

Joseph 2 – Falling from Grace into Grace

Do you remember this chap? (Photo of Jonathan Aitkin) His name is Jonathan Aitkin and he was a conservative politician who had quite a high profile both while they were in government and after they had been voted out. Unfortunately for the latter part of his career the publicity was for all the wrong reasons. With a blinding arrogance that, when you look back on it seems unbelievable, Aitkin took on a national newspaper for printing a bad story about him that everyone knew to be true.

He paid all too highly for his arrogance, not only did he lose a very expensive court case but he ended up in prison. This was a man who fell from grace, from the heights of government to the depths of Bellmarsh Prison. But that's not the whole story, he not only fell from grace but fell into grace. In prison and after prison God was working in his life.

In an interview with the BBC after leaving prison he admitted that pride had been his downfall & that before prison he had had a “summary relationship” with God. “I used to treat God like he was my bank manager. I rather condescended to God... I was a very important politician after all.” When faced with the anger of his fellow inmates he prayed to God properly for the first time on his first night in prison. He has continued to be open about his faith and since getting out he now does a lot of work for the Prison Fellowship International. Jonathan Aitkin was a man who fell from grace into grace.

The parallels with Joseph are clear – we have two arrogant men cast down, one through an act of justice, the other through an act of injustice. God was there to catch them when they both fell. In the depths of prison and public disgrace for one and the disgrace of slavery and prison for the other God worked in mysterious ways as we learned last week to perform his wonders on two human lives and through them to touch many others.

I want to look at the next part of the Joseph story under three headings that for me sum up this part of Joseph's life. They are Hard Lessons, Soft Landings and Secret Plans.

To say that Joseph has had to learn some hard lessons is something of an understatement. He has had to cope with betrayal by his family, being kidnapped and held in slavery in a foreign country, a false accusation of rape, even in prison he has had to live with the ungratefulness and empty promises of his fellow inmates. There is one particular chap who I visited in a previous church who was one of the most patient men under suffering that I ever met and even he probably would have said that Joseph was having, "A hard time of it."

Joseph's sufferings remind me of the first trial of Job when God allowed The Satan to take away everything from Job but his health. Joseph has also been stripped of everything that he could call his own; it was not just his coat that his brothers tore away from him that day when they attacked him and sold him into slavery. All his security, rights and privileges left him that day, he no longer belonged to a family who could stand up for him, indeed he no longer belonged to himself.

He had become a piece of property to be sold to the highest bidder, a non-person with all the rights of a Chinese cockle picker, God has systematically removed from him everything that he could trust in or rely upon other than God himself. Joseph is being taught how to trust in God the hard way. Three months before we were due to move from Scotland to Northern Ireland and I started my training as a minister I was made redundant by the internet company that I worked for.

Suddenly all our well laid plans got thrown into complete disarray. We had our last few months' money organised practically down to the last penny and then we found out that I wouldn't have a job. God took care of just as he had done during other times when one of us was out of work. I got some low paid temp work and we arranged to move a couple of months earlier and I started work as a Summer Assistant in Ballycastle but by the time we arrived there our money and our overdraft had completely run out and we lived off the kindness of the people in whose house we were living until we could find a place of our own.

Now, scary as it was at the time, that lesson was pretty simple and easy compared to what Joseph had to learn, we risked losing our house if we couldn't pay our last couple of months rent. Joseph risked losing his life if he didn't keep his master or his gaoler happy. He had to learn to trust in God the hard way, the very hard way. But with these hard lessons came soft landings for God soon showed him that in these difficult circumstances, he could be trusted to get him through.

Yes, Joseph had hard lessons but God also gave him soft landings. God's grace was with Joseph in each and every situation in which he found himself. God seems to have had everything arranged in advance for Joseph, the right time, the right people, and the right places to be. Looking back it is easy for us to see God's hand moving Joseph inexorably along his path to greatness but it must have been very difficult at the time for Joseph to realise why God was doing what he did.

But there is nothing left to chance in the Joseph story, God may not speak directly to Joseph but he is constantly acting on his behalf. God arranges for Joseph to have just the right master in the form of Potiphar, one who would be able to see the qualities in Joseph that God would bring to the fore. He needed a master who would recognise Joseph's worth and allow him the experience of running a large household so that he would have the skills when the time came for him to run Egypt and so God picked Potiphar to pick Joseph.

Maybe God also picked Potiphar because of his wife? Joseph would be no good to God's plans if he grew wealthy and fat as the chief slave in Potiphar's household. God wanted Joseph in prison so that he might become known in Pharaoh's court as someone who could interpret dreams and so maybe he put him in the same house as this scheming woman knowing that when he refused to sleep with her she would resort to foul means to get rid of him.

Did God arrange for this injustice to happen to Joseph? He certainly arranged the first injustice by the brothers. God arranged that not only would Joseph be thrown into the right prison so that he could meet Pharaoh's baker and the cupbearer but he also softened his landing there by granting him favour in the eyes of the prison warder.

Even in prison, God was working for the best for Joseph. He had hard lessons to teach this arrogant young man but he gave him softened landings each time he fell. Joseph had now reached the lowest point that he could reach. There were very few places in Egyptian society lower than a slave in prison. No Prison Fellowship in those days, no Amnesty International to complain or submit reports, however ineffectually, to Pharaoh on your behalf.

But even here, in the darkest place of a dark and pagan country Joseph is still not out of the reach of God. God has brought him to this place for a purpose that Joseph could never understand. He would have laughed at you if you had told him it. Joseph, God has brought you here to this prison so that in a few years you can be prime minister of Egypt and protect your family and those treacherous brothers of yours from a great famine that will take place about a decade from now.

It sounds crazy doesn't it?

God's grace does not stop operating simply because the world around us seems devoid of grace and goodness. God's grace does not stop operating simply because the world around us seems crazy. I don't know what the hard times and the dark times and the downright crazy and chaotic times of your life have been and I would not want to sound so arrogant as to try to diminish the hurt and the pain of those times with some kind of pious words or religious platitudes but the Bible tells us, especially through stories such as that of Joseph that in those dark times, especially in those dark times, God is near to us, working for good for those he loves.

God's secret plans were being worked out through the life and the difficulties of Joseph. God secretly picked Potiphar and the home in which Joseph would be enslaved. God secretly picked the prison to which he would be unjustly condemned. God secretly picked the prison guard and even secretly guided the psychopathic whims of pharaoh so that he might pick Joseph's inmates.

God allowed the cupbearer to forget for two years so that Joseph might secretly remain in prison, and not be freed by Pharaoh to simply disappear off the scene as a free man. God walked silently into Pharaoh's mind and gave Pharaoh a dream. He allowed the cup bearer to remember again so that just at the right time God's man, God's secret agent would be in the right place to do the job that he wanted him to do.

The right people have been put in place for this take over bid in which one of Abraham's descendants will take over one of the greatest kingdoms in the world. The places are ready and the time is ready, the dream is ready and the winds and rains, the flooding of the river and the slow changing of the climate has been made ready and set in place.

The Lord, the king of all the earth is about to demonstrate publicly that he is not some local and colloquial God tied to one family or one place. He is about to literally move the heavens and the earth for his people to protect them and defend them and bring them to Egypt. Out of the stinking pit of an Egyptian prison he will accomplish a coup d'état, a complete takeover, in one of the strongest nations in the world just for his love of Abraham's ungraceful and ungrateful descendants.

If that is what he did for the sons of Abraham then what will he not do for us? If he moved heaven and earth for the children of the Old Covenant paid for by the blood of bulls and lambs then would he not shake the foundations of creation itself for those bought by the blood of his son Jesus Christ?

Pause

So when you are learning the hard lessons pray that God may also provide soft landings. Look out for them and not only for yourself but for your brothers and sisters here in church and outside of church. Maybe you can be someone's spiritual or emotional safety net; there for them when they fall. Maybe God can provide a soft landing through you as you listen or as you help in any way that you can.

Through it all never forget God's powerful and unshakeable loyalty and love for his people – that includes you and me, a people that he would move heaven and earth for and still does. God's plans, his often secret and unfathomable plans still continue today. He still humbles the proud and lifts up the humble; he still teaches hard lessons and gives soft landings and he still changes his followers through adversity and hardship so that they, so that you, in turn can change the world.