

Compassion and Reconciliation

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"I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." (Genesis 45:4-5)

How can each of us develop resiliency? How can we, in spite of hard things that happen, have a strength to make a difference for good in our daily lives even when things go very wrong? What helps a person have compassion for others and be able to wisely forgive people when their words or actions have caused substantial harm?

Each of us have had times in our lives when deeply disappointing events have happened, such as when people did or said things that evoked anger, sadness or deep discouragement in our heart and mind. Imagine the thoughts and feelings that Joseph could have experienced as he walked down to Egypt as a prisoner and future slave, with a clear sense that this was due to the choices of his brothers. Imagine the jumble of thoughts and feelings he might have had when he learned that his master's wife had accused him of attempted sexual assault and he was taken to a prison, where he would spend years in captivity perhaps with little hope of release. What would have gone through Joseph's mind as weeks, then months, then years went by after he had asked Pharaoh's chief butler for his help. After interpreting the chief butler's dream and telling him he would be reinstated in his honored position in Pharaoh's palace, Joseph said to him:

"But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house. For indeed I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews; and also I have done nothing here that they should put me into the dungeon." (Genesis 40:14-15)

But the chief butler forgot Joseph and didn't think of him for two full years. Joseph was a teenager when he was taken from Canaan to Egypt and was 30 years old when his fortunes dramatically changed. Almost half his life had been spent far from home and from his loving father caused by a series of angry, vengeful actions or inexcusable neglect.

One could picture someone experiencing this period of time in Joseph's life being a bitter, cynical person, burning with thoughts of revenge or perhaps sinking into deep depression. Joseph did not. Part of the reason why seems to be indicated in his response to being sold as a slave to Potiphar. We read in Genesis 39:

The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. (Genesis 39:2-4)

Obviously, Joseph had applied himself to being useful even though he was far from where he wanted to be. Happiness, usefulness and the presence of the Lord all go together.

Similarly when Joseph had been falsely accused of attempted assault by Potiphar's wife and thrown into the prison, he likewise applied himself to being useful there. We read:

But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. (Genesis 39:21-22)

Again, after Joseph had been forgotten by the chief butler for two years, but was then suddenly brought out of the prison and brought before Pharaoh, Joseph not only humbly interpreted Pharaoh's dream but he went on to suggest a wise course of action to follow given the coming years of plenty followed by years of famine. Joseph wasn't fuming with resentment. He was focusing on what needed to be done, what was useful.

This is a fundamental part of what the New Church teaches about the source of happiness. We read: "Angelic happiness is in use, from use, and according to use, that is, it is according to the good things of love and of charity" (*Arcana Caelestia* 454). Another passage states:

People who are governed by charity [or a wise kindness], that is, who dwell in love towards the neighbor - from which love the living delight contained in pleasures derives - have no regard for the enjoyment of pleasures except on account of the use that is served; for charity does not exist if there are no works of charity. It is in the exercise of it, that is, in use, that charity [or this wise kindness] consists. Someone who loves the neighbor as himself never experiences the delight of charity except in the exercise of it, or in use." (*Arcana Caelestia* 997)

Because Joseph clearly focused on being useful, he had many happy experiences at Potiphar's house and at the prison. If he had been consumed with anger or a depressed state of mind it would have been impossible for him to serve Potiphar. He could have been an unreliable servant, whose self-absorption with his thoughts about what his brothers had done would have made him a poor worker. He could have been regularly punished for doing a poor job, but instead he was given significant responsibility. Likewise at the prison, he could have been deeply affected by the false accusation of Potiphar's wife and drawn within himself about how unfair this was. He apparently did not respond in this way. If he had been withdrawn and self-centered he could have been regularly disciplined in the prison. It seems clear that he was not. He was instead given responsibilities and opportunities to be useful that could have brought fulfillment and happiness to his life.

The second hugely important reason that Joseph had an amazing resiliency was his sense of the presence and care of the Lord in his life. It is our own choices that make for a greater or lesser sense that the Lord is with us. Consider this fundamental teaching about the Lord's presence:

What flows in from the Lord is the good of heavenly love, thus of love towards the neighbor. Within this love the Lord is present, for He loves the entire human race and wishes to save each one forever. And because the good things of that love originates in Him, He Himself is within it and so is present with us when we have the good things of that love within ourselves. (*Arcana Caelestia* 6495)

Similarly in this passage from the teachings for the New Church:

The Lord is indeed present with everyone, for from no other source does life flow, and He governs every specific detail of it. This is so even with the worst of people, and in hell itself. But the nature of His presence varies according to the way His life is received.
(*Arcana Caelestia* 2706)

While the Lord was with Joseph in Egypt and supported him in living a hugely useful life, it seems that Joseph still did not trust his older brothers. The first time they came for food during the famine, Joseph spoke to them harshly and even had them imprisoned for three days. But he also heard them make an important acknowledgment to each other. They said:

“We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us.” And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not speak to you, saying, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us.”
(Genesis 42:21-22)

Joseph still wished his brothers well. He gave them grain to take home and returned their money to them. When the brothers arrived the second time with Joseph’s younger brother Benjamin, he provided them with a wonder feast. On their return to Canaan, Joseph again had them provided with as much food as they could carry and again returned their money. But he also had his special silver cup put in Benjamin’s sack. It seems clear that Joseph intended to send the older brother’s home and keep Benjamin with him in Egypt. When all the brothers returned after the silver cup was found, in a climactic moment, Judah pleaded for Benjamin to be allowed to return to his father and he would stay in Egypt in his place. Then Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, speaking to them for the first time directly in their language, and both acknowledged their harmful choices but also saw that fundamentally God had been bringing about wonderful things in spite of everything else. The ability to see this is crucial for resiliency and for compassion. Joseph could not possibly have had it if he had spent the last more than twenty years of his life burning with anger toward his brothers. Because Joseph had lived a useful and fulfilling life in Egypt and found much happiness, he could recognize that this would never have happened without the tragedy of his mistreatment by his brothers and his being sold as a slave. He recognized a Divine blessing through the course of his time in Egypt.

Some of us have experienced great harm in our lives and all of us have had many things go badly because of the flawed choices of the people around us. If we are to grow in resiliency and in wise compassion, we too have to ask the Lord’s help to keep our hearts and minds focused on the opportunities to be useful that come before us each day. As we do this our lives will be blessed and so will the lives of many people around us. And with these blessings we can also ask to have a growing and wise compassion and forgiveness to those who have harmed us. This is what the Lord wants for us. May we do our part opening the way for us to receive these wonderful gifts.
AMEN.

Lessons: Genesis 45:1-15, *Arcana Caelestia* 5901, 5934

Genesis 45:1-15

¹ Then Joseph could not restrain himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Make everyone go out from me!" So no one stood with him while Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept aloud, and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard *it*. ³ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I *am* Joseph; does my father still live?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed in his presence. ⁴ And Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come near to me." So they came near. Then he said: "I *am* Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For these two years the famine *has been* in the land, and *there are* still five years in which *there will be* neither plowing nor harvesting. ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸ So now *it was* not you *who* sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph: "God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not tarry. ¹⁰ You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near to me, you and your children, your children's children, your flocks and your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ There I will provide for you, lest you and your household, and all that you have, come to poverty; for *there are* still five years of famine." ' ¹² And behold, your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that *it is* my mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ So you shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt, and of all that you have seen; and you shall hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴ Then he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. ¹⁵ Moreover he kissed all his brothers and wept over them, and after that his brothers talked with him.

***Arcana Caelestia* 5901**

"[You did not send me here] but God." That this signifies that the Divine had done this, is evident without explication. How the case herein is, has been unfolded wherein it is said of Joseph that he was sold into Egypt and there first ministered in the house of Potiphar; namely, that as in the supreme sense he represented the Lord and in a lower sense those who are being regenerated by the Lord, factual knowledges are the first things which are learned; for they are the things from which truths are to be concluded, and in which truths are then to be terminated. Afterward progress is made toward more interior things. All this is what Joseph represented, and this being so, it was the Divine which sent him there.

***Arcana Caelestia* 5934**

"And he said to them, Do not quarrel on the way" means the perception imparted to them that they should be at peace. . . For quarreling with others is an absence of peace because there is disturbance of mind. . . those who have a perception of the Lord's presence also have a perception that every single thing that happens to them is conducive to their own welfare and that no evil influences can reach them. This is what gives them the peace they enjoy. Without such faith or trust in the Lord no one can ever attain that peace, nor accordingly the bliss which joy brings since that bliss resides within such peace.