

“Memory—Sorting Things Out”
 Sermon for 29 May 2016
 Galatians 3:4; 5-9 and Genesis 37; 50:15-21

Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? (Galatians 3:4) We are going to sort some history out. Paul points the way to sorting by faith (by far the best and most productive approach). **Suffering** points in an opposite direction; it suggests sorting by pain, not by faith. We wouldn't have to consider the second, less appropriate mode of remembering except that sorting by pain is so prevalent, so common and, well, native to our flesh. I will touch on this matter later, but for now, let's walk together in Galatians 3. Paul asks the Galatians to consider how God has worked in their midst. How did the One **who supplies the Spirit to you, and works miracles among you** actually function among you? Good question. Do we live in the Spirit, or do we experience God's miraculous power **by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith**? Do you see the contrast? Paul asks, What have you experienced, suffered, and was it in vain that God moved through faith and not performance, through the Spirit and not through religious behavior? Where did you touch the life of God? And, most importantly, where did the life of God touch you?!

I learned many things on this trip, my conference and family vacation time. Just one thing here. It relates to church attendance. What does it mean for someone to “attend” church? Attend means to “pay attention, to ready oneself to receive information . . . and then to choose to make what you have heard actionable.” Attending church is about much more than the numbers, more than merely showing up! If you attend church, and by faith anticipate hearing from God, then **the hearing of faith** will be activated in you today. And the Spirit of God will be imparted to you and that, in itself, is a game changer.

Yes, things that looked bleak become hopeful. The joy potential in your difficulties, your troubles (which “nobody knows but Jesus!”) is enlivened. For **with God, nothing is impossible**. Matthew 19: 25-26: **25 When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” 26 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”**

Our first historical assertion: nothing has changed since the time of Abraham's salvation: Abraham **believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness**. (See Genesis 15:6) *If you receive this by faith, then it will not prove meaningless, pointless, or vain.* Do you believe? Then the same applies to you—you will be accounted righteous, for all **who believe in Jesus shall be saved** (Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9; John 3:15; Mark 16:16 and Romans 10:10-11). How does one make that actionable? For surely, you will have forgotten to do that by the end of the service. You must live as one forgiven, as one **accounted righteous**—that is, as one completely and entirely right with God forever. You must live as one who is guiltless—not because there is nothing to feel guilty about (or worse as one who believes there is not right and wrong!) *but you are to live as one whose real guilt has been truly dealt with, once for all, and that you acquired this condition solely by faith, by the hearing of faith.* Sin is real, guilt is real. But, rather than ignoring, or denying these realities, we are blessed to know

that through what Christ suffered for us, and through what we have suffered on account of these things, the burden has been lifted and we are free.

Therefore, know that only those who are of faith (who believe rightly) **are sons of Abraham . . . the sons of the promise, heirs of the kingdom and co-heirs with Christ of all that is . . . forever. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith** (all the non-Jewish people of the world ever!), **preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.”** (v. 8) There is rich, even astonishing truth here: first, that the first application of the promised blessing is to all who believe.” Second, this truth applies to the impact that those who believe are to have on the entire world. We are saved, redeemed, and counted righteous for a divine purpose: to embody God’s blessing, to manifest His goodness, to live out His kindness before all the nations regardless of where they are in terms of belief. To be blunt, we are to live for others as *God is for others*. There is no basis in our blessing for spiritual hoarding, or spiritual one-upmanship—we suffer, in part, because that is what we are redeemed to, and purposed for. For those weaned on self-interest, and mired in self-indulgence (the pursuit of pleasure, greedy for fame, wealth, power or influence) will find it very hard to accept that life is not about that stuff, not about us. ***On the deepest level, we are saved to be a blessing to others.*** Sin and self-protective living are interlopers in our lives. By faith we must turf those rascals out! Live in the Spirit, walk by the Spirit, and you will see that it is so.

Mark 8:34-36: 34 Then Jesus called the crowd to Him along with His disciples, and He told them, “If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and for the gospel will save it. 36 What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?...

No one, hearing this, can err in concluding that God’s totally means business!

Verse 8 also contains three animating verbs related to the living Word, the Scripture: foreseeing, preached beforehand, and saying. How awesome! Hebrews 4: 12-13: **12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it pierces even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight; everything is uncovered and exposed before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account....** This passage interprets Galatians 3:8 on our behalf and we owe a lot to it for helping us rightly grasp what Scripture uniquely is—no other book is like the Bible.

Now we are going review by faith the fulfillment of this Abrahamic prophecy in the life of God’s servant, Joseph. We have to back up first and discuss briefly Joseph’s father who was, as his name portends, a deceiver. He was a liar and manipulator—a wretched opportunist. While Laban was no great shakes as a father-in-law, Jacob represents the kind of capitalist who gives free enterprise a really bad name! Jacob, having deceived

(and lied) to dispossess Esau of his birthright (yes, he did that) proceeded to fall in love with Rachel. Laban tricked his hard-working, devious and rascally son-in-law to be to marry Leah. *It is very hard to comprehend how Jacob, being so in love with Rachel (who was so stunningly beautiful) could consummate the marriage bed with her sister Leah (the weak-eyed, plain Jane older sister) and not know the difference until afterwards.* We should perhaps let that slide for the moment. However, what we should note is that bigamy is not the best: endless strife, rivalry and heart-rending favoritism inhabited his tent. Leah gave him many sons, so eager to earn his love and Rachel, proved infertile initially and this did not lend itself to a happy home. Jacob, in the meantime, seems to have given up his thieving ways, but now proceeds to show *favoritism* amongst his burgeoning family.

There are six categories of sinner that Jacob qualifies in! Multiple times each.

We do have to wonder if all the unhappiness and strife in Jacob's family life wasn't a judgment of God for Jacob's pushy, self-centeredness and lying past. (No-one would buy a used camel from that man!) Now, lest you think I have lost my way in this tale of miscarriage of justice, sin and family dysfunction; I say, no, not in the least. God, working behind the scenes!, is looking for his man to be governor of Egypt and, as it were, "savior" of the known world. That would be Jacob's son, Joseph, a kid from a messy family, where sin is legend, lying rampant and lovelessness abounds . . . oh, well, you get the picture.

Joseph is a dreamer, not a high achiever with a positive family background. On the scale of one to ten on most likely, he might be in the negative twenties . . . or worse. And we haven't even gotten to his wretched siblings. Because Joseph was both Momma's boy and Daddy's favorite, the other ten brothers pretty much had it in for him. And, just to make the hostile mix more volatile, Joseph has some dreams projecting a rosy, dominant leadership role for himself done the road *which he fails to fly by his PR staff*—yep, he shares his happy stars with his meathead sibs . . . They don't take to it so well. (That would be understatement.)

So, as you probably already know, the brothers hate him enough to decide to "eliminate the dreamer." So, it's off with the robe and into the pit with Joseph. They purpose to leave him there naked, terrified and abandoned to die. This goes to show that boasting is a terribly risky business when you have testy family members to cohabit with—your own siblings probably know how to deal with loose lips and favoritism. It isn't pleasant . . . ever. Maybe our own lives are not quite so dramatic or theatrical . . . but then Joseph's proving grounds were of a different order. God was fashioning him to be a blessing, remember, and God does it very well: His way. Joseph probably died a thousand deaths to himself, as a son of promise now a slave, as a prisoner in a hopeless and helpless place. Yes, God was with him . . . all the way down on the way to up! And all he could do was remain faithful. Maybe that is where you are right now—hang in there: **what's impossible with man, is a mere trifle to God!**

And these are some of the memories that Joseph collects on his way to being a slave in the household of Potiphar. Not the fondest, happiest or choice of recollections!

Meanwhile, the brothers pocket the shekels they got for selling their brother, kill a goat and fake a murder. They lie to Jacob and propose that his favorite son is dead. Who can fathom the depths of wickedness to which the human heart is plunge in its rage, and evil pursuit of revenge? If you are puzzled as to how this ranks as a training program to become a governor, someone who is to administer God's mercy to the multitudes, *you've got me*. It is a mystery. And, frankly, the biography doesn't really improve much once Joseph lands in Egypt. Potiphar has a wife who fancies Joseph and Joseph, with great integrity and loyalty, refuses her lustful advances. Heaven has few furies like a woman scorned; so, failing to get what she wants, she lies, falsely accuses Joseph of attempted rape. And Joseph gets sent off the slammer for many years, for a crime that he didn't even do!

Look, I know that it's unfair and all, but this is not my story line. These memories are what God gave Joseph to occupy his mind for some eighteen years of unjust imprisonment. Do you think it was easy to sort these things out by faith, and not by pain leading to bitterness, resentment and anger?

Yes, God did salt this journey with some wonderful achievements, everything that Joseph put his hand to God prospered. And God gave him the gift of dream interpretation (the key to his escape from prison to the palace!) Joseph is faithful to give all the glory to his God and King. The clever me was left behind! Yes, in spite of all the family dysfunction, all the neglect and abuse, all the angry treatment, all the being sinned against, *Joseph kept the faith*. He kept his trust in God **alive**—yes, against almost Job-like odds, against an immense tide of wickedness rather like that confronted by Noah, Joseph worked his memories, and reworked them by faith so as *not to be embittered, but bettered by what befell him, all his circumstances, his losses, setbacks and discouragements—all painful memories*.

And **that**, that rising above, that assigning the purposes of God to the evils of mankind, whether from family or foe, is a standard of truth, a standard of sorting by faith, for us. For, with God, it is not so much where you came from, nor the influences of genetics, schooling, socialization or family training, that counts in the end. **None of those things can hinder you from becoming the servant of God that you were created to be! And that extends to your re-creation by faith as well.**

We are not told what all it took for Joseph to turn all that negativity around—but the trauma of his life story may put our stories into a healthier perspective if we apply the lessons to ourselves. If we take our eyes off of what happens to us and instead consider what God is intending to work through us, we may be enabled to say, with Joseph, **You intended it for evil, but God purposed it for good—that many might be blessed.**

And, to close the loop, it is from this perspective, the perspective of reworking our memories by faith, that we arrive at the place where we understand Paul's question:

Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? What we make of our memories can either open our future, or shut it down. When we say that God is good *all the time*, in the bad times and the good times, we are on solid ground—then our hope is real. If God can handle the world's climate, change the course of human history, it seems likely that He can also manage your biography so as to bring **glory to His Name** and to prove you to be **a blessing to all nations**. Will you let Him? Who do you think you ought to be blessing? Life will begin vain, only if you so choose it to be.

Amen.