

Saints under Pressure 2

Joseph: Coat of Many Colours

Genesis 50: 15-21

Shiny Saints are all very well but you and I can't relate to them or indeed seek to emulate them. Saints with Feet of Clay sounds more attainable. Jacob, as we saw last week, definitely had feet of clay. He was a deceiver and self-sufficient. God tried to show him the possibilities that surrender to Him could bring: stairways between heaven and earth again is the stuff of dreams, but still he didn't listen. In the end he had to come to the very end of his own resources and truly wrestle with God to become the new Israel. We learnt that Saints under Pressure need time alone with God, they need to let God alone take the initiative, and they need to learn that God is a gentle God. To these lessons we add the story of Joseph with that wonderful coat of many colours: interestingly the bible never quite says that (richly ornamented robe) but it's a handy peg to hang Joseph's story and write into musicals. The 'Many Colours' encourages the Saint to remember our rainbow promising God and the many ways in which Joseph's difficult journey refined and changed him to bring him to the place of influence God had planned for him. The sovereignty of God is worked out in a multi layered and coloured way which is often only recognised looking back. The key verse of our reading encapsulates this: "You (my brothers) intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20). That's the prize of redemption from our Redeemer and nothing/no one is beyond redemption! Saints under pressure choose to believe in the words of Romans 8:28 that 'all things work for the good of those who love God.'

A glance at Genesis 35 shows 12 sons born to four different mums (who says this story is out of date?). One, Rachel, was the great love of her husband Jacobs's life. She gave birth to Joseph

in her husband's old age (after Jacob's wrestling match) and Joseph became Jacob's favourite. The richly ornamented robe which Jacob gave his son at age 17 was probably a festive garment, inappropriate for the everyday jobs which the older brothers had to do. Favouritism shown, jealousy and resentment grew - and then the teenage Joseph made the situation worse by telling his family about dreams he had dreamt in which he was ruling over them. His dreams came true in the end, but his tactless behaviour did not help difficult relationships. Joseph clearly was a man with a calling from God but he, like his dad, needed some training, and God's training courses are not orthodox ones nor do they have a mind to health and safety! God is sovereign and the greater God's plan for our lives the greater the training. Saints with feet of clay need lots of training! Of course nothing excuses the way the ten older brothers ganged up against Joseph. Even when 'ganging up' is just to tease or make somebody the butt of everyone else's humour and we need to watch out lest this should appear in any group of which we are a part. Joseph's brothers went even further: 'little' sins do tend to develop into more extensive ones, as Jesus underlined in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-28) and as James echo's in his epistle (1:13-25). Joseph would have been murdered but for his eldest brother, who needed to get back into his father's favour (Genesis 35:22). So without knowing it, Reuben advanced God's long term plan for Joseph to become influential in Egypt and eventually save the whole family from famine. That is to be in the future. To God, however, everything is 'now'. He is beyond time. The brothers callously misled Jacob into believing Joseph was dead and Jacob grieved for his son. Just imagine what must have been going on inside the ten older brothers - and in Joseph's own heart! But even when Joseph was being sold into slavery, God was carrying out His plan bringing good out of evil. The 17-year-

old Shepherd must however be patient till at age 30 he becomes the Senior Administrator of Egypt (41:46).

God's training for Joseph involved a mixture of pain and comfort, like most of our godly training! Sold to Potiphar as a slave, he knew that God was still with him. Potiphar realised this was no ordinary man: soon he was asked to run the whole household. Potiphar prospered as a result and soon Joseph assumed full control of his affairs. Initially embittered and feeling unjustly treated; now he had a level of job satisfaction. But then Joseph's integrity was tested: by Potiphars wife who sought to have her wicked way with him. He resisted but there is nothing worse than a woman scorned and she makes a false allegation of a sexual nature. Potiphar is furious but interestingly he doesn't put Joseph to death but into his private dungeon. One senses he knew his wife and doubted the truth of the deceitful slander. Anyone used by God is not going to get praise from the world, and they are likely to face false rumours/stories.

You see God is giving Joseph time to adjust to his new life: aged 17 he is sold as a slave, then there follows 6 years serving Potiphar and another 6 in the dungeon. Quickly he is joined by the Kings Cupbearer & Baker both of whom have got on the wrong side of Pharaoh, and then both have dreams. Joseph rightly acknowledges that: "all interpretations belong to God" (40:8) displaying a growing assurance about his gift and call. He listens to both of their dreams and gives the interpretations: one good news and the other bad news. The Cup Bearer is restored, the Baker executed. Joseph at this point tries to circumvent God's plan: don't forget he said to the cupbearer to mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of prison. We need to know that when we allow God to take full control of our lives we need to trust him however tempting it is to take a spiritual short cut! The cupbearer duly restored forgets Joseph and another two years passes. We need to allow our Gift to get noticed: if its from God,

it will be, but in His timing not ours! So then Pharaoh has a dream, no one can interpret it, and then the cupbearer remembers and mentions Joseph.

So only when Joseph is humble enough to give all the credit to God (41:16/28), the time is right for him to be brought to the attention of Pharaoh. His period of suffering and training ends as abruptly as it began. Joseph get shaved, here's some new clothes, hurry Pharaoh wants to see you! So God uses Joseph to reveal His will only when he has learned humility. God may speak in stages: dreams one and two run together. Revelation via Joseph from God comes with clarity and conviction (seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of famine). Such revelation is given for a practical purpose. Appoint a wise administrator, says Joseph. His CV is now rather relevant! I will appoint you says Pharaoh (41:39-40). Job done: Joseph has moved in thirteen years from almost dead slave to the second most important person in Egypt! Who said nothing is impossible for God!

The transformation is complete: a saint under pressure trusting God now in a place of huge influence. The whole of Pharaohs court recognised the worth of Joseph, and Pharaoh acknowledged that he sees the spirit of God in Joseph. Joseph is exalted but without an ounce of the pride he had displayed at age 17. God's word through Joseph had a prediction in it and the fulfilment confirmed that it was truly of God: faithfulness to God and his promises brought him many rewards. Sadly however, once married and having sons (Manasseh & Ephraim) he forgets his Fathers house (41:51) but part of God's plan was to restore his Fathers House!

So the story moves on rapidly: seven years of plenty and huge storehouses filled, then as the famine starts Joseph begins to open up and sell the grain. The famine went way beyond Egypt and Jacob in Canaan sends his sons to buy grain. Jacob and Josephs brothers are confronted with the past: they were weak and

fallible. Jacob as we saw last week had been crafty and selfish and although his weakness was largely dealt with by God he was, like us all, still prone to sin. Interestingly he was unwilling to send Benjamin (again he had a favourite). The brothers arrive and bow down to Joseph (dream fulfilled!) Joseph recognises them but they don't recognise him: does he seek revenge or does he gloat: no! He treats them with restraint but wants them to face up to themselves and their story. He gets them step by step to open up and admit their guilt: Rueben realises that they need to face up to their past. 42:24 ("He turned away from them and begin to weep...") suggests Joseph was not relishing his role but saw the need to bring them to a place of repentance. One son (Simeon) held as hostage they return with full sacks and on the first nights stop they realise their money has been returned as well. A very reluctant Israel lets Benjamin return with them. This is an emotional roller coaster for Joseph but he delights in seeing Benjamin again. Again they seek to return home but not only their silver has been put in the sacks but a silver cup from Joseph's table is in Benjamin's. They are arrested by the guards: they plead their innocence but all is discovered especially the cup in Benjamin's sack. Joseph presses them to leave Benjamin with him and go home but Judah passionately offers his own life in return. Joseph can control himself no longer and in private reveals who he is to his brothers. They wept and embraced, and the postscript of the story is that Israel brings his whole household and they make their home in Goshen, Egypt. The rest as they say is history!

Joseph's feet of clay saintly story is Good News for Imperfect Families, evil times and scared people. God has long-term plans for communities and for His world. Joseph's story is an example of how God works in human history, building what will ultimately be good out of the rubble of our sinfulness and stupidity. After terrible trauma, caused deliberately by his own brothers Joseph

was able to say: "You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."(50:20) Perhaps one day we too shall see the long term plan of God which ran alongside events that left us wounded and asking: Why God Why? Saints under pressure choose to believe that: all things work for good for those who love God! (Romans 8:28)

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