

The Prize of Heaven

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In life there are many obstacles and trials that are put in our lives to keep us from going to Heaven. In James 1:2, it states that we should count it a joy when we are tempted. That is a simple statement but one that is hard to actually put into action. When we fall into temptations there are only two ways it can go. We either sin or we do not. In today's world, sin is not looked at as a horrible thing. This can be hard on young Christians. There may be times in your life where you think that you are the only Christian around and that nobody understands what you are going through. There are going to be times where you think that giving into temptation will make things easier on you. This is when it is best not to think about what you are going through but what everyone before you went through. Think about how Christians were killed just for being Christians and how the trial you are going through most likely will not kill you physically if you continue to acting as a Christian. Is it worth an eternity in Hell for a short-lived sin?

This does not mean that you will not sin against God "for all have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)." Everybody sins and it does not matter what sin you have committed, all sins can get you into Hell. It seems as though that many people these days have decided to rank sin and look down upon people for the sin in their life. Jesus had a strong statement to say on that; He says in Luke 6:42, "... Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? ..." We must always make sure and help each other in all life whether it be in struggles or times of joy, but we must always make sure that in helping someone, we are not just looking at them and looking down upon them. We must also make sure and keep the beam out of our own eye.

Living the life of a Christian on paper seems quite easy, but living the life of a Christian in the world can be difficult. We are running a race and there is no trophy for second place. We must strive to all reach the goal. In 2 Timothy 4:7-8, the author says that he has fought the good fight and finished the course. He also says that he has kept the faith. Have you fought the good fight? Have you kept the faith? Do you ask yourself those questions? That is something that we must constantly do. We must always stay focused on the prize that is Heaven.

Godly Living In Difficult Times

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He was hated and envied by his brothers. He was conspired against and tempted on a daily basis. He was wrongfully accused and sent to prison. Yet, the Lord was with him through it all and his life serves as an example of godly behavior in trying circumstances.

Joseph is introduced to us in the midst of family turmoil. His brothers "hated him and could not speak peaceably to him" (Gen. 37:4). A series of events would soon occur in his life that would eventually bring him more difficulty. How did Joseph behave in these situations? What made him behave the way he did? Is it possible for us to live godly during difficult times? A study of the life of Joseph provides the answers to these questions.

Godly Behavior Begins With God-Consciousness

Joseph was God-conscious. He behaved the way he did because God was on his mind. When he was tempted to sin his first thought was "how then can I sin and do this great wickedness, and sin against God" (Gen. 39:9)? He gave God the credit before he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh and his officers (Gen. 40:8; 41:16). He remembered God when his sons were born (Gen. 41:51, 52). He acknowledged God's providence concerning how he ended up in Egypt (Gen 45:5, 8; 50:20).

A bitter or angry man would have behaved a different way in Joseph's situation. An ungodly man would have done things differently. Joseph behaved the way he did because he kept God in his mind and that resulted in godly behavior -- even in difficult times.

Four Keys To Joseph's Success

God-consciousness is essential. But just thinking about God won't necessarily translate into godly behavior. How did Joseph do it? Notice the four keys to Joseph's success.

1. He had a deep and abiding faith in God. Joseph died in Egypt. However, he knew that his descendants would someday be brought by God to the land that He swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 50:24-25). How was Joseph able to say "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here" (Gen. 50:25)? The Hebrew writer gives us the answer. He said, "By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and have instructions concerning his bones" {Hebrews 11:22}.

Hundreds of years after his death, during the exodus from Egypt, Moses took the bones of Joseph with him (Ex. 13:19), where they were eventually buried at Shechem (Joshua 24:32) in the land of promise. Joseph believed in God and His word. And that faith was a part of his success in godly living during difficult days.

2. He did not listen to Potiphar's wife. She cast longing eyes on him but he refused. She tempted him on a daily basis but "he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her" (Gen. 39:10). Godly living might mean that we have to say no more than once. Sometimes we are tempted and say "no." That's good! However, temptation returns and we feel the pressure and say "yes." That's bad!

Joseph was prepared. When temptation arrived, he did not heed it. Joseph would have agreed heartily with the wise man's advice -- "My son, if sinners entice you, Do not consent" (Prov. 1:10). His refusal to sin was one reason he was successful in a difficult situation.

3. Hatred, bitterness, and revenge were absent in difficult times. Many would be overcome by these qualities if they were in Joseph's position. However, when he had the opportunity to get even with his brothers, he refused. When his brothers were afraid, Joseph spoke lovingly to them. He used words and phrases like "don't be afraid" and "I will provide." He "comforted" and "spoke kindly to them" (Genesis 50:21).

Many do not live godly because they are filled with hatred, bitterness, and revenge. They are consumed with these emotions and their actions lead them down the path of ungodliness. Joseph was different. They were not present during those difficult times and that was part of his success.

4. Joseph acknowledged and accepted God's providence. He did this on at least three occasions. He told his brothers, "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 ... 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" (Gen. 45:5, 8).

Joseph never blamed God. He never became bitter. Instead, he acknowledged that God had a purpose. Joseph realized, "... God meant it for good, in order to bring about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

It is hard to label things today as "God's Providence." Perhaps, we should be content in knowing that God is in control of all things and that He cares for us. Joseph had that mindset and it caused him to live godly during difficult times.

Can We Live Godly During Difficult Times?

Yes! Perhaps none of us has endured what Joseph went through. Yet, he lived godly. He was God-conscious. He had a deep and abiding faith in God. He did not heed sin. He did not allow vengeance to control his life. He submitted to God's will. Friends, that is a recipe for living godly at all times -- especially during difficult days!

One Who Can Sympathize with Our Weaknesses

Kyle Pope

Hebrews 4:15 declares -- "**For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin**" (NKJV). To many of us this concept is a bit difficult to grasp. We know that this "High Priest," of whom the text is speaking is Jesus (see vs. 14), yet, how is it possible that this Jesus, of whom the Bible declares -- "**In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily**" (Colossians 2:9), can sympathize with *our* weaknesses? Would not such a being who has the power to "**understand my thought afar off**"

(Psalm 139:2), and who has “**searched me and known me**” (Psalm 139:1) to whom “**there is not a word on my tongue**” that He does not “**know it altogether**” (Psalm 139:4), would He not grow bitter and cynical watching us continually stumble and grope in ignorance, double-mindedness, and weakness?

One night many years ago at about 3:00 AM in the morning something happened to me that helped me understand this a little bit better. Like all new parents, in those days we had our share of *late night awakenings*. While we were very fortunate to have children that slept well through the night as babies, there was the occasional sleepless night with a crying child which took some getting used to. However, on this particular night something occurred to me about my own relationship with my young daughter. As I arose from my bed to comfort that small little creature crying in the darkness I realized that such an awakening was no longer difficult for me. That’s not to say that I enjoyed being awakened, or that my rest was not interrupted, but it occurred to me that my love for her as her father brought me to the point that being awakened was a minor thing to me. What was more important to me than my own sleep was calming the fears of that little girl frightened by a nightmare, uncomfortable from a diaper needing to be changed, or simply alarmed by the darkness and her own frailty.

The Bible tells us that God loves us as a father. All men are “**His offspring**” (Acts 17:28) and those who are Christians are “**begotten of Him**” (I John 5:1). This unselfish love is demonstrated in God’s willingness to *rise up in the night* (so to speak) to send His Son to those crying out in the darkness of sin. He *holds out his arms* (in essence) to comfort us through the message of the gospel -- “**the power of God unto salvation**” (Romans 1:17). As he *holds us in His arms* (to extend the metaphor) He offers us forgiveness, should we stumble again, if only we will appeal to Him through Jesus (I John 2:1-2).

While certainly my love for my children pales in comparison to God’s love for us, this does suggest to us something about God’s nature. Jesus said, “**If you then, being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him**” (Matthew 7:11). If we as parents can “sympathize” with our children’s weaknesses, then surely our Father in heaven and His Son (through whom He offers us intercession) can sympathize with our weaknesses.

The last part of Hebrews 4:15 tells us the full extent of this sympathy; that Jesus was “**in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.**” Beyond simply a rational understanding of temptation, Jesus endured what we endure. The same type of temptations we battle -- “**the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life**” (I John 2:16), He battled and won (see Matthew 4:1-11). Even Jesus *cried out in the darkness* (as we do) as He suffered the sorrow of loss (John 11:35-36) and the anguish of death (Luke 22:41-45). He understands us, because He endured these things Himself.

The next time we as Christians *cry out in the night* in fear, frustration, and weakness let’s remember -- “**we have a High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God**” (Hebrews 4:14). In remembering, let us learn from His example and cling to His mercy. While He is never tolerant of sin, He does offer help in times

of testing. **“For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted”** (Hebrews 2:18).

The Voice of Experience

Don't Look Back

Wayne Fancher

Imagine that you are driving your car. You casually merge on to the interstate and glance behind you to check for traffic. Now imagine that you continue to look back and not look forward again. The results would be disastrous and I don't think you would have a fun driving experience. A similar idea is expressed in Luke 9:62 when Jesus says to a potential disciple, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

I believe that the use of the metaphor of plowing is not an accident. In 1 Kings 19:19-21, we find the account of when Elijah called Elisha to follow him. In verse 19 of 1 Kings, Elijah “... threw his mantle on him.” Elijah's act is like when a father clothes his son. He was symbolically offering to adopt Elisha as his son and apprentice. In Luke 9, Jesus is making the same offer to his potential disciple. Jesus is actually saying, “I want you to be my spiritual son” and “as my spiritual son you will receive an inheritance.” Just like Elisha received a double portion of Elijah's spirit (under the Jewish system, the firstborn son received a double portion of the inheritance) we too shall receive our inheritance as children of God. If we are willing to serve Him, one day we will be able to be in the presence of Almighty God for eternity!

Back to 1 Kings 19:21, we see that after Elijah calls Elisha to be his son and apprentice, Elisha stops plowing and then burns the oxen. Elisha was symbolically expressing that he was so dedicated to following Elijah that he burned all the things that might have caused him to want to go back to his old life. I think the application of this Old Testament account is obvious. What are you willing to give up to follow Christ?

Fist, I think that we must identify what we have to give up. Hebrews 12:1 says “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” There are two things we must lay aside: sins and weights. A weight is something that is not necessarily sinful, but it makes the race of Christianity harder to run. Another way to say a weight is “a hindrance.” I think we all know that we must turn from our sins to enter Heaven. For the rest of this “mini-lesson” I want to discuss what hindrances we must be willing to lay aside to enter Heaven.

If you have friends who are not pursuing righteousness, you should be cautious around them that they do not corrupt you. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, “Do not be deceived: Evil

company corrupts good habits.” If your friends have corrupted you or are in the process of corrupting you, are you willing to lay them aside to enter Heaven?

I believe the closest bond between unmarried people is the person you decide to date. You should be cautious when you are choosing this person. Ask yourself, “Is serving God their number one priority?” If it is not, then what is? I can say from experience that serving God is much easier if the person you are dating is zealous for God and follows His commandments. If your boyfriend/girlfriend does not want to serve God then you should be careful. Do not lose your soul in an attempt to conform to what your boyfriend/girlfriend wants. Once again, 1 Corinthians says “Do not be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits.”

If you play sports, are in band, theater, or some other extracurricular activity you must also be careful. It is not sinful to play a sport, an instrument, or to perform in a play. What is sinful is when you are required to miss church because of these activities. “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). What is your activity requires you to wear something that is immodest? Girls, do not let your activities reveal so much of your body that it puts a stumbling block in front of guys and causes them to sin with lust in their hearts. Guys, do not find an excuse to not wear a shirt because it may put a stumbling block before girls and cause them to sin. Also, if your extracurricular activity causes you to be constantly around evil people so that your mind is corrupted, are you willing to quit in order to maintain your spiritual purity? For people that are in drama, if you are required to say or do something a Christian shouldn’t do, are you going to say no? Sports are fun. Band is fun. I guess drama is fun; I’ve never actually done it. All of these things are fun, but if they cause us to sin, we must lay them aside and follow Christ.

These are just a few examples of hindrances and there are many more. In everything we do we should emulate Christ. If we respond like Elisha did and lay aside all of the things that cause us to be attached to this world, then we will receive our inheritance. If we are “steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord ...” then we shall be with God and worship Him for all eternity. Do not look back to your old life of sin. Do not allow the things of this world to choke out your faith. Keep heavenly focus!