

Resilience: Blessing others

Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well. Genesis 49:22

Over the past few weeks, we have been considering Resilience—the ability to survive difficult times and then bounce back. We have been following the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Joseph was torn from his family, almost killed, sold as a slave, later thrown in prison for a crime he didn't commit, and then faced a seven-year famine. Yet Joseph was resilient. He not only survived but thrived during these difficult times. Some of the things that helped Joseph to be resilient can also help us. For this close of the series I will review previous parts of the story.

Be mindful of the Lord's love and plans for us

One thing that helped Joseph be ready for the difficulties he would face in the future was the coat of many colors that his father had given him as a sign of his great love for Joseph. Every day that Joseph wore that coat he could remember that his father loved him. We too can be mindful of the Lord's love for us. The Lord has given us many reminders of His love in His Word. You can think of that coat of many colors as being all the passages in the Word that tell us how much the Lord loves us. "I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore with loving kindness I have drawn you." (Jeremiah 31:3) Take these passages like a coat of many colors and put them in your mind; wear them; take them with you wherever you go to remind you that the Lord loves you. This may make it easier to get through these difficult times.

We also see the Lord's love in the world around us. If you are here in this Cathedral, when you walk out the door look at the beautiful colors of the trees, or flowers and sunsets. The Lord has given the whole world this coat of many colors as a reminder of His love.

Joseph's dreams also helped him prepare for difficult times. The Lord gave him a vision that everything would turn out well. He would be with his family, and they would love and honor him.

The Lord gives us dreams, too. He has given us a vision of His purpose and goal for us. He wants us to be in heaven with Him. He wants you to be surrounded by people whom you love and who love you. That's why He created heaven and wants to bring you there. This vision of eternal happiness is the dream that he wants us to keep in mind.

Let him who wishes to be eternally happy know and believe that he will live after death. Let him think of this and keep it in mind, for it is the truth. (Secrets of Heaven 8939)

So our first practice for becoming resilient was to be mindful that the Lord loves us and has a plan for our future.

Re-see your challenges

When Joseph was sold as a slave it may have seemed that his life could not be worse, but then he was thrown in prison for a crime that he did not commit. Joseph could have given in to despair, but instead, he saw slavery and prison as opportunities to do the best he could. Even though he was stuck in prison the Word says that the Lord was with him, and everything he did prospered.

When the butler and baker in prison were sad because they didn't understand their dreams or what was happening to them, Joseph told them, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" When we feel depressed because we've accepted a negative interpretation of our situation, we can step back and say, "How does the

Lord see this situation?" "In the world you will have trouble," He says, "but take heart, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Although the Lord has great plans for us, He allows us to go through failure and suffering, because every failure is an opportunity to learn a better way and to change, and every time of suffering is an opportunity to discover compassion. Lord promised Israel that He would give them the Valley of Trouble as a Door of Hope (Hosea 2:15) and we can re-see our struggles and pain as a Valley of shadow that leads to dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. (Psalm 23)

Practicing gratitude

So we can gain resilience by being mindful of the Lord's love and His plans for us, and also by re-seeing our struggles as opportunities. A third practice that helps us gain resilience is calling to mind the Lord's blessings. Just as Joseph stored up grain during seven years of plenty that they could draw out again during the seven years of famine, the Lord is constantly storing up within us all the good states that we go through and all the truths that we have embraced. From the time we were little babies the Lord has been storing up states of innocence, trust, peace, and goodwill in the depths of our minds. He gets us through the hard times by drawing from that storehouse to nourish and encourage us.

Sometimes while supporting couples through difficult times, my wife and I have invited them to tell the story of how they fell in love, or to describe their wedding day. Often these memories give them an opportunity to relive those states of joy and peace that they had at an earlier time and that the Lord had stored up for them. We also have asked couples to say all the things that they appreciate about their partner. This not only makes it easier to work on problems, but sometimes even makes the problems simply evaporate. The same is true in many other situations. Expressing gratitude especially for those who give us trouble, is a good way to rise above the pettiness that so often poisons our relationships.

Gratitude has the same effect on our relationship with the Lord. Feelings of bitterness, resentment, and abandonment can be softened if not dispelled, by remembering the good the Lord has done for us, and the good things he has stored up for us in heaven. "Bless the Lord O my soul, and forget not all His benefits." (Psalm 103:2)

Showing compassion

Our fourth resilience practice is to have compassion. Joseph's brothers hated him and wanted to kill him, and instead sold him as a slave. After living years as a slave and prisoner and finally becoming a ruler in Egypt, Joseph's ten brothers came down to Egypt to buy food during the famine. They didn't recognize Joseph. He had changed from a stripling teenage shepherd into a majestic ruler of Egypt speaking Egyptian and wearing Egyptian clothes. But Joseph recognized his brothers, and immediately started a plan to see his brother Benjamin again. Joseph spoke to the brothers harshly, and took one of the brothers, Simeon, as a hostage, demanding that the other brothers go back home with the food they had bought, and return to Egypt with Benjamin. Eventually the brothers came back with Benjamin, and then Joseph framed Benjamin as a thief who had supposedly stolen Joseph's silver cup. As punishment, Joseph said, Benjamin would have to remain in Egypt as a slave, while the brothers were to return home without him.

Twenty-two years earlier Judah was the one who had suggested selling Joseph as a slave. This had ruined Joseph's life and broken their father Jacob's heart. Now they were faced with Benjamin similarly becoming a slave, and Judah knew their father would die of grief. Out of compassion for their father, and compassion for Benjamin, Judah offered to become a slave in Benjamin's place, so that Benjamin could go home to their father.

Judah's show of compassion moved Joseph deeply. He broke down and wept; he revealed himself as their long lost brother and forgave them for hating him and selling him as a slave. Judah's compassion towards Benjamin and their father, as well as Joseph's compassion for his brothers and father brought about a reconciliation. The family could be together again as Joseph's dream had predicted.

Was Joseph slow to forgive?

Biblical Scholars are uncertain about what Joseph was thinking and feeling when he asked his brothers to go home leaving Benjamin behind in Egypt. Some say that he was having trouble forgiving his brothers, and didn't really want to see the older brothers again. Only the youngest, Benjamin had not been part of their betrayal all those years earlier, so of course, Benjamin did not need to be forgiven. But when Judah showed compassion on Benjamin and offered to take his place as a slave, they say, Joseph was surprised, and was moved to forgive the brothers he could not forgive sooner.

Another possibility is that Joseph had long since forgiven his brothers, since as a ruler in Egypt he had seen the blessings that the Lord had brought him, and he had forgotten his earlier troubles with his father's family. Perhaps Joseph was not at all surprised to see his brothers after 21 years, because the Lord had told him in the beginning in his dreams that he would be reconciled and rejoined to his family. Joseph would have been all along hoping and longing for this reunion, but he knew that it could not happen if his brothers still hated him and wanted him dead.

If Joseph wanted reconciliation with his brothers, then sending them home without Benjamin would not have been a pretext for getting rid of them, but rather a test to see whether they had changed. By making Benjamin a slave before their very eyes, Joseph was able to recreate the event when Joseph suffered the same fate, and he could see that they now had compassion for Benjamin that they had not had for Joseph earlier. Knowing that they had changed, Joseph was now able to reveal himself and reunite the family. Thus it was not so much a change of heart on Joseph's part as a change in Judah and his brothers that brought about reconciliation.

We may never know whether Joseph was limited by a typical human inability to fully forgive his brothers, or whether his heart reflected a more divine ability to have compassion on all people at all times. Yet on a deeper level, we can see that Joseph represents the Lord, and the Lord always has compassion. Even while he was being crucified He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

Whether having compassion comes easily for us or rather with years of practice and effort, is often the case when words spoken with anger, bitterness, or contempt have separated us from our fellow human beings, that vital part of our resilience and reconciliation is the compassion we are able to feel when others are suffering.

Providing for others

After (1) being mindful of the Lord's presence and purpose, (2) reframing our problems as opportunities, (3) practicing gratitude, and (4) showing compassion, our fifth means of growing in resilience is to provide for others. As soon Joseph had revealed himself to his brothers, he told them that he would provide for them during the remaining years of famine and afterwards. They could bring their families and their parents from Canaan down to Egypt and live in the best part of the land where all their needs would be met. At the same time, Joseph continued to provide food for all the Egyptians, so they could continue to thrive even during the famine.

A familiar description of love is that it is to feel the joy of another as joy in oneself (Divine Love and Wisdom 47), that is, to desire another's happiness just as much or more than our own. A corollary of this is that when others are suffering we feel their pain and grief. So when those we love are in misery love becomes compassion (Secrets of Heaven 6180). Yet there is more—love is not only to feel another's joy as our own, but

also to want to give to another everything that is our own. We want to serve them, be useful to them. We want to use all our resources to make the lives of others better.

Another passage describes three essentials of love. The first is to love others outside of oneself; next to want to be united with them; and finally, to want to make them happy from ourselves. (True Christianity 43) We can see the desire to be united to others in Joseph's wanting to reunite with his brothers and father. What follows is a desire to make them happy, which Joseph did by using all his resources to make their lives better.

Faithful in a very little

When Joseph was a slave, it was a lowly job. Yet Joseph did his work faithfully and honestly, so he was successful with that work. Later, being supervisor of a few prisoners was not a glorious job, but Joseph did the best he could. Those small jobs were preparation for the much more important work that he would be doing as a ruler of Egypt, saving many lives, not to mention providing for the future of Israel as a nation.

In the parables of the minas and the talents the Lord spoke of servants who were faithful in a few things.

'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.' (Luke 19:15-19) 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' (Matthew 25:20-23)

So it was with Joseph. He was faithful over a few things, and the Lord made him ruler over many things. Likewise, we may feel relatively unuseful, too young, too old, or too unemployed for meaningful work, or too isolated for meaningful relationships. Yet if we can be faithful in a few very little things, the time will come when the Lord will open the doors of heaven and shower us with opportunities to cooperate in His work and experience His joy in serving others with no thought of gaining something in return.

When Jacob was on his death bed, there was little that he could do for his children. Yet he could say a few kind words to them, a very little but with a series of consequences that still continue. To Joseph, he said, "Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a well." This calls to mind a prophecy:

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, And whose hope is the Lord. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, Which spreads out its roots by the river, And will not fear when heat comes; But its leaf will be green, And will not be anxious in the year of drought, Nor will cease from yielding fruit. (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

A tree that survives heat and drought pictures the resilience that gets us through difficult times. Clearly this resilience comes from trusting the Lord and staying connected with Him. It is His strength and blessing that causes us to be fruitful. The Lord is the vine and we are the branches. If we abide in Him we bear much fruit. Joseph, too, became a fruitful bough because he trusted and hoped in the Lord. Jacob said in effect to Joseph, the Lord has blessed you in many ways, so you have in turn become a blessing to me.

By the God of your father who will help you, And by the Almighty who will bless you With blessings of heaven above, Blessings of the deep that lies beneath, Blessings of the breasts and of the womb. The blessings of your father Have excelled the blessings of my ancestors, Up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills. They shall be on the head of Joseph, And on the crown of the head of him who was chosen from his brothers. (Genesis 49:25-26)

When the Lord was in the world, He underwent temptations and through them overcame the hells and became one with the Divine love that was in Him from birth. It was that Divine love which gave Him such resilience and strength against the hells. Through his efforts and suffering He became our Savior. He became a blessing to all humankind. If we remain connected to the Lord, He will bless us and help us to be a blessing to others.

Lessons

Genesis 49:22. "Joseph is a fruitful bough,
A fruitful bough by a well;
His branches run over the wall.

23 The archers have bitterly grieved him,
Shot at him and hated him.

24 But his bow remained in strength,
And the arms of his hands were made strong
By the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob
(From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),

25 By the God of your father who will help you,
And by the Almighty who will bless you
With blessings of heaven above,
Blessings of the deep that lies beneath,
Blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

26 The blessings of your father
Have excelled the blessings of my ancestors,
Up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills.
They shall be on the head of Joseph,
And on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers.

John 15:1. "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. 8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

9 "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

11 "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. 12 This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. 14 You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. 17 These things I command you, that you love one another.

Secrets of Heaven 997. Someone who loves the neighbour as himself never experiences the delight of charity except in the exercise of it, or in use. Consequently the life of charity is a life of uses. Such life pervades the whole of heaven, for the Lord's kingdom, being a kingdom of mutual love, is a kingdom of uses. Every pleasure therefore that springs from charity finds its delight in use, and the more pre-eminent the use the greater the delight. For this reason it is the very being and nature of a use which determines the happiness that angels have from the Lord.