

July 4, 2010
“If it is from God ...”
Acts 5:12-42

This coming week our Vacation Bible School will be looking at the life of Joseph - from prison to prince of Egypt. It's a familiar story to many of us. Joseph has been maliciously thrown in prison for a crime he did not commit. But in prison he has the opportunity to encourage his jailor, a couple of royal officials, and probably all sorts of other inmates and guards. God uses him, ultimately, to save Pharaoh, the entire kingdom of Egypt, and his own family (who sold him into slavery) from famine. Joseph ends up being Pharaoh's right hand man. It's a wonderful story of the truth that *"God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them"* (Romans 8:28). Notice this verses does NOT say *"God causes everything to happen ..."*! It SAYS that when things happen, God causes them to work together for good. That is subtle, but critical difference.

I'm excited about the week ahead. The story of Joseph has fantastic lessons for us about trusting God's grace and goodness, even when circumstances look bleak.

This morning I want to turn to another story of people in difficult circumstances. Joseph's experience was not unique. In this story, "Peter and the apostles" - we don't know how many of them - are twice arrested by the Jewish authorities. Once they are thrown into prison. Once they are flogged. But through it all God was using them in amazing ways to show His love - and to share His love - with all people from all backgrounds, cultures, and communities.

It's not fair

For most Christians in the developed world it is almost inconceivable that we might be regarded as dangerous subversives who need to be detained and roughed up! But when the powers-that-be felt threatened by the message of the apostles they did what fearful rulers have done throughout the ages - they arrested them. So this time they were *all* in prison.

It wasn't fair. We are used to a culture where we expect freedom of religion. Where we assume that people are free to talk about their faith. Have a look at this video clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gB2ktTV6U8&feature=player_embedded . But that isn't the reality in much of our world today (I will reflect a bit on my Lebanon experience here).

Many Christians are in prison for their faith - or their crimes. Check out www.releaseinternational.org, www.opendoorsuk.org, www.barnabasfund.org.

What God does ...

God used Joseph to bless people - and ultimately to save Egypt and his own family - through his prison experience. In this case, prison didn't do much goo either. You can imprison a person, but

you can't contain the Holy Spirit. Wise old Gamaliel knew that if God was with these crazy people they would be unstoppable.

Isn't it amazing how God is at work ... even in the midst of stressful and painful experiences? Even when life isn't fair? Time and again in Scripture, the experience of God's people is that God DOES work things together for good in tough times.

Read Psalm 23 - or sing a version of it - as a word of encouragement to people "walking through the darkest valley."

When tough time come our way, is our reaction be like that of the apostles who were *glad* to have been '*worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name*' (v 41)?

What was the problem?

Do you remember why Joseph ended up in prison? His master's wife made a pass at him and he refused her. Angry at his rebuff she lied and had him incarcerated. He was in prison for doing the right thing. He was in prison for having high morals and living them out.

Why did the new Christian community in Acts 5, so admired by 'the people', come to be loathed and feared by those who held power? The answer is that Jesus' alternative way of living, based on love, sharing and justice, threatened powerful leaders who benefited from the existing system. When you encourage people to love and obey a higher power than the government, the government can get nervous. When you invite people to a higher allegiance than the state, you threaten the state. And when you challenge people to love, forgive, and care for one another you threaten the existing social order.

What we call the 'good news' can divide people. It makes some people dance for joy. But it threatens others. It makes others angry. If we are going to genuinely live by Jesus' principles, than we can expect some push back. We may face some ridicule. Like Joseph, we may compromise our upward mobility or certain opportunities ...

On the other hand we maintain our integrity. We keep a clear conscience. And we testify to the truth and power of God.

If we are going to witness publicly to our faith in Jesus we may have to be prepared to suffer the consequences.

A different freedom

Joseph found opportunity to be a blessing, even in prison. These simple men - former fishermen, tax collectors, and the like - found themselves imprisoned, questioned and then flogged. But they kept at it. In fact they left the Sanhedrin rejoicing. It wasn't that they were happy to be flogged. They were happy that Jesus had chosen them. They were happy that they could stand

up for what they believed. They were happy their consciences were clear. There is something about the good news that makes prison - that makes suffering - ineffective for people of faith.

The seventeenth-century poet Richard Lovelace (1618-1657) is one of many who have been imprisoned for their faith. He wrote "*To Althea, from Prison*":

*When, linnet¹-like confinèd I
With shriller throat shall sing
The sweetness, mercy, majesty
And glories of my King;
When I shall voice aloud how good
He is, how great should be,
Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood,
Know no such liberty.*

*Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage;
If I have freedom in my love
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.'*

An old Irish saying goes like this:

*It is easy to be pleasant when life flows by like a song,
but the man worth while
is the one who will smile
when everything goes dead wrong.
For the test of the heart is trouble,
and it always comes with years,
and the smile that is worth the praises of earth
is the smile that shines through the tears."*

Putting it into perspective

We can learn from Joseph - we can learn from Peter and the apostles - about how to handle challenges in our lives.

It is also good for us to remember those who are persecuted for their faith today. Our challenges pale in comparison to many people around the world who are suffering acutely for

¹ A small bird (like a canary) often kept as a pet in a cage.

their faith. These words were written on the wall of a cellar in Cologne, Germany, where Jews had been hiding from the Nazis:

*I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.
I believe in love even when I am alone.
I believe in God even when He is silent.*

The truth is that *"God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them"* (Romans 8:28). What does that mean for you in your circumstances today? The God walked with Joseph, Peter and the apostles through prison and beyond is with you, and can bring beautiful things out of your life today. How does that encourage you?

Let's also keep our perspective. Our sufferings for Christ are trivial compared to those endured by many of our brothers and sisters. Let's pray for our brothers and sisters who truly do suffer for their faith today ...

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