

Overcoming Life's Challenges

By Al Felder

(Genesis 37-50)

There is a significant portion of the book of Genesis that is dedicated to covering the life of Joseph. There are some specific events that we are going to look at within this portion of God's word. As we do, we will examine some of the challenges that Joseph faced in his life. By the time we finish I believe that we will truly be able to say that the story of Joseph is a story full of lessons for all of us.

As we begin to read, we notice a couple of things that caused division between Joseph and his brothers.

²These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilnah, and with the sons of Zipah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colors. ⁴And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him." (Genesis 37:2-4)

Joseph told his father when his brothers were up to no good. Certainly they despised him for this. On top of that, Joseph was his father's favorite. This fact was obvious to the other brothers, and they hated Joseph for it. In fact, the Bible says that they could not even speak peaceably unto him.

As if these things were not enough, Joseph had two dreams that made his brothers mad as well. In the first dream Joseph and his brothers were binding sheaves in the field. Joseph's sheave stood tall while the sheaves of his brothers began to bow to Joseph's sheave. In the second dream eleven stars, along with the sun and moon, all bowed down before him.

These dreams indicated that Joseph was going to have a position of prominence over the members of his family. Even his father and mother would rank under him. His brothers understood the meaning of these dreams, and they hated Joseph even more.

After all of this had taken place, Israel sent Joseph to check on his brothers and bring him a report. *¹³And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here am I. ¹⁴And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem." (Genesis 37:13, 14)* Joseph goes and does as his father instructed him to do. He has trouble finding his brothers, but he remains persistent in his search until he locates them.

Before we go any further into the story, I want to take some time to stop here and consider a point. There is no evidence that Joseph returned his brothers hatred or envy. Even when he gave his father a report of his brother's wicked actions, he was simply telling the truth and doing what his father asked.

In the New Testament we are commanded to never return evil for evil.

"¹⁷Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. ¹⁹Dearlly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. ²⁰Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. ²¹Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:17-21)

These are some of the hardest verses in the Bible to obey. When someone wrongs us in some way our natural instinct is to retaliate. We want to live by the Old Testament standards of an eye for an eye, but the New Testament commands us to conduct ourselves in such a way that all men can see our concern for them. Even those who have wronged us.

When the Bible says, "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men," it doesn't mean give it a try, but if it doesn't work that's ok. This verse actually acknowledges the fact that some people will not allow peace. It does not matter in some instances how much effort you put into living peaceably with someone, they will not have any of it. The point stressed in this verse is to make sure that we as Christians are not guilty of contributing to the problem.

Instead of returning evil for evil, we are to return good for evil. We are to be kind to those who mistreat us. By doing this the Bible says that we will heap coals of fire on our enemies head. This doesn't mean that by doing good to them we can get back at them in some way. It actually means that through our good behavior we may actually be able to stir the conscience of the evil doer towards repentance. Isn't this exactly what God has done towards us? Despite our wickedness towards Him, He has done everything so that we might be restored to Him.

As we return to our story, we find that Joseph's brothers are not pleased to see him. *"¹⁸And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. ¹⁹And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh."* (Genesis 37:18, 19) At first, Joseph's brothers wanted to kill him. The oldest brother, Reuben, was able to persuade them from taking this action.

Instead, they cast him into a pit. After they had done this, a company of men passed by on their way to Egypt. The brothers decided to sell Joseph to them as a slave. In order to cover their actions, they covered his coat in blood and told their father that he had been killed by an animal.

Once in Egypt, Joseph did not fill his life with hatred, bitterness, or ungodliness. ¹*And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the hands of the Ishmeelites, which had brought him down thither. ²And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.*” (Genesis 39:1, 2) He was a trustworthy, loyal, and godly slave in the house of Potiphar. God blessed Joseph, and he found favor in Potiphar’s sight. For those who enjoy putting historical events in their proper perspective, Joseph’s time in Egypt began around 1900 BC give or take a few years.

Joseph endured a great betrayal by his brothers. That betrayal; however, did not justify hatred, bitterness, or revenge on the part of Joseph. Godliness is not determined by the circumstances we face. ⁵*Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. ⁶So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.*” (Hebrews 13:5, 6) Here’s the deal. Life can hit us with some pretty tough pills to swallow sometimes. We can’t always control the circumstances of our life, but we can control our response to them. We can be godly and content regardless of our circumstances.

Despite all that he had been through, things were going well for Joseph. Potiphar had made him the overseer of his entire house. Potiphar trusted Joseph so much that the Bible states, “He knew not ought he had, save the bread which he did eat.” (Genesis 39:6) He trusted Joseph completely.

Eventually, Potiphar’s wife began to desire Joseph. *“And it came to pass after these things, that his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me.”* (Genesis 39:7) Joseph refused her offer, but she would not take no for an answer. She increased the aggressive nature of her temptation. Day after day she continued to tempt Joseph.

Isn’t that exactly how temptation is for us today? We may find ourselves in situations in which our limits are tested. Here’s the good news. *“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”* (1 Corinthians 10:13) There are three things that stand out about this verse of scripture: there is no temptation that is unique to us, others have gone through it before, God will not suffer us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear, and He has made a way of escape for us.

Potiphar’s wife didn’t take rejection to well. After it became clear to her that Joseph was not going to give into her demands, she falsely accused him. She made it look like Joseph was the one who wanted her, instead of the other way around. Naturally, Potiphar believed his wife and had Joseph cast into prison.

As Christians we must keep our life above reproach, but that does not guarantee that our enemies will not falsely accuse us. Consider Jesus. ⁵³*And as he said these things unto*

them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to urge him vehemently, and to provoke him to speak of many things: ⁵⁴Laying wait for him, and seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him.” (Luke 11:53, 54) Just as the Pharisees did with Jesus, our enemies will constantly watch us looking for something they can use to discredit us or accuse us.

In many instances, a person is believed to be guilty as soon as an accusation is made. No evidence or proof is presented, only the word of the false accuser. That is enough to condemn a person as far as some people are concerned. When faced with such situations, let us be like Joseph and Jesus. We must retain our trust in God, remain faithful to God, and be meek and humble.

While in prison, Joseph was given charge over Pharaoh’s butler and baker. *“¹And it came to pass after these things, that the butler of the king of Egypt and his baker had offended their lord the king of Egypt. ²And Pharaoh was wroth against two of his officers, against the chief of the butlers, and against the chief of the bakers. ³And he put them in ward in the house of the captain of the guard, into the prison, the place where Joseph was bound. ⁴And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them: and they continued a season in ward.”* (Genesis 40:1-4) Each of these men had a dream that Joseph interpreted. Unfortunately for the baker, the interpretation of his dream meant that Pharaoh was going to kill him. The butler, however, had a more favorable interpretation. He was going to be restored to his previous position. Once there, Joseph asked that the butler remember him and the butler said that he would.

The butler failed to remember Joseph after he was restored. Joseph remained in prison for two years after the butler was released. Then, one day the butler remembered his promise. *“⁹Then spake the chief butler unto Pharaoh, saying, I do remember my faults this day: ¹⁰Pharaoh was wroth with his servants, and put me in ward in the captain of the guard’s house, both me and the chief baker: ¹¹And we dreamed a dream in one night, I and he; we dreamed each man according to the interpretation of his dream. ¹²And there was there with us a young man, a Hebrew, servant to the captain of the guard; and we told him, and he interpreted to us our dreams; to each man according to his dream he did interpret.”* (Genesis 41:9-12) Pharaoh had a dream, and he desired for someone to tell him its meaning. When all of Pharaoh’s magicians and wise men failed to tell him the meaning of the dream, the butler told him about Joseph. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dream, and Pharaoh made him second in command over all Egypt.

Now, Joseph found himself in a position of prominence. He was respected and powerful. As far as many people are concerned, he had it all. What they fail to realize, however, is that Joseph already had it all because he had God.

It had been 13 long years since Joseph’s brothers had sold him into slavery. During all that time Joseph never gave up hope, or lost his faith in God. The inspired writings of the Apostle Paul gives us a vivid picture of this unwavering faith.

⁸We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. ¹¹For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. ¹²So then death worketh in us, but life in you. ¹³We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak; ¹⁴knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us with you. ¹⁵For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through thanksgiving of many rebound to the glory of God. ¹⁶For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; ¹⁸While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”
(2 Corinthians 4:8-18)

There will be times that we are unappreciated by others, falsely accused, and experience difficult times. One thing that we cannot do, though, is allow these things to rob us of our joy in Christ. We must keep our faith and realize that these events can be used to prepare us for greater service.

Through his new position of power, Joseph’s own dreams had now come to fruition. A great famine took place which caused his brothers to come to Egypt looking for food. At first they did not recognize Joseph, but after a series of events he revealed himself to them. He instructed them to go fetch their father, and bring the entire family to live in the land.

Once their father had died, Joseph’s brothers feared that he would repay them for their evil.

¹⁵And when Joseph’s brethren saw that their father was dead, they said, Joseph will peradventure hate us, and will certainly requite us all the evil which we did unto him. ¹⁶And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying, Thy father did command before he died, saying, ¹⁷So shall ye say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil: and now, we pray thee, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father. And Joseph wept when they spake unto him. ¹⁸And his brethren also went and fell down before his face; and they said, Behold, we be thy servants. ¹⁹And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? ²⁰But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.” (Genesis 50:15-20)

Of all the lessons we could glean from Joseph’s life on overcoming life’s challenges, this one may be the most important. We must forgive those who have wronged us. Notice Joseph’s response to his brothers, “Fear not: for am I in the place of God?” Joseph realized that vengeance belongs to God, not man. Joseph left to God what belongs to Him.

What would you do if you found yourself in Joseph's position? He had the power to make his brothers suffer for their wicked actions against him, but he chose forgiveness over vengeance. He showed mercy. *"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy."* (Matthew 5:7) When given the opportunity will you demand justice, or will you show mercy? God will extend to you what you extend to others.

Like Joseph we will face many challenges in life. Those challenges may come in the form of hatred, envy, betrayal, temptation, false accusations, ingratitude, power, wealth, and forgiveness. When faced with these things will you be victorious like Joseph? Only faithfulness to God will allow you to do so.