

Faithful in the Little Things

Genesis 41

We continue to look at the life of Joseph this morning, so that we can learn more about God and our own lives and grow in our faith.

One of the games we played over Christmas vacation was the game of “Hearts.” (Picture) For those who aren’t familiar with it, Hearts is a card game where you try to avoid taking points, and to do that you try to avoid taking tricks with points in them. Hearts are worth 1 point, and the Queen of Spades is worth 13, so you try to avoid taking those cards by playing lower cards than the other players. But like most card games, you get dealt a hand of cards and you don’t know how good they’re going to be.

To make the game more interesting, at the beginning of each hand each player gets to pull three cards from their hand and pass them to someone else. So you usually give your worst cards to someone and someone gives their worst cards to you. There’s a rotation for who you pass your cards to. On the first hand, everyone passes to the left, on the second it’s to the right, and on the third it’s across. In each of these hands you have the chance to improve your hand by passing. But on the fourth round, you keep your hand. You don’t get to pass any cards. You have to play the hand you’re dealt. Sometimes it turns out well, but oftentimes it doesn’t – oftentimes you end up with bad cards that that make it really difficult to not take any points. Whether you like it or not that’s just the way it is. You have to play the hand you’re dealt.

Sometimes life can feel like that. Good, bad, or otherwise, you end up with your own unique set of circumstances that God places you in. Sometimes you’ve had a part in bringing about those circumstances, oftentimes you don’t. Either way, you have to play the hand you’re dealt. And that’s not always easy. In the game of hearts you’ll hear people say, “Oh, I got a good hand!” and other times you’ll hear groaning and complaining: “I had a terrible hand!” And sometimes that’s the way it can feel when we look at the circumstances in our lives.

If you look at the details of your life right now, what kind of hand have you been dealt? Look at where you’ve ended up...

- Are you married or single? Kids or no kids?
- Super smart? Talented? Athletic? Or not so much?

- What kind of parents did you have? What kind of home did you grow up in?
- Who did you marry?
- Look at your health situation, your job situation, your financial situation.

Sometimes these things aren't everything you hoped they'd be. Sometimes there are disappointments – big disappointments. Some of those have to do with your own choices, but often they're because of factors outside your control. Whatever it is, for right now, this is your lot in life. This is where God has you. This is the hand you've been dealt, and this is what you have to work with.

The question I want you to think about this morning is: How are you going to live out the life you've been given? Will there be lots of complaining and grumbling about the way things turned out? (Picture) "I've got a terrible hand!" Will you go around with a bitter chip on your shoulder that flavors everything you do and say? Will you be hindered by defeat? Will you be someone that people feel sorry for and have pity on? That's a road a lot of people go down.

Today I want to give you a compelling reason to avoid that trajectory in life and go in a different direction, no matter what your circumstances are. Even if you've been dealt one of the most lousy hands of anyone around you. There's a reason to not give in to a pessimistic, melancholic, Eeyore kind of existence in this life and we'll see that in what happens in Joseph's life as we look at his story today.

Joseph had multiple occasions to look at his life and think, "I'm done. I didn't deserve this. My life stinks and I'm giving up." He could have easily sunk into a pit of bitterness and despair. First he was captured and sold as a slave. Then he was falsely accused and thrown into prison. Last week we saw how he should have gotten out but was forgotten – stuck in prison for no apparent reason and there was nothing he could do about it. That's a pretty bad hand he'd been dealt by God. But today I want to see what he did with that and what God did in his life because of it. There's a principle we can learn from Joseph's story that I believe should compel us to live like he did.

Read Genesis 41:1a, 8-13.

After two whole years (of being forgotten in prison), Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile... (and I'm going to skip the details for now, because they come up again later on. So skip to verse 8...)

⁸ So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh. ⁹ Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "I remember my offenses today. ¹⁰ When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, ¹¹ we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. ¹² A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. ¹³ And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged."

So finally, after two full years of waiting, the cupbearer remembered Joseph. That meant that for two full years Joseph had to deal with the hand he'd been given, and it wasn't an easy one. He was in prison, he was there because of a lie, and he was forgotten by the only person who had access to Pharaoh who could set him free. During those two years Joseph could have easily given in to bitterness and despair. He could have shriveled up in discouragement, angry with God and with the lot in life he'd been given. The cupbearer finally remembered him, but what would they find when they went looking for him? What kind of attitude would he have and what condition would he be in after all that waiting?

What kind of attitude do you have in the midst of your circumstances? You've faced disappointments, loss, and broken dreams – forced to deal with a lot of bad cards. How has it affected the way you've lived your life? How has it affected your personality and relationships with other people? Has it derailed you from God's purpose and made you a difficult person to be around?

If Joseph had given in to bitterness and despair, I'd think he'd be completely useless if they went to find him. If he was angry with God, how could he hear from him and be able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams? His circumstances could improve, but not if he'd given in to defeat.

Read Genesis 41:14-16.

¹⁴ Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. ¹⁵ And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you

can interpret it.”¹⁶ Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

This was really an amazing response if you think about it. Someone in Joseph’s situation could have easily lost confidence in God. He could have lost faith that God was with him or would do anything for him. If God couldn’t release him from prison for so long, why on earth would he believe that God would give him the interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream? People in Joseph’s situation often don’t trust God anymore – they have learned to fend for themselves.

But that’s the opposite of where Joseph was at. Joseph didn’t try to fend for himself when he stood in front of Pharaoh. Instead he immediately admitted, “It is not in me to interpret your dream.” And then he expressed his ongoing faith and confidence in God: “God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.” Even after everything Joseph had been through, he was trusting God. He hadn’t hardened his heart. He was faithful with the hand he’d been dealt, as disappointing as it had been. And because of that faithfulness, the Lord was with him, the Lord sustained him, and the Lord was about to entrust him with even greater responsibility. He had been faithful in Potiphar’s house and faithful in prison and now the Lord would entrust him with even greater responsibility.

Read Genesis 41:17-38 (not on screen)

¹⁷ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Behold, in my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile. ¹⁸ Seven cows, plump and attractive, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. ¹⁹ Seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and thin, such as I had never seen in all the land of Egypt. ²⁰ And the thin, ugly cows ate up the first seven plump cows, ²¹ but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were still as ugly as at the beginning. Then I awoke. ²² I also saw in my dream seven ears growing on one stalk, full and good. ²³ Seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them, ²⁴ and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me.” ²⁵ Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁶ The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. ²⁷ The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. ²⁸ It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ There will

come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt,³⁰ but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land,³¹ and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe.³² And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.³³ Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt.³⁴ Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years.³⁵ And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it.³⁶ That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.”³⁷ This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants.³⁸ And Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?”

Read Genesis 41:39-40 (ON SCREEN)

³⁹ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are.⁴⁰ You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.”

In a shocking turn of events, Joseph was put in charge of all of Egypt. He had been faithful in the little things for 13 long years and now God was entrusted him with great responsibility. The story goes on to describe what Joseph did in his new position and how God blessed him and used him to bless many people – just like when he was in Potiphar’s house and prison. 13 years of being faithful in the little things and because of that, God entrusted him with something greater.

Joseph is obviously an extreme example compared to us, but I believe the principle is the same. Whatever our circumstances are, God’s desire is that we pursue faithfulness – faithfulness in seeking him, faithfulness in our character, and faithfulness in loving others and carrying out our purpose. If we are faithful in the little things, God will entrust us with greater things, whether in this life, or the next.

While encouraging 1st century Christians who were facing persecution and difficult circumstances, Peter wrote this in 1 Peter 5:6-11: *“Humble yourselves,*

therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Let those words and promises wash over your soul this morning. Jesus gave his disciples the same assurance when he told them this parable in Matt. 25:14-30...
“For (the kingdom of heaven) will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

If we are faithful in the little things, God will entrust us with more. That might be in this life, like Joseph, or it might be in the next, like we see in this story. But the promise is there to give us hope in the midst of whatever we're going through today. We need not be like the servant who shriveled up in defeat and hardened himself against God. He gave in to the roaring lion who wanted to devour him. He was unable to do anything for the kingdom with what he'd been given, and he lived his life in bitterness and despair. Don't go down that road. Resist the devil and stand firm in faith. Rather than giving in to the disappointments and limitations of our situations and doing nothing, let us be faithful, trusting that in due time, God will raise us up.

What has God entrusted you with? Maybe you feel like you've only been given the one talent, and it's easy to see the negative things and focus on them, but what are the good things God has given you? What are the opportunities you have for ministry? Who are the people God has placed around you? God allows us to go through difficulties so we can comfort and bless the people we encounter. It may not be the situation you want to be in, which I'm sure Joseph struggled with, but it's where you're at, and God wants you to be faithful. If you are faithful in the little things, God will exalt you. This suffering is only for a season, and one day we will all be able to look back at what we went through and give glory to God. Paul says in 2 Cor. 4:16-18: *"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."*