

This past Monday I was part of our district's ordination council where we evaluated the ordination paper of a pastor and grilled him with questions for three and a half hours. I always like being on this end of tough questions! The moderator of the council always has us go around the table and introduce ourselves and tell what church we serve in. This time opened the time of introductions by saying, "Tell us your name, where you are from and your besetting sin." Of course he was joking but you can see how such a question could make you sweat. We usually don't tell anyone our besetting sins let alone someone whom we have just met. Yet we all have them. Each of us has an Achilles heel, a weakness toward certain kinds of temptations. Satan knows all of our weaknesses and he also plays the odds like a casino owner—he knows that if he hits us in our area of weakness the odds are always going to be in his favor that you and I will give into the temptation.

Therefore, what can we do to change these odds? What can we do to strengthen our areas of weakness so that we can win the battle on a more consistent basis? This story of Joseph that we started last week contains powerful principles to help us win the daily battles that we all face. Let's pick up where we left off last Sunday.

*Now Joseph was well-built and handsome,<sup>7</sup> and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"*

*<sup>8</sup>But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. <sup>9</sup>No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" <sup>10</sup>And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.*

*<sup>11</sup>One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. <sup>12</sup>She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.*

Many pastors use this story to teach people how to avoid temptation and they usually focus in on verse twelve. *But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.* The principle gleaned from this verse is that we are to run away from temptation. It's better not to even get close to temptation, but when sin comes knocking, run! Run as fast and as far as you can, but just run! That's not bad advice and I think I have given similar advice at times, but this vastly oversimplifies the story and in reality, nearly misses the mark completely. Let me explain the problem with advice like this. Have you ever watched a movie where the good characters are

being chased either by bad characters or some kind of wild animal? In order to heighten the action scene, inevitably one of the characters falls over a tree branch and twists their ankle. (Of course the women in these movies always run in high heels, but that's a different problem!) And then what happens? The other person who was running with them stops and tries to get them going again. "Come on, let's go. We've got to run. He's catching up to us!"

Do you see? When we tell someone to run away from temptation, it's kind of like telling someone with a broken ankle to run away from a crazed killer. You get up and try to run but you just stumble and fall again. The monster comes after you and eventually devours you because you can't run. But Joseph did so much more than just run away, and that's what we need to understand this morning.

Before we get to that, let's take a closer look at his level of temptation in verse ten. *And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.* I think it is important to note this because Joseph did not have a one-time temptation. When we think back to this story, we remember that Joseph was tempted and that he ran away without his cloak but we tend to forget that this he had this temptation before him every single day. Potiphar's wife was an extremely persistent woman. We can conjecture that she was also a beautiful woman, since a powerful man like Potiphar could have had his pick of almost any wife. It's also possible that she had done this sort of thing before. Anyone who is this brazen and forward did not learn this behavior over night. She probably had many long years of practice. I point this out as a way to compare the level of temptations that you and I face. For example, if you have ever been tempted toward emotional or physical adultery, I can guarantee you that your temptation was not as difficult as Joseph's. No one would ever want to face what he faced. He was a slave and she was his master. As chief steward he would have regularly obeyed her every command. She was used to having Joseph obey her and he made it a habit of obeying her. Add to the mix her beauty, power and daily persistence, we see that this was a hotbed of powerful temptation. Therefore, if you are ever tempted to claim that no one understands you, if you think that the temptations that you face are so great that you cannot possibly overcome them, I don't buy it. Joseph's temptation literally pounded on his door every day and like the approaching monster in the woods, threatened to devour him at any moment.

The first thing he did to overcome his temptation was to clearly identify the sin before him. He didn't make up excuses. He didn't try to rationalize it. He simply called it wrong. Last Sunday we saw the total trust that Potiphar had placed in Joseph. Nothing was beyond the reach of his control. Joseph was a powerful man in the house of a powerful man but he knew that he only managed what had been entrusted to him. This is how he explained it to his temptress. *"With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care."*<sup>9</sup> *No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife.* But most people who fall into temptation justify it through some form of rationalization. "It's not really that bad. I'm not hurting anyone else. I can't help myself. You don't know my struggles so don't judge me. God will forgive me." We may feel guilty after we have given into temptation but while we walk into it we rationalize it.

But Joseph had a secret weapon that did not allow him to rationalize sin—he saw all sin as being an offense against God. After he gave his speech to Potiphar’s wife about how his master trusted him with all things, he finished by saying, *How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?* This statement is almost an intrusion into the dialogue. Based upon everything he had just said we would have expected that Joseph would have framed the sin in terms of how it would affect Potiphar. Potiphar placed great trust in Joseph and a sin of this magnitude would have destroyed that trust. But instead of doing that Joseph put all of the emphasis on a potential sin as being an offense against God.

This is perfectly in line with David’s classic confession in Psalm 51. If you recall, the context is David’s sin against Bathsheba. David sings:

<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

<sup>2</sup> Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

<sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

<sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Was David’s sin only an offense against God? What would the murdered Uriah have to say about that? Wasn’t he sinned against? What about Bathsheba? She was seduced by the king, her husband was murdered and she was forced to marry David as part of a great conspiracy. What about the union of the illicit relationship? The boy died in infancy due to the sin of his father. What about the army? Could they ever trust a king who would send their best officers to their death merely to satisfy his own out of control lusts? What about the people of Israel? Their mighty king who sang songs to the Lord had lied to them, deceived them and betrayed them. Everyone in Israel was sinned against by David’s selfish pursuit of pleasure. How then could he claim that he had only sinned against the Lord? On the one hand, this seems to be an affront to all of the people he sinned against, but on the other hand, David was absolutely right. Any rejection of God’s laws is a rejection of God himself. I don’t think David would have claimed that no one else was hurt in the process but that ultimately God was the offended party.

The Bible calls sin lawlessness and we need to remember whose laws are being broken. The Bible calls sin unrighteousness and we need to remember whose righteousness is being violated. It was right of David to speak in these terms as it was right for Joseph to classify this potential sin as wickedness against God. Taking another man’s wife would be harmful to the husband but it is also a thousand times more offensive to God.

But some might wonder why God would be so offended by our actions. After all, aren’t Christians supposed to not be easily offended? Isn’t it the mark of a mature believer who bears up under insults? If this is the mark of a mature believer then why is God so mightily offended by us? God is so offended because God is so holy. Intellectually we know that God is holy. We sing about his holiness but we fail to grasp the significance of his holiness. We usually think of God’s holiness as being the absence of sin. While that is absolutely true God’s holiness is not just the absence of sin but also the presence of his perfect righteousness. This combination makes God’s holiness something that is reserved for God alone. Holiness touches everything that God does and is. His love is a holy love. His justice is a holy justice. Even his wrath is a holy wrath.

God's holiness is his only attribute that is repeated three times. Isaiah records the cries of the seraphs above the throne of the Lord.

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."<sup>1</sup>

John records the song of the four living creatures in Revelation.

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."<sup>2</sup>

Listen to this quote from David Wells' book *No Place for Truth*.

It is this holiness of God, then, without which the Cross of Christ is incomprehensible, that provides the light that exposes modernity's darkness for what it is. For modernity has emptied life of serious moral purpose. Indeed, it empties people of the capacity to see the world in moral terms, and this, in turn, closes their access to reality, for reality is fundamentally moral. God's holiness is fundamental to who he is and what he has done. And the key to it all has been the loss of God's otherness, not least in his holiness, beneath the forms of modern piety. Evangelicals turned from focusing on God's transcendence to focusing on his immanence [pervading all creation]-and then they took the further step of interpreting his immanence as friendliness with modernity.<sup>3</sup>

Let me define the last few words in case you are not familiar with them. Transcendence is the sense in which God is wholly other. He is high and lifted up. He is eternal and beyond our reach. God's immanence is the sense in which God is completely with us. He is intensely personal and loving and wants to be in our presence. Which of these two attributes represents God's holiness? Transcendence and holiness go hand in hand. If he is holy and we are not, then he must be separate from us. These two balancing attributes of God must be held together in our minds and hearts otherwise we construct a god that is like Wells' description—he is "friendly with modernity." That's another way of saying God is our friend and it is his job to forgive us no matter what we do. That is just one step removed from saying that God doesn't care what we do.

Yet another way of seeing the holiness of God throughout the Scriptures is the ongoing emphasis on atonement and covering of sin. The first covering of sin by a blood sacrifice comes in Genesis three when God clays the lamb as a covering for Adam and Eve. The rest of the Torah is a bloody mess. On almost every page there is some kind of description and prescription for animal sacrifices. Every detail from the draining of the blood to the burning of the fat are all part of the atonement of sin for fallen men and women. In other words, the ongoing emphasis on atonement is evidence that we are separated from God. God is holy and any hint of unholiness cannot be in his presence.

This is the way that Joseph approached the daily pounding of temptation—he understood all sin as being an offense against a perfectly holy God. Joseph was a young, handsome and well-built man. In his flesh, Joseph desired Potiphar's wife just as much as she desired him, but in his spirit, it was inconceivable that he could do such a wicked thing against his holy God. Do you see then that this is what enabled him to run away? If you tell a person to run away from temptation, like I said earlier, it's like telling a man with a broken leg to run away from the monster that is chasing him. It cannot be done. But a person who bathes himself or herself in the holiness of God, who understands all sin as a direct offense against an infinitely holy God is like a man with two strong legs and full of energy. Joseph ran from temptation because he cultivated his spiritual mind and heart in such a way that he was strengthened to run. You and I lose the battle of temptation not because there is not some part of us that wants to run. In our better

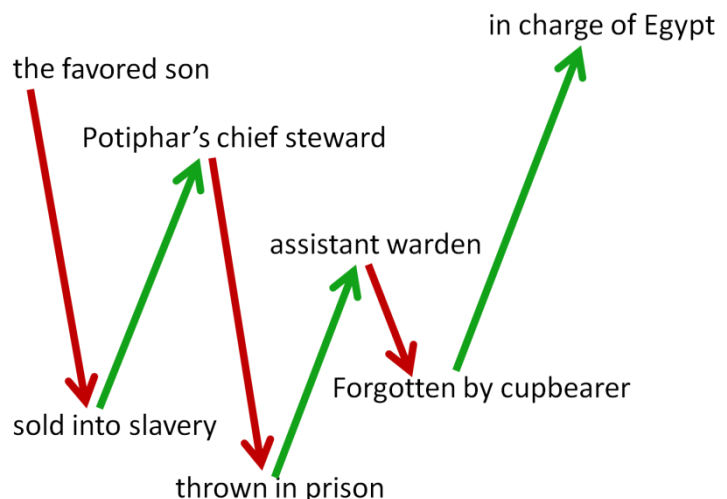
moments we hate the monster that is chasing us. We lose the battle of temptation because we cannot run. We are hobbled and crippled and can no more run away from the monster of temptation than a bird with a broken wing can escape the pouncing cat.

However, we must not use this as an excuse because anyone can be trained to run away. It is not inevitable that the monster catches you. And the wonderful thing about the perfect holiness of God is that this is one of God's attributes that can be transferred to us. We will never have omnipresence, omnipotence or omniscience, but we will have holiness. Christ, the holy one, took our sin and imputed his righteousness, his holiness to us. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Cor 5.21). The gospel of Christ gives us holiness.

The other thing that helped Joseph in his battle was his willingness to suffer for doing good. Joseph knew what the 17<sup>th</sup> century English playwright knew—that “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”<sup>4</sup> He must have known that this powerful woman would not continue to sit by idly by while he repeatedly rebuffed her. One day the hammer would fall and before that happened, Joseph must have counted the cost. God's holiness was so overpowering for him that suffering was an acceptable trade for pleasing God. Joseph had counted the cost of discipleship and he considered it a small thing compared to offending his Lord.

Two wonderful passages in 1 Peter apply to the life of Joseph. *For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God* (1 Peter 2.19). *It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil* (1 Peter 3.17). Some of you are afraid to do the right thing because you know that there is a cost involved. Compromise is easy. Righteousness is often not easy. It may cost you financially. It may cost you your reputation. Notice especially what labels Peter applied to this kind of suffering. He said it is “commendable” and it is “better” to suffer for doing good. But we would never apply these positive words to a time of suffering, would we? We don't even understand this Joseph story in this way.

We usually think of the Joseph story in this way. First we see that Joseph was the favored son. We don't like the favoritism but it is good that his father cared for him so deeply. Next, Joseph was sold into slavery. That is obviously a bad thing. But while he was a slave, he was promoted to a prominent place in Potiphar's house. That's a good thing, right? But then the nasty wife gets him in trouble and he is thrown in prison, and that's a bad thing. But the same thing happens in prison. Joseph was promoted to assistant warden in prison and everyone cheers—“Yeah for Joseph!” But even though the cupbearer promises to mention him to Pharaoh, he forgets and Joseph continues to



languish in prison. How terrible. Finally, Pharaoh has his own crazy dreams, Joseph interprets them and he is made second in command over all of Egypt. When we see that Joseph is elevated to this high position and that he will eventually save the lives of the entire nation but also his own family, we understand that all of his suffering was for a good purpose. It all makes sense in the end because all of the loose ends are tied up and the story has a happy ending. But I am convinced that this is the wrong way to understand this story.

We label Joseph's being sold into slavery as a bad thing. I would agree that what his brothers did was evil. The Midianite slave traders were engaged in an evil business of human trafficking. There is massive sin in this part of the story but we need not call the story bad. It is good. And listen carefully—it is not good merely because everything turns out in the end. It is good because God calls such things “commendable” and “better.” It's not good that bad things happen but it is good when you bear up under them. Moreover, these “bad” things were good because Joseph was in the center of God's will at each step. Too often we link success and prosperity with the Lord's will but we label all bad things as coming from Satan. Cancer is bad. Being laid off is bad. Being persecuted for your beliefs. Being wrongly accused. If you can bear up under unjust suffering it is good. When Joseph was sold into slavery it was all part of the sovereign plan and purpose of God. When he was accused of wrongdoing and cast into prison, he was in the center of God's will. When the cupbearer forgot all about him and he pined away in prison, it was commendable and good for him to bear up under unjust suffering.

Finally, we see that righteousness is not only good and commendable, it can bring hidden rewards. When Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of a terrible crime with evidence in hand, what do you think his punishment should have been? He should have been immediately executed, so why wasn't he? Joseph was spared execution because Potiphar believed him. Righteousness brings rewards.

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<sup>1</sup> Is 6:3

<sup>2</sup> Re 4:8

<sup>3</sup> David Wells, *No Place for Truth*.

<sup>4</sup> William Congreve, *The Mourning Bride*, 1697. The actual wording from the play is "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned,"