

Joseph's Change of Clothes

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Heb 11:22 – “By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.”

The triumph of Joseph's chastity under exceedingly severe temptation might have been very properly traced to the power of his faith, but it is passed over by the Hebrew writer. The forgiveness he displayed toward the flesh and blood who betrayed him is certainly noteworthy. But when the Hebrew writer, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has to pick one occasion in Joseph's life that accurately portrays his faithfulness, he chooses the episode at the very end of the book of Genesis as it pertained to the carrying of his bones from Egypt.

Why the bones? Maybe it tells us we are poor judges in what God is most satisfied in. Or maybe it tells us we haven't dug deep enough to truly understand everything that transpired leading up to his death. But what it most definitely tells us is that despite the many changes of fortune that occurred in Joseph's life, he never forgot who he was, and who God was.

The lesson of Joseph's change of clothes is a remarkable lesson in how to respond to our many changes of fortune. I've worn many kinds of clothes in my life. I've worn diapers; I graduated to pull-ups. I've worn a baseball uniform and I've worn a karate uniform. I've worn an apron for bagging groceries. I've worn a high school graduation robe and then another one for college. But none of my changes of clothes represented spiritually anything of significance quite like Joseph's change of clothes.

- 1) The clothes of the “favored” – Gen 37:3 – “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic.” If you have ever known a football team to be the preseason consensus #1 team, you also know that rarely do they stay that way. Young men are often not ready for the kind of favoritism that can come with great ability. Too often, even with the greatest intentions, it can get to our head until life (or God) finds a way to bring us back down to earth. The Apostle Paul was one of the greatest disciples to have ever lived. He was “untimely born” for the role of Apostleship. He was caught up to the third heaven. How did he view his favored status? 1 Cor 15:10 – “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.” Whatever our gift, whatever our favored situation or circumstance, may we always wear the coat of grace like Paul.
- 2) The clothes of “suffering” – Gen 37:23-24 – “So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it.” No one enjoys suffering. But just as situations and circumstances in life bring favor, they also bring suffering – and often they come one after the other. Joseph now finds himself in a garment of slavery, having lost his garment of favoritism. He's seemingly lost his family. He's seemingly lost his inheritance. But we're told that there was something he hadn't lost, and that was God (Gen 39:1-4). As sure as we are that suffering will come in our lives, we can be just as sure that when all seems lost, God is there. And because God was there and Joseph knew he was there, we read that Joseph became successful in all that he did. In addition, how well we wear the garment of suffering determines whether those around us see God. Potiphar saw the Lord was with Joseph and because of this Potiphar saw a glimpse of the Lord. When people find out we are Christians, the spotlight is on us. How we handle adversity separates “the men from the boys” so to speak and becomes a living testimony to those around us – 1 Pet 2:12 – “Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.”

- 3) The clothes of “moral integrity” – Gen 39:11-12 – “Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. She caught him by his garment, saying, ‘Lie with me!’ And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside.” Whereas Joseph had no choice in his last change of clothes that led to suffering, this is a change of clothes that did involve a choice. And this choice to refuse the advances of Potiphar’s wife means that Joseph’s doing what is right is going to bring him suffering – 1 Pet 2:20 – “For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.” There are many situations in our life when doing what is right will bring suffering to our lives. Teaching someone what they need to hear will bring you suffering when the heart it penetrates is solid as rock – they will revile you, slander you, tell lies about you. You could lose friends, members of your family, your job. When these voids in our relationships come because we do what is right, God is waiting for us to fill that void with Him, to lean on Him – 1 Pet 4:12-13 – “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.”
- 4) The clothes of the “tested” – Gen 41:14 – “Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to Pharaoh.” – Psa 105:17-19 – “He sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. They afflicted his feet with fetters, He himself was laid in irons; until the time that his word came to pass, the word of the LORD tested him.” If there is one sure thing about God, it is that after wearing the garments of suffering (which is intended to prune us), He will once again raise us from the shackles to see what fruit is borne. Joseph has been betrayed by his brothers, thrown in prison for doing what is right, and showed acts of kindness to the cupbearer only to have been forgotten by him. And now he’s been given the power of interpreting dreams for a God that many might say in his circumstances had forgotten him - so why not take the credit? Fortunately, Joseph passed the test (Gen 41:16, 25, 28, 32, 39, 52). And we have a greater advantage than Joseph to pass our tests because ours are “open book”.
- 5) The clothes of the “exalted” – Gen 41:42 – “Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck.” This is what God is wanting to do for each and every one of us – Matt 23:12 – “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” God wants to use us for His glory. But before God can get the glory He deserves, He has to ensure the instrument of it will give glory where glory is due. And you never know what suffering that comes our way may actually be preparing us for down the road - not for our own exaltation, but for God’s. Joseph is ready to wear the garments of exaltation because by his suffering, it produced a proven character ready to pave the way for the people of Israel to populate Egypt.
- 6) The clothes of “godly sorrow” – Gen 44:10-13 – “So he said, ‘Now let it also be according to your words; he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and the rest of you shall be innocent.’ Then they hurried, each man lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. He searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest, and the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. Then they tore their clothes, and when each man loaded his donkey, they returned to the city.” Just as Joseph had to lose his coat of many colors and then had to leave his garment in the hands of Potiphar’s wife, sometimes we need to shed our clothes, or in this case “shred”, in order to fully put on Christ. It was a custom of the Jews to rend their clothes as an outward expression of intense anguish or distress, similar to how we sometimes rip out our hair (and they did that too). Later on, Jews would do it purely as a matter of custom where there was no grief or anguish or distress which led the prophet Joel to rebuke them (Joel 2:13). But we do not get the sense that what the sons of Jacob did here was any more than an act of genuine sorrow at the apparent fate of their youngest brother Benjamin. There can be no true repentance without godly sorrow, without a rending of the heart. And Joseph’s brothers show a

genuine change of heart over their apparent loss of Benjamin, by shredding the clothes of godly sorrow which leads to repentance.

- 7) The clothes of “faith” – Gen 50:24-26 – “Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.” Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here.” So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.” Jacob also gave instructions concerning his bones (Gen 49:29-32), but Jacob’s instructions were borne out of natural affection to be with his forefathers rather than an expression of faith. But Joseph was so sure that God would take them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land that he postpones his burial in anticipation of that event. And this is remarkable considering everything that happened to Joseph. He triumphed over the curse of world prosperity, having anything and everything at his disposal as second in command of Egypt, most likely for 60 – 70 years before he died. He triumphed over an idolatrous society. Someone once said that Egyptians were so idolatrous they grew their gods in their own gardens (leeks and onions). We think we see in Joseph, here and there, traces that he was damaged by Egyptian habits and customs, but still not so much as one might have expected—and in no degree so much as to make us suspect his fidelity toward God. During the time before his family came to Egypt, he probably had no one of like precious faith to associate with, only an Egyptian wife who was the daughter of one of their priest. But through countless trials/suffering, an idolatrous society, and wealth we couldn’t possibly dream of, his last dying words exhibited a faith we could all envy.

Like Joseph, when our life here is over, we’ll have remains. And it is when we endure our “change of clothes” like Joseph did that we too will be carried away into the Promised Land.