

WHEN GOD DESERTS

Do you all long to grow in wisdom? It is an old assumption of mine that everybody would like to be wise – that each of us has as one of our goals an image of ourselves as one who, having lived on this earth through years of searching and striving, has come to the place of discernment. We would like to be among those who can see beneath the glitter and flash to the true values; who can look at the common and discern beneath the surface the caring of the Creator; who can experience the swirling, conflicting, confusing currents of all the busyness and activity and commotion going on and still detect the steady flow of God’s redeeming purpose underneath it all.

Wisdom is such an elusive virtue, however. Many wonder if it truly exists except as a word we use for those who agree with us. Unlike knowledge, wisdom is seldom among the practical and valued commodities of our world. It’s nobody’s fault; we would pay for wisdom if we could figure out where and when to get some. The trouble is, we are never sure where wisdom dwells until it is too late. That is, wisdom is always recognized by our world in retrospect. Individuals may find it or even themselves become wise, but the rest of us cannot tell for sure until after the story is over and we can look back on how things worked out.

In any case, wisdom is not knowledge. All the knowledge in the world cannot make a person wise, just as all the facts in the world do not add up to a single truth. Wisdom is never the foe of knowledge, but wisdom puts knowledge together in special ways that reveal patterns of meaning, purpose, direction, and truth. Wisdom is to knowledge what faith is to reason. It takes that next step beyond. It discerns God, and with the awareness of God come purpose and patterns, choices to be made, assignments to be given, principles to be honored. The drama of LIFE begins – with all of its possibilities and terrors – if God really exists. Then we are not just “here” by accident. All of it actually matters, including us and how we live every moment of every day. And that’s where we left off: The fear of the Lord (trust in the Lord) is the beginning of wisdom.

After saying all that, it would be interesting to take a break, a kind of field trip, and go look for a while at a man of wisdom, maybe getting some further glimmer of what this is all about. Fortunately,

we have records to provide us with such information, and all of us have copies of the records. Today I will reintroduce you to a man you already know very well, so we do not have to start from scratch. Also, we do not have to wonder or argue about whether or not he was wise. The story is known and proved out, and has been for four thousand years. Joseph stands among the greatest sages and seers of all time. He was that, and he will go on being that, whether we like him, agree with him, or learn from him – or not.

In his time, Joseph saved the Egyptian empire from mass starvation, chaos, and ruin. In the process, he also saved the core of the Israelite nation. He therefore stands as one of the pivotal figures in “Western” history. Without him, God would doubtless have found another way; nevertheless, we cannot imagine our history without him. Clearly the whole river of history changed its course with the influence and contribution of Joseph.

I know you know the story, but it’s the sort of story we both know and never fully know. How well can we identify with Joseph? All humans are gifted in some ways, and Joseph too was gifted. Looking back, we say he was gifted in very unusual ways. Perhaps. At least we can say with certainty that Joseph honored his gifts. He trained them, applied them, used them, and claimed them constantly. To me, that is what first stands out most startlingly about Joseph. Throughout his life, wherever he found himself, regardless of the circumstances, we find him honoring his gifts in this way.

What are his gifts? I am sure I do not know them all, but two stand out unmistakably. First, his primary gift is a special spiritual discernment. He does not just acquire “wisdom” – he is born with it. The outstanding mark is his ability to comprehend and interpret the meanings of dreams. But that is only the apex of his gift. The story makes it clear that Joseph senses, sees, and perceives the pattern of life’s events. He is a scholar and a thinker as well as a dreamer. He is a sage, a seer, a wise man – one of the magi.

Joseph’s second gift is more mundane and practical: He is a terrific manager. He knows how to organize, how to keep records, how to take care of the details, how to keep everybody clear about what is going on and what they should be doing.

Notice what Joseph is not: He is not a king, a warrior, or a leader type. At no time in his life is he ever number one. He is always

backup, always number two, always the power behind the throne – the coordinator. He has no charisma, no personality for making friends, no vision or purpose of his own with which to inspire others. We might even say, if we did not know the rest of the story, that Joseph was dealt a pretty weak hand. Despite that, he is sort of a super-clerk – a whiz at it – with a special interest in esoteric subjects.

So Joseph is a seer and an organizer. He is most often valued for his secondary, more useful gift. But the first is higher and more dangerous, and that is the one that gets him into trouble. Either way, Joseph uses his gifts in the awareness that it's really God behind the forces and facts going on around him. So Joseph honors his gifts. He trains them and claims them all the time. And according to the story, he is also faithful. He tries to serve God. Whoever he seems to be working for, in his own mind he works for God. That is also why he gets into so much trouble.

If you honor your gifts, you know you are important. If you honor your gifts – if you train and use and claim them – then you have to set yourself apart in some ways, if for no other reason than simply to make room in your schedule to honor the gift. What good is the greatest musician in the world without time to practice? So Joseph's brothers learn to hate him. They do normal work while Joseph keeps the books and reads and studies. He wears the long-sleeved coat of a scholar (not a coat of many colors). Joseph also makes it clear that he has a special destiny. I suspect he was lonely and frightened by it, and hoped his father and brothers might understand and help him to understand and live with it. But they thought he was being egotistical and superior, and they could not stand him for it.

What a string of misfortunes then seem to unfold for poor Joseph. His brothers are about to kill him when, “by accident” (of course), they get a chance to sell him into slavery for a profit instead.

We do not know how many years he was in Egypt before he rose (as a slave) to the position of chief manager for Potiphar. His secondary gift of managerial skill was great, and he used it well. Then disaster again. Potiphar's wife. And once again, if Joseph had not behaved so aloof and superior, maybe this second disaster would never have happened. So next we find him in prison. As an aside, it is a mystery that he had not been killed for this incident. Why would Potiphar merely throw him into the guardhouse if indeed Potiphar believed that Joseph had accosted his wife? One suspects that Potiphar knew his wife better

than she hoped, and appreciated Joseph more than he could afford to show.

The guardhouse was not as grim as a prison for hardened criminals. It was the guardhouse for political prisoners, those who had run afoul of Pharaoh or his household. As Pharaoh's Captain of the Guard, the guardhouse was Potiphar's to use. Nonetheless, we would imagine that it was quite a large establishment. How many years before Joseph rose to the position of chief manager of the prison? We are not sure, but it would be at least two years after that before Joseph is released.

What was Joseph thinking during all this time? Maybe: What was the meaning of those dreams I used to dream? What's the use of trying to be faithful, when all I ever get is scorn, abuse, hatred, and ruin? Why should I keep praying and studying? Why bother to make myself useful? Prisoner and slave in a foreign land, among strangers, with nobody to really care about me – my own family hates me – what's the point or purpose of any of it?!

Perhaps this is exactly what Joseph said to himself as he languished in prison. But there is no hint of it. Was Joseph morose as he went about his prison duties, day in and day out, month in and month out? Somehow I doubt it. Joseph seems to be the sort of person who goes on doing his thing, honoring his gifts – training them, applying them – running the prison better than it had ever been managed before.

I suppose he *must* have wondered, "What am I doing here? What good can come of this?" But some of us "languish" better than others. Isn't that a wonderful word? *Languish*. How are you at languishing? First I want to know, if you missed it: How are you at honoring your gifts? But now also: How are you at languishing? Everybody I know languishes part of the time. Part of every lifetime seems to be spent in wrong places, on interim tasks. Sometimes it seems like *all* of life is, as if we can never quite find the right circumstances, the right combination. Then we languish, wondering how long we will be in this place. When will we get lucky, find the right niche, come forth into a situation where we can make a real contribution and be who we really are? So we languish. But some of us languish better than others. How are you at languishing?

I think Joseph was great at it. Of course, he had a lot of practice: despised brother, sold into slavery, household slave for Potiphar, falsely accused of attempted rape, now prison. But Joseph languished very well. Wherever he was put, soon he was doing his own thing again: manager, organizer, seer, interpreter of dreams. Usually there is some joy (praise and appreciation) for the chance to be who we are and for the chance to serve, no matter where we are. Usually, almost always, there is the *possibility* of such joy, if we choose it. Joseph always seemed to choose it.

Everybody knows how Joseph interpreted the dreams of the butler (cupbearer) and the baker in prison. And two years later, the butler remembered Joseph when Pharaoh was troubled with his own dreams. So Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, and eventually became the second-in-command of all Egypt. Then he saved Egypt from famine, and eventually Israel too. And how poignant the meetings between Joseph and the brothers who had sold him into slavery.

Many things here are too fascinating to touch on at the moment, but one thing in particular I commend to you: It is hard not to notice that from the time of Joseph's boyhood, when he is filled with zeal and faith and the visions of his own destiny, until he is thirty – for all those hard and difficult years – it does look precisely like God has deserted him. Almost everything that can go wrong does go wrong. And Joseph is not making slow progress against difficult odds. He is going backwards most of the time (from any fair, objective perspective). His situation keeps deteriorating. Indeed, it does look like God has deserted him. If, in fact, God ever did have a special purpose for him, surely God has forgotten. Or maybe it was all a boyish dream in the first place – the simple “delusions of grandeur” that most of us must outgrow from our youth. (And if we do grow out of them, we are no longer of any use to the Kingdom.)

What do you do when God deserts you? When none of the plans materialize? When none of the opportunities come forth or come true?

Can I get you to imagine this story for a moment from God's point of view? Of course we cannot, really, but we can try. Just switch perspectives. Here is Joseph, your servant, with the special gifts you have endowed him with. He is superbly suited for a very special task, a very important task. The trick is to keep him alive and to maneuver him into a place where he can use the gifts at the crucial time. All of this must be done according to the self-imposed limitations – that is, without directly violating anybody's free will.

So you do what you can to alert Joseph, to awaken him to his destiny. Naturally, you do that by means of the high gift you have given him. Joseph has dreams, from early youth. You try to get the information through to him. Something important is afoot. He has a very important role to play. Of course, he only gets vague bits and pieces of it, but he is game. He believes you and holds onto the plan, dim as it is for him.

Now, how do you get him to Egypt? Well, it's a little tricky, but it will probably work. First of all, you used up so much of Joseph's circuitry to build in the special wisdom and spiritual tune, that he is shorted in other areas like tact, relational skills, recreational interests. The objectivity and perfectionism that make him such a superb manager/organizer also make him uncomfortable to be around. He is always helping people by straightening them out, telling them what they ought to be doing, telling them what they do not want to hear. Fine, that gets him into Egypt. His brothers cannot stand him.

But he lands in Potiphar's household. That's a true dead end. Potiphar is not about to get rid of him. Potiphar has never had it so good. Joseph is a genius and Potiphar's affairs are in fabulous shape, so Joseph is obviously there for life. Great. Potiphar is delighted. Joseph is comfortable and secure. But that's not what you designed him for. Now what?

"Even being God ain't no bed of roses." There is no way to get from Potiphar to Pharaoh – except through prison. Something has to jar Joseph out of his excellent position into the one where he really belongs. Joseph cannot save Egypt or Israel from his position in Potiphar's household. Somehow God has to get him to Pharaoh. So Joseph goes to prison. It is the greatest promotion of his life, only it does not look that way for quite a while. What it looks like is that God has really deserted him, this time for good and for sure.

That is the real drama behind the story. If Joseph loses faith, despairs, turns away from God, or lets his gifts atrophy, get rusty, or get out of shape, then the whole thing is for nothing. Then Joseph will die believing that God has indeed deserted him. And God will have to figure out some alternative way to carry forth the plans and the true purpose. How close do you suppose it came? How close does it come with you?

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God is a risk-taker, a gambler – always trying to match us to the tasks and situations we are designed for. But we have to honor our gifts and learn to languish faithfully. And we can now believe, by the power and love of Jesus Christ, that God never deserts us! Yet the risk is still very great – each time God has to promote us, through some prison, to where we really belong – that we will lose faith, quit, and let the gifts go to seed because we think we have been deserted.

Jesus said, “*You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much.*” Do you hear that like a promise? Honor your gifts. It will help you know what to do and how to do it, and when and where.

Honor your gifts. Learn to languish by running your prison well. And trust the promise.