

We are continuing our series on spiritual formation. Our vision is to be transformed people, transforming the Peninsula. To be agents of transformation, we have to be transformed, and that happens through spiritual formation. We've defined spiritual formation as the process of intentionally opening our lives to the work of the Spirit to become more like Christ. It's about growing in our faith, being formed into the image of Jesus.

A few weeks ago, we asked, "Whose job is it?" We said spiritual formation is 100 percent us and 100 percent God. We also identified four ingredients involved in being formed into the image of Jesus. We covered worldview, spiritual practices, and life with others. In this message, we are talking about the final ingredient — life experiences. This one is different from the others because the others focused more on the 100 percent us, where we're actively working out what God is working in us. But with life experiences, we don't have as much control. We do have a say over how we respond, but not always over what happens to us.

About ten months ago, our family had a chance to experience this firsthand. As many of you know, both our son and son-in-law are college football coaches. When our son-in-law was hired as the head coach at Western Kentucky University at age 35, he was a rising star — the youngest head coach in Division 1 football. He also hired our 25-year-old son, who was just starting his career, to be part of his staff. The first year they made a bowl game, but in the second year, they struggled and only won three games. Guess what? They got fired. Now anyone who knows college football gets that every coach gets fired sooner or later. But it felt unfair. He still had two years on his contract. They had one of the youngest teams in college football. But in two years they went from being rising stars to being unemployed and feeling like they were run out of town.

That's a life experience they had little control over. How do you handle something like that? Our faith tells us that in all things, God has a purpose for us. What he brings into our life, both what brings us joy and what brings us pain, are meant to shape us into the image of Christ. The Bible says God "works out everything in conformity to the purpose of his will" (Eph 1:11). God is 100 percent committed to accomplishing his purpose in us, which is to make us like Jesus, and he uses all the experiences of life to do that.

But let's face it, sometimes it's hard to believe God is working out his purpose when we get fired, or when we hear of a child killed in another mass shooting, or when we're called to walk through personal tragedy. One of my daughters is a nurse in the oncology unit at Lucille Packard Children's Hospital. Just take in a few of those stories, and you have to

wonder if God "works out everything in conformity to the purpose of his will." That sounds good in a theology class, but can we really believe His purpose runs through every life experience?

Whenever I'm struggling with these questions, I think of Joseph, whose story I want us to look at. We're going to look at his life from 20,000 feet. If anyone might question the purpose of God in everything, it was him. His story is found in Genesis 37-50.

Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers

Joseph was the favorite son of one of the Old Testament patriarchs named Jacob. His favored status earned him the deep resentment of his eleven brothers. But Joseph added to his brothers' hatred by flaunting that status. His dad even gave him a multicolored coat to show his higher rank. Joseph wore it to parade his own importance and put his brothers down. Joseph made things worse by sharing with the whole family about his wild dreams. On one occasion he said,

"Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it. Genesis 37:6-7

How would you expect your brothers to react to that? I have an older brother. If I told him that, it wouldn't have gone well for me! No wonder it says, "*And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said*" (37:8). No doubt, Joseph had some growing up to do. If God was ever going to use him in a significant way, he'd have to whittle him down to size.

It wasn't long before his brothers had an opportunity to act on their jealous hatred. They were out shepherding their father's flocks far from home. Joseph had stayed home, but he was sent by his father to check on them. As they saw him coming from a distance, they plotted a way to kill him and tell their dad he was eaten by a wild animal. But in the end, they decided to sell him to a caravan of traders heading down to Egypt. Listen to what happened next.

Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces." Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave." So his father wept for him. Meanwhile,

the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. vv. 31-36

Joseph in Potiphar's house

Joseph is sold as a slave to an Egyptian administrator named Potiphar, who sees his talents and puts him in charge of his household. Potiphar's title literally translates as "chief butcher," which was a military function. In other words, this is a guy you don't mess with! But Joseph earned his respect. The writer of Genesis attributed this to the Lord

The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. Genesis 39:2-4

Even though he was a slave, he made the most of it. You might even say these were good times for Joseph. Sometimes God blesses us, and that's part of his program too. But the good times didn't last long.

Joseph is put into prison

Joseph also had the unfortunate blessing of being "well built and handsome" (39:6b). He caught the eye of Potiphar's wife, and she tried to seduce him. It says, *"And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her" (39:10)*. Obviously, that's a wise decision his part, but it got him into trouble. She was so offended she framed him for attempted rape, and Potiphar has no choice but to send him to prison. It's worth noting if Potiphar really believed his wife, he'd have had Joseph executed, but instead, he sent him to a place for political prisoners. This would set the stage for the next chapter in Joseph's life.

It's worth pausing for a moment and reflecting on how all this must have felt to Joseph. Joseph's life was like a roller coaster. Right when it appears he's getting blessed, he gets rocked with another setback. I'm sure Joseph never thought his life would go like this. Whatever happened to those dreams he had? They didn't include either a pit or a prison. Just like in our own lives, there are things we never could foresee: deep disappointment over what might have been, unrelieved heartache over a child gone astray, unfaithful spouses and friends, piercing sorrow over lost loved ones, and lonely dark seasons where God seems to hide his face. Some of you have been there; some of you are in a pit or prison of sorts right now.

Joseph thrives while in prison

But God continues to move with purpose in Joseph's life. Again, we're told, "the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden" (39:21). The warden put him in charge of all the prisoners.

Then something happened that gave Joseph the hope of freedom. Joseph met two former officials who were in prison because they'd somehow gotten in trouble with Pharaoh. One had been Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and the other his chief baker. One night both of these

men had disturbing dreams, and they didn't know what they meant. Dreams were considered a portent of future events, and so they were desperate to know what this meant for them. When Joseph saw they were upset, he said, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams" (40:8b). Joseph had a Ph.D. in dreams, right? So, he went on and interpreted their dreams. He told the baker he'd soon have his head cut off while the cupbearer would be restored to his position in the palace. Joseph was so sure of his interpretation he said to the cupbearer,

"When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon." Genesis 40:14-15

You can see how Joseph's felt about his plight. "Life's not fair. I've done nothing to deserve this." And he really hadn't. But his attempt for the cupbearer to take up his cause failed. The cupbearer was restored to the palace, but he forgot all about Joseph. We don't know how much longer Joseph stayed in prison, but it had to have felt like an eternity, and he had to feel just like we feel in those times, forgotten by God.

Joseph is released and promoted in Egypt

But then Pharaoh himself had two troubling dreams that none of his wise men could interpret. The cupbearer finally remembered Joseph, who was brought into the palace and successfully interpreted Pharaoh's dreams. The dreams both indicated seven years of abundance would be followed by seven years of famine. This warning would allow Pharaoh to prepare for the famine, and who better to lead the efforts than Joseph? Pharaoh said,

"Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you." Genesis 41:39-40

Things were good again for Joseph. He got married, had a couple of kids, bought a house, and leased a BMW. And he used his extraordinary gifts of leadership and administration to prepare for the famine by storing grain and carefully doling it out.

Joseph is reunited with and forgives his brothers

And this was quite a famine. It was felt all the way in the land of Canaan, where Joseph's brothers and father still lived. When Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, he sent his sons to buy some food so his family could survive. So, Joseph's brothers went to Egypt. They were brought before Joseph, and yes, they bowed down to him just as Joseph's dream, so many years ago, had said. It had been so many years since they saw him that they didn't recognize him. Of course, he'd taken on Egyptian hair and dress. But he recognized them. Instead of revealing his identity, he played this little game of cat and mouse (ch. 42-44). What's clear is Joseph was testing them. He wanted to see if they'd changed their ways since they sold him into Egypt.

And then the big reveal.

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. vv.45:1-8

What a moving scene! Notice what Joseph said three times: "God sent me ahead of you..." God did that to preserve the lives of his chosen people. He did that because he was committed to fulfilling the promises he'd made to Joseph's great grandfather, Abraham. Since Joseph could see everything that had happened had a purpose, he was able to forgive and embrace his brothers.

This comes out again years later after Jacob had died. Joseph's brothers were afraid that with the death of their father Joseph would finally take revenge on them for what they did to him. So the brothers told Joseph that before their father died, he said Joseph should forgive them. This was a lie, but a guilty conscience is hard to shake. They even tell Joseph, "We'll just be your slaves."

But Joseph said to them,

"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. vv. 50:19-20

God uses life experiences to accomplish his purpose

It's all about purpose. God is able to take even the evil things people do and use it for his good purpose. Augustine said, "God permits evil to transform it into a greater good." This story is a living example of Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." It doesn't say God causes all things. He's not the author of evil; he permits it, but he doesn't cause it. Nor does it say all things that happen to us are good. There are many things that happen to us that aren't good at all. What it says is God causes all things to work together for good. It's in the interplay of all things God accomplishes his purpose.

Here, God's purpose was to save, preserve, and ultimately bless his people. In being brought to Egypt by Joseph, they were saved from the famine. Not only that, Egypt was a perfect place for his people to

incubate for the next 400 years. It was a world power where Israel could safely grow to over a million people ready to move towards the Promised land.

God had another purpose in all of this. He was molding and shaping Joseph from a brash and ego-centered young man into a genuine servant of God. Psalm 105:16-22 reflects on the life of Joseph. It says when he was sold as a slave, "*They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck (soul) was put in irons.*" Literally the Hebrew says, "his soul came into iron." Ancient Jewish translators interpreted that to mean, "iron entered into his soul." If they're correct, that means it was through his suffering that God turned him into a great man of faith with iron in his soul. Think of it this way: Joseph died when he was 110, living to see his great, great grandchildren! He had 21 years of hardship, but 71 years of blessing and productivity. I have no doubt he would never have become the person he was apart from iron entering his soul through suffering.

The challenge is when we're in the middle of our story; when we can't see through the darkness, when life just keeps beating us up, how do we survive? Joseph can help us here.

Joseph Teaches Us:

Don't live in denial

First of all, don't live in denial. Some people become stoics. They deny the pain of life. Joseph didn't do that. Several times he broke down and wept uncontrollably. He felt the sting of pain and rejection. Nor did he minimize the evil done to him. He said to his brothers, "You meant it for harm." He didn't go soft on what they did. He called it what it was. They did him wrong. Nor did he passively accept his circumstances. He made every effort to get out of prison. When you're suffering, there's no need to wipe a smile on your face and say, "Praise the Lord." When life is hard, it's okay to say, "This is hard. I don't like this. I want this to end."

Maintain your trust in God

You can say that, but at the same time, maintain your trust in God, as Joseph did, even when he didn't know the outcome of his situation. When Pharaoh asked him if he could interpret his dream, Joseph said, "*I can't do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires*" (41:16). When he sent his brothers back to fetch his father and bring him to Egypt, he sent them with a message, "*God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay*" (45:9). Even in naming his sons, he acknowledged God. Manasseh: "*God has made me forget all of my trouble.*" Ephraim: "*God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering*" (41:51-52).

At times we'll feel like giving up, sometimes it feels like we're clinging to the last thread of our faith, but we must hang on to him. Remember the words of Solomon, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding...*" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Be alert to the different temptations each life experience can bring

Joseph also teaches us to be alert to the different temptations every life experience can bring. Even blessings present a temptation. When Joseph was favored by his father, he gloated. That was wrong. When Joseph was promoted in prison, he could have become proud and taken

credit, but he didn't. When Potiphar's wife tempted him, he said to her, "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (39:9). Joseph resisted the temptation that comes with power, authority, and good looks. Whatever life brings us, usually there's a way of dealing with it that's wrong.

How does this apply to you? What temptations are you facing in this season of life? Whatever season of life we're in, one of the temptations we all face is comparison. Thanks to social media, this trap is more prevalent than ever before. Not only do we compare ourselves with friends, but now we compare ourselves with celebrities, strangers, and friends of friends, whose lives are all photoshopped. You can be going through a hard time and feel worse because of how perfect everyone else's life looks, or you can be going through a season of blessing and feel bad because someone online has it even better than you. It's a trap, and we have to avoid it.

Make the most of every situation you're in

Another thing about Joseph is he made the most of every situation he was in, and God blessed him in that. He refused to focus on himself. Joseph was gifted in leadership and administration. In both Potiphar's house and Pharaoh's prison, he put his gifts and talents to work and made both better in the process. He gave himself tirelessly to any work to be done. He took an active interest in other people. Even in jail, he got involved in the life of the cupbearer and baker. He could have just given up, become bitter or passive, but instead, he became an asset and source of blessing to others. It's such an overused cliché that I hate even to use it, but it's true - bloom where you're planted. God has given you gifts and talents. Wherever you are, God put you there, and you can put your gifts and talents to use.

The only way we can do this is to trust in a sovereign God through all the life experience he gives you. God uses every life experience to accomplish his purpose. He always has a redemptive purpose in mind. We may not get to see it as clearly as Joseph did, but it's there.

Earlier I mentioned our son and son-in-law. In the two years since they got fired, I've seen how God used that experience to form them and put "iron in their soul." They're better people, better husbands, better coaches, and better men of faith than they were before. Lynn and I are prouder of them than ever. And, by the way, they're both employed as college football coaches in the state of Utah, and we're sort of glad they got fired because now they're 1,000 miles closer to us!

You see, even when we don't understand why this or that is happening to us, God is working out his purpose. Corrie Ten Boom used to say, as life unfolds in real-time, it's like viewing the backside of a weaving or tapestry. It appears nothing more than a jumble of thread—randomly

tangled, frayed, and knotted. Nothing really makes sense, but things aren't always what they seem. When you turn a tapestry over, you see the art: rich colors, the texture, patterns of astonishing beauty. Likewise, occasionally, God gives us a glimpse at what He's doing in our lives. That momentary peek gives us the courage to soldier on, knowing nothing happens by accident. The One weaving it together knows what he's doing. She often quoted a poem about it, called "Life is but a Weaving."

He knows what he's doing in your life and you can trust he will use every dark thread to accomplish his glorious purpose.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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