? And I think the most important question in all of this is: How do we keep our faith, and not just keep our faith but keep a vibrant faith?

As Paul writes, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race and I have kept the faith." That's important, isn't it? That, as we navigate through these days, that our faith is intact. Because as I look around, so many are having a difficult time believing – believing in God, believing in the things that we took for granted, finding themselves stretched in terms of prayer. How do we pray? What do we pray for? Faith is taking a beating these days.

So, I thought that we would spend a little time today and ask ourselves the question: How do I keep my faith intact? How do I keep a vibrant faith in times like these? And for that, I thought we'd go to Genesis and look at the life of Joseph, and see whether we can glean something from him, from the way in which he lived his life, learn some things from him. It's too large a passage of scripture for us to read through because Joseph comes into the narrative in ch 37 and goes on right to the end of Genesis. That's a lot of chapters. So, I'm going to actually lean on Leona Laico Galal, who put together a timeline for us about Joseph, and just go through that and lay the groundwork for us to then spring off of his life and ask the question: How did Joseph maintain his faith at a vibrant level all through the things that he went through? What did he go through?

He was 17 when he was sold into Egypt; in prison actually from the age of 17 up till 30. He was 30 when he was made overseer over all of Egypt. He was 39 when his brothers first came to Egypt, the second year of the famine or 9 years after being made overseer. He was probably 41 or so, when the brothers came a second time and Jacob himself came to Egypt. He was 110 when he died.

Let's flesh it out a little bit. He was favored by Jacob because of his heart and because he was a child of Jacob's old age. This, as many of us know, caused his ten brothers, excluding Benjamin then youngest, to be very, very jealous of Joseph. They resented their father's favor to him so much so that they decided to kill him. And when Joseph came to check on his brothers as his father asked him

to do, they already plotted in their hearts evil against him, even as they saw him walking towards them. Reuben saved Joseph from death although he left him in the hole. Joseph was then sold to the Ishmaelite traders. Then deception entered because the brothers took his coat of many colors that his father had lovingly given to him, soaked it in animal blood, and took it back and told their father that he had died. It didn't seem to bother the brothers that they were causing immense grief to their father.

Joseph was taken to Egypt at the age of 17, hungry, tired, alone. he was sold as a slave. Think about his situation; think about how we might handle this. How would we handle ourselves in a situation where we are abandoned at a young age, or maybe even at the age that we are in. And yet, we read that Joseph did not curse God. He continued in his prayer, cried out to God, always worshipping Him, and trusting Him. Then we know that he got a job with Potiphar, and how he was blessed in that job until Potiphar's wife cast her eye upon Joseph, wanted him to sleep with her. He refused, remained faithful to God, and loyal to Potiphar. Then she was so angry when he refused that she caught hold of his garment and kept it, screaming that he had raped her. And Joseph finds himself in prison.

But we read that even in prison, he prospered, he bloomed. It's a good thought for us, that wherever Joseph went, he bloomed, even in times of adversity. Because of his trust in God, he allowed God to use him so that he kept prospering. And in prison, two of Pharaoh's servants, the butler and the baker, find themselves there. They have dreams, and Joseph interprets those dreams – that one of them will live, and one will die. The baker loses his life just as Joseph said. Then he tells the butler, "Don't forget me when you are freed." But he does. He forgets Joseph until Pharaoh has a dream. Then he remembers Joseph who had helped interpret his own dream. Joseph is then brought and interprets Pharaoh's dream. He gives the correct interpretation and Pharaoh is so impressed that he puts Joseph in charge of Egypt, second only to himself.

Joseph knew that a great famine was coming because God had given him insight by the interpretation of the dreams that Pharaoh had. Joseph prepared for this. All the skills that he learned while in prison enabled him to organize and store vast amounts of grain. Finally, we read that the famine hit, and all Egypt went to Joseph to buy grain. This made the Pharaoh even wealthier. People came from all over the Middle East to buy grain, including Joseph's brothers. They came and eventually were reunited, forgiven, and the family moved to Egypt to reside in the land of Goshen. Then the Jews were there for 400 years.

What an incredible account! What an incredible story of a man who went through all kinds of adversity, difficult situations – disliked by his brothers, taken and thrown into a pit, sold to Ishmaelites. Then, living a life of integrity with Potiphar, and finding himself thrown in prison because he refused the advances of Potiphar's wife. Languishing there, and yet keeping his faith in God, and then finally being placed second only to Pharaoh. All though it, Joseph could have said, "I kept the faith."

Beloved, today we are going through incredibly difficult times. I cannot even imagine what some of you are going through. I don't know your situations, but I do know that sickness, and ill-health, and death have visited you, that hard times are upon so many, that you are stretched beyond the resources that you seem to have, emotionally, physically. These are difficult times, and maybe the last thing on your mind itself is: How do I live a life of faith? And yet, beloved, I think that we must pay attention. We must pay attention to how we live through this time, for these are defining moments for us.

So, let's just look at Joseph and see a couple of things that we can pull from his life, that stand out, that helped him to go through and keep the faith.

1. His integrity was intact.
2. He didn't allow himself to get bitter.
3. He forgave the people who were around him. He didn't carry unforgiveness.

1. Integrity.

He didn't compromise on his beliefs. He didn't take advantage of his position even when he had a high position. He ruled with integrity, honored the trust that was placed in him, and would not dishonor God. When Potiphar's wife came after him, he said, "How can I sin against God? I cannot." In the midst of all of this, he maintained his integrity.

2. He refused to get bitter.

In spite of everything that was happening to him – the mistreatment by his brothers, thrown into jail even though he was innocent, and then even forgotten by people whom he had helped – he refused to get bitter.

3. He was able to forgive.

In the end he was able to forgive. There was a happy reunion with his family

So, I ask you beloved, as I ask myself: How are we doing during these days? In terms of these three areas, as we look at our faith and trying to keep our faith vibrant during this time. How are you in terms of integrity? Are you standing by your integrity? Are you still standing by your word? Are you still standing by your principles? Are you still uncompromising in your behavior? Are all of these areas still non-negotiable? Or have you compromised in any of those areas?

Is your integrity intact?

Philippians 4:6 invites us to think about certain things. But I was thinking as I read it, that it applies even to living a life of integrity – to be able to stay true, pure, right, holy, friendly, proper, truly worthwhile, and worthy of praise – just following after these things. And the question for us today as we look at our own lives and the various things that we have been facing, is to ask ourselves: Have I managed to keep my integrity intact? Maybe you're saying, "Not really. I've slipped in an area. I've given my word but haven't kept it, or a principle that I used to hold sacrosanct, I've slipped up there." I want to encourage you. I don't want today's message to be one of condemnation because the bible strongly tells us that there is no condemnation to you and I who are in Christ Jesus. But the Word can bring conviction. Maybe today is just a gentle reminder from the Lord saying, "Get back to a position of integrity." What's happened has happened, but go to the Lord and say, "Lord, I failed. I slipped. I did wrong, Lord. please forgive me. Help me to get back to living a life of integrity." And beloved, He will. This can't be any kind of joy for you on top of going through difficult times to also have this thought hanging over your head, that you compromised on something. It cannot be pleasant. So, if you find things that need God's touch, take it to Him.

Are you harboring any bitterness?

Is there any root of bitterness that has crept into your life? Hebrews 12:15 says, "Watch out that no root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, because that has the potential to corrupt." How are you doing in that area? As you look at the things that are going on, have you allowed yourself to get bitter? Maybe you couldn't help somebody, you couldn't help a family member, you couldn't do enough? Or maybe you think I prayed and nothing happened. Now you're just bitter.

I remember more than a few years ago, I was in Colorado Springs with a wonderful Christian brother. He wanted me to meet somebody and so we were sitting in a coffee shop waiting for him. When this person showed up, I was shocked by his appearance. I have never seen a more grotesque face, and I

tried to hide my horror as he sat down and grimaced in what to him was really a smile. He said, "I'm used to people being shocked at my appearance. I used to be a newscaster at sports events. At the end of one of these events, I was lighting the firecrackers, and one went off in my face. It blew my face, smashed bones, everything. I've had multiple reconstructive surgeries on my face and finally, this is the best that they could do. But, more than just the reconstruction of my face was the reconstruction of my thoughts and my mind. Day after day, I just took in the bitterness. One day I walked into this hospital and I met a nurse. She came up to me, looked at me and said, 'you know, there are only two things that happen in this hospital; you either get better, or you get bitter. And you decide which one.'"

Maybe today you're bitter about the things that have happened, things that you had no control over but happened anyway. And you're blaming yourself. Maybe you're angry that you didn't have what it took. I wonder whether there's a root of bitterness that has the potential to corrupt. I love this quote by Maya Angelou: "Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. It doesn't do anything to the object of its displeasure." So true. It doesn't do anything for the situation that has happened. Nothing. It's only eating into you and me.

So, maybe today is the day that you deal with that bitterness and say, "Lord, I have allowed bitterness to come and take root in my heart, and I want to get rid of it. Lord, it's just eating me, it's consuming me, and it's making me an angry negative person that nobody wants to be around." Maybe God is saying, "Will you give Me your bitterness today? Let Me pour the sweetness of My Spirit into that area."

Are you able to forgive?

Joseph didn't carry around unforgiveness; he's able to forgive his brothers, and there was a happy reunion. I wonder, as you look at these last year or year and a half, whether there are events that have transpired, things that people have done to you, said to you, either by family or friends or colleagues that have harmed you, hurt you. And you've vowed to yourself that you will never forgive them.

As I was putting this together, I was reminded of the Lord's Prayer: "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." That's the call, hard as it may be. I know that these are hard words to one who has been hurt. Yet, for us to re-capture a vibrant faith, unforgiveness has no place in our lives. It has to be an act of the will. It cannot be that you're saying, "I'll wait for somebody to be sorry." No! Forgiveness is just letting that person who harmed you go; not that you excuse the behavior, but that you're saying, "I'm not going to let that behavior continue to control who I am, or my response to what happened. I'm letting that go. That's part of my history. I cannot in any way erase that. maybe I'll learn from that, but I'm not going to carry that person around wherever I go." That is how somebody described it. I wonder whether there are people who have hurt you, beloved, who you haven't forgiven. I wonder whether today, the Lord would be saying to you, "Let go. It's not doing you any good; it's only going to stand in the way of your own faith."

Paul said, "I fought the good fight, I finished the race, and I kept the faith."

Beloved, that's what we need to be doing during these days – keeping the faith, having a vibrant faith even during these days, clinging to the Lord and saying, "I will not let You go. To You alone I will cling because You are my only hope. You are my anchor, and You are the lighthouse. I cannot let You go. I will not let You go. Do what it takes, look at my life in terms of integrity, bitterness and unforgiveness. Do what You need to do in my heart, Lord Jesus, but I'm going to cling to You, because You are the only One I have who can help me to go through." "I will cling to the old rugged cross" as the songwriter says. And that's where we must be.

So, let's search our hearts; make sure that our connection to God is strong during these days, make sure that we haven't given a foothold to Satan where we have compromised, or where there's a little bitterness or unforgiveness, and make sure that we haven't lost our joy, the joy of living – even in these days to be able to live with joy. Then, to make sure, as Joseph did, to bloom even in this situation, even in these days, even in these desperate times. So I urge you today – don't give up, don't give in. Stay the course, cling to the Lord. Make sure that prayer and bible study and worship are integral components of your day. Let's make sure that even through these days, we have a vibrant faith and that we can say, even though we are not at the end, that we are keeping the faith. May God help us.

Shall we pray?

O loving Holy God. Whom do we have but You? And to You we come Lord. In all of these things that are happening, we've not had time to even look at our lives and see what's going on, maybe to do introspection. But today, turn the spotlight on us. Show us where we have compromised; show us where we have a root of bitterness. Show us Lord if we have not forgiven anybody. Lord, help us to hold on to You, hold on to us Master, help us to have a faith that is vibrant even in these tumultuous times. Lord, let Your presence fill every room, every heart where people are listening. Touch each one, Master with the power of Your Spirit. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.