

ENJOYING VICTORY THROUGH HARD TIMES

Joseph, the son of Jacob, learned the secret to walking victoriously through hard times. His theology was built around a very big God. The story begins in Genesis chapter 37 with Joseph, the second youngest of 12 brothers, receiving some explosive information from the Lord. A series of dreams revealed a future ministry of leadership in store for Joseph. By the time we get to the end of Genesis, his dreams have been fulfilled. He has a long, rich life, packed with blessings. I believe Joseph is a picture of how the Lord desires all of us to reign in life with Jesus. When our days are over and we set down to review them, we should be able to say, "all the Word of the Lord has been fulfilled toward me for good!"

The secret to Joseph's success was how he handled the curve balls life threw him. His early years included being raised as a rich kid in a very large family with loads of hostility. At age 17 his brothers came near to killing him. At the last minute one fairly responsible sibling

detoured the effort and the lad was sold instead as a slave. From being your father's favorite to standing on a slave auction block is what I'd call a drastic change.

Overnight Joseph had to adapt from telling servants what to do, to receiving orders as a common slave. At this point Joseph made a decision that would change the entire direction of his life. He moved closer toward his God!

Do you realize how normal it would be to rebel against your new oppressors? Who could fault Joseph for trying to devise a plan for escaping from Egypt and returning home. In fact, were he alive today, this would be the expected response. Why, it's the American thing to do. "Look out for number one!" I seriously doubt that Joseph knew the truth that Jesus would propound some 1500 years later, that "the way to up is down." The Master would prove that by laying His life down as a servant, the Father would raise Him up and seat Him on the throne of the Universe. How did Joseph know, there in bondage as a slave, that if he would submit to his oppressors as unto God, that he would be promoted to the second highest office in the land?

In Genesis 39:1 we're told Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar. In verse three we read, "Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand." But how did Potiphar know it was the Lord who was blessing this young man? Joseph must have lived a life of praise and thankfulness toward God. Can you see him scrubbing the floors and singing with

great gusto the songs of Zion?

It quickly became common knowledge that this young slave was full of a zest for life. No mealy mouthed complainer, no, this jewel of a slave was always happy. He submitted to the tasks before him with a heart of thanksgiving toward Yahweh. He believed God was at work in his hard times. With this kind of faith, anything is possible.

Soon folks were talking about this joyful person, one they all loved being around. They began to notice that everything Joseph touched was blessed. His prayers were sought after. He was approached for answers to difficult problems. Before long he was promoted more by others deferring to him than by a title being handed to him. You don't argue with Joseph because he's always right! You don't want to argue with Joseph because his smile is deemed a good token.

To be promoted by people pushing you to the top out of love and respect is indeed rare. That's how David was made king. It's what the people were trying to do for Jesus on Palm Sunday. Joyful service during hard times pushed Joseph to the top. His attitude, while in less than ideal surroundings, released the power of God to accomplish the prophetic dream he was given years earlier.

What was the choice before Joseph as he awoke the morning of his first day on his new job as a common slave? He could live in the past. In his mind he could revel in the good old days—see dad putting the special robe on him in front of his brothers. Maybe he should

tell the slaves working along side of him in Egypt how important he was back home! I doubt that they would be impressed, seeing him in slave chains.

I wonder if he could have demanded to see a lawyer? Maybe a hunger strike would break the resistance of the establishment? Well, if you have to work you have to work, but you don't have to enjoy it, right? Not with Joseph. Somehow he knew that such a small matter as demanding his right to have a bad attitude would be sufficient to quench the Spirit.

Jesus said that if we are faithful in small things then we will be faithful in the great things. This being true, there are no small things! Every time our attitude becomes less than one of submissive-love toward Yahweh, something else can slip in. Our right to pout can be exercised, but at the expense of God's blessing. If we get angry in the small things, how can we ever be considered faithful to handle the larger, more dangerous responsibilities?

Who would have faulted this young Jewish boy for throwing a fit, at least for a few days. It would be understandable if he had to be whipped a few times to get him to cooperate with his new master. After all, you have to train slaves...show 'em who's boss! But I get the impression that Joseph didn't need to be taught the "force" lesson of who's boss. He knew God was his ultimate boss!

What shot Joseph to the top was his faithfulness in the seemingly unimportant matter of giving thanks for all things and in all

things. That which filled his heart in abundance came out his mouth. The room was filled with glorious praise, be it latrine duty or K.P. When you flow in thankfulness in all things, your work becomes a sacrifice of worship. The Scripture says whoever offers praise glorifies the Lord. As you glorify God while doing the laundry, the room is filled with the same commodity as the focus of your attitude—the glory of God! The small, mundane issues of life become the building blocks for either a palace of praise or a prison of irritation.

Did this lad really have a secret for success? Apparently it still is a secret! Few think that faithfulness with our attitude in small, difficult circumstances counts. Too much of what I'm hearing these days promotes open confession of our weaknesses. There's an honesty kick that says:

Share your failures with everybody
because we're all in this together.
Sure you're going to get angry with
the boss, so tell us about how you
wanted to punch his lights out. We'll
all pray for your attitude and go
home thinking it has been good to
get together to share how we are all
struggling as frail humans to live for
Jesus in this old imperfect world.

Wait a minute. What about the Joseph-response that didn't entertain angry thoughts because he had no rights. What about the Paul-response of praising God in the Philippian jail instead of throwing a fit? Have we been tricked

into settling for "natural" responses instead of walking by faith that God is still in control, even in hard times?

Let's think for a moment about the words of Genesis 50:20.

And as for you, you meant this for evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

How big is your God? Does He really care about the small details of your life? It's easy to agree with the first part of this verse, isn't it? Some folks are out to hurt us. Why? Who knows. They hurt and so they will hurt others. Some think that if they can step on enough people they can climb out of their squalor.

From our days on the school grounds we know that there are takers, hurters, name-callers, and plain mean critters. Most individuals are nice, but a few hurters seem to spread a lot of poison. What about the second part of the verse? Do you believe that God is really concerned about your welfare? Do you believe that He cares when others take advantage of you? Read carefully this familiar verse in Hebrews 11:6, and notice particularly how we please Him.

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Do you believe that if you seek the Lord, He will reward you? If not, then you can't please Him. If you do, then every trial of life

can be chucked full of rewards and blessings. All we have to do is to seek Him in every trial. Instead of saying, "Lord, why me?" we say, "Here am I Lord, use me." What is the difference between these two attitudes? The first is self-seeking, the second is Jesus-serving! The first cry increases frustration, anger, pity or irritation (maybe some of each!); the second turns on the power of God. Joseph obeyed Colossians 3:23 long before it was written:

Whatever you do, do your work heartily (Greek, "with soul"), as unto the Lord rather than for man.

Could you be sold by your brothers into a life of slavery and go to work with a good attitude? Could you give thanks when the boss's wife had you thrown in jail on trumped-up charges? How about when you are passed over for promotion? What if the folks at church don't speak to you? What about the scene at the office when everybody is in a contest to see how little work they can do and still keep their job? Do you turn a deaf ear to the charges of apple polishing and keep doing your best as unto Jesus?

Just how big of a God does it take to transform the evil that others toss us into something for our good? Surely the One who holds every molecule together by the word of His power can qualify for the job. Proverbs says God has the muscle to turn the hearts of kings as a waterbrook. He alone has the authority to promote us. Psalm 75 says that it is God who puts one down and exalts another.

Peter tells us that God will exalt us at the proper time if we humble ourselves under His mighty hand.

There is a secret for releasing the attitude that wants to praise God in all things. Merely saying "praise God" when things go awry is not that earthshaking. What we need is to be genuinely convinced that Yahweh is in control of the mess we are presently in the middle of! It may seem overpowering, but if God is here, actively working behind the scenes to create our miracle, then we want to thank Him! Yes, we can praise Him with feelings.

I'm not saying pain feels good, but rather that it's great to have a God who never leaves us! It's thrilling to know that the God of the Universe is right now working every detail together for our good! Perhaps you have been turned off by people saying "praise the Lord" when they obviously did not mean it. This can become a Christian cliché. The attitude of heart of being God-centered and genuinely appreciative of His involvement in our situation is true faith. I'm not thankful that Clyde's jealousy prompted him to start vicious gossip about me; I'm thankful that the Lord is taking Clyde's gossip and using it for my good in spite of his intentions. I'm not filled with praise because my brothers sell me as a slave; I'm overflowing with glory because God means this for my exaltation!

This attitude of thankfulness does not mean we can goof off after we've said, "praise God." As Joseph showed his trust in Yahweh by working hard at small, menial jobs, even so, we

must work through the difficult times doing more than we would otherwise. He no doubt whistled as he worked; we also need to have a song in our heart. With true gratitude toward the Father, we do what is necessary. For David it was: praise God, kill a bear, sing a song to Yahweh, lead the sheep, worship the Lord, kill a menacing giant.

If you're a policeman you will have to write speeding tickets for fuming motorists while giving thanks. If you're a loan officer you will have to praise the Lord and turn down some applicants. As a good mother you will have to paddle the "devil" out of some small posteriors, all the while singing praise to Jesus. We can't hide behind praising the Lord while our little rascals throw temper tantrums.

We can't pass off shoddy work under the guise of being religious. The attitude I'm talking about is not a substitute for brains. We're to work harder and produce more than others because of our proper attitude. We seek the wisdom of God so we can get to where He's taking us faster, not sit back and wait for God to do His thing.

God could have ended the famine in Palestine and thus Jacob would not have had to send his sons to Egypt looking for food. His plan was otherwise. In case you haven't noticed, God doesn't like boring plans! His complex plots interweave mystery and intrigue with the frailties of mankind. To flow with His mind as an obedient hand may take you into some risky places and result in some scratches. The hand must trust the mind. We don't have to

understand what God has up His sleeve, but we must trust that He is ultimately in control!

"How can I be sure that God really has my best in mind when I go through hard times?" I'm glad you asked. Let's go to Ephesians for a very intimate picture of His love for us:

For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Ephesians 5:29-32

How close is a husband/wife relationship supposed to be? I'm not talking about what the TV says or what you may have witnessed as a child. What does God intend for the home environment? The wife is to give of herself in loving abandonment to her husband's will, while the husband is to nourish and cherish his wife, as his own body, even to the point of laying down his life for her. Notice the last sentence in the verse above, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church."

If this is God's picture of His desired relationship with us, then we can have full confidence that any hard times we have to go through are absolutely for our best. He's our husband. He's already laid down His life for us once! He has pledged to treat us as He would Himself! Whatever trial you go through He

will use to nourish and cherish you. He will even cover for our mistakes!

We might have a difficult time believing God will do His part because we're having a hard time holding up our part. If I'm not too good at submitting to Him in every situation, then it will be hard for me to receive His loving husbandmanship! Do you believe the old saying, "You get what you pay for"? If we don't pay the price of praising Him in the perplexing times, it will be hard to enjoy His cherishing and nourishing. We won't "feel" close to him, even though He's still there and still in ultimate control!

The dutiful wife of a missionary will trek through the jungles alongside her mate, braving bugs and snakes. Because of their love for each other and their commitment to a common cause, they see potential risks as a mutual experience. She, the weaker sex, plods through the same seamy pollution as her husband. She's at his side, helping as an expression of his ministry. The hard times he experiences, she shares. This is their commitment.

Jesus has never asked us to do something He was unwilling to do. He suffered the embarrassing, aggravating times in life—Place of birth: stable! He was refused service. People lied about Him. People befriended Him only to get as much as possible. He was unappreciated. At the time of His greatest need, all His friends ran away. Yes, He's acquainted with our lot in life. How do I know the Lord is working through my hard times? Because He's at my

side, as my husband, and He's been through all this stuff before!

When I yield to Him as my husband, He exerts His mighty power to protect me as His bride! As the missionary would not want his wife to suffer, still he knows she will as part of their combined efforts. Yes, there are costs in life, just like the wife of the missionary. The hard times in life are not something we fear and avoid at all cost; they rather become the necessary hassles involved with reaching out to people lost in the jungles of life. It may seem more glorious to be buried in the sand by pygmies than to have your ears singed off by an irate church member; but, we're not into glamour when it comes to hard times—just praise the Lord from your heart and press on through the jungle at the side of your Husband—there's a village ahead!

Joseph responded properly to the adverse situation of being sold into slavery. Is this common? Can we know the Lord, but not respond in such a way as to release His peace in hard times? Notice how Joseph's father, Jacob, responded to the news that his son Simeon was being held hostage in Egypt:

*And their father Jacob said to them,
"You have bereaved me of my children:
Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no
more, and you would take Benjamin;
all these things are against me."
Genesis 42:36*

We know what the real picture was like because we can read the whole story! Was Jacob justified in feeling the way he did?

According to whose viewpoint? We see through such a darkened glass that at times everything seems dismal. We, like Jacob, could just die! We think every way we turn we're going to be ripped off. Everybody and everything is against us! But was this so? Had not Jehovah God promised to bless Jacob? Was not the covenant making God of his fathers with him?

What was the real story when Jacob was singing the blues? The whole time God is working all things together for our good we might be having our own pity party. How do we look after the truth comes out? Does Jacob appear in this verse as a great man of faith or a whipped puppy? Just because we can't pick up a book and read our story like we can Jacob's, does that change the fact that God has promised to work all things together for our good?

We know we can't please the Father without faith. Is it faith to cry around when things appear out of control? How would Jacob's attitude have changed if he had known the real scoop from God's vantage-point? Don't we have God's view point concerning our present situation in Romans 8:28?

What will it take for us to agree with God concerning His promises? Jacob had a hard time when his boys returned and told him that Joseph was alive in Egypt. No wonder, it was his reading between the lines that told him Joseph was dead in the first place! His sons didn't say that Joseph was dead, they merely presented evidence that Jacob misconstrued. It seems that our own wrinkled-up conclusions

are the hardest to iron out with truth. Did he asked the Lord the whereabouts of his son? Was not his fear and grief founded upon a lie? When we buy the devil's circumstantial evidence that we're going to fail, we buy a lie that is set over against the Word of God that says in all things we will be more than a conqueror?

What did it take for Jacob to believe that Joseph was alive? *When he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived.* Are we so carnal-minded that it takes the wagons of the world, the actual, physical token of a miracle before we will say that God is meeting our needs?

If we wait to praise the Master until we see physical evidence that everything is going to turn out OK, then we are implying that we don't trust Him! How much better to flow with the unchangeable Word of our God which lives and abides forever. All Jacob had to do when presented with adverse reports was to run to his Lord. He could have entered His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise: "Abba, Father, I praise You, the God of heaven and earth, because You have promised and You are watching over Your Word to perform it."

FAMILY SQUABBLES

Most of our hard times as a kid came from our very own brothers and sisters, didn't they? The small, petty squabbles are a part of life because we are members of the fallen race called humans. How do we breeze through these rough seas without drowning? Is there

something God is trying to get through to us with our siblings?

Life in the family is a microcosm of life in our world. If we can't get along with members of our family, then we will no doubt have conflicts aplenty when we step into the bigger world of adult relationships. If we can learn to praise God for family members as they are, we can usually make it in life alongside the toughest! Joseph's brothers had a hard time relating to him; however, he adjusted to them in the proper way. I know this by the way he treated them when they came to Egypt. If he had a score to even, then things would have been quite different. Instead, all he wanted to see was if they had grown. Did they care about their father's feelings? Was Benjamin important to them? Were they remorseful about their earlier atrocity against him? As soon as he saw their changed, repentant hearts, Joseph broke loose with tears and forgiveness. He said,

And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

Notice how he did not want them to grovel in self-abasement but to enjoy forgiveness. We can have this mature response when we have walked in true praise and thankfulness during the trial! He had seen God's hand in the whole thing. Sure, they intended to harm him out of jealousy, yet God had other plans!

The crucible of the home can grind out

selfishness and pride if we let it. Those who know us best can tell us the things we need to hear. But usually, siblings say what we need to hear in such crude terms that we automatically put up our defense shield. "They hate me, so I won't give any credence to what they say." Sometimes fathers are cruel and untactful. If their mean statements are rejected because the words hurt, then we shortchange ourselves. Only when we give thanks to God for the parent or brother or sister just as they are and for what they say, are we free to hear what the Lord might be saying to us through the imperfect vessel. We know God used Balaam's donkey; how about a relative? Just because instruction is not shrouded in pillows and jewels, don't ignore it.

Giving thanks for the treatment we receive is saying that we believe that God is bigger than any injustice! Praising God for people as they are is really expressing faith in 1 Corinthians 10:13 and Romans 8:28! Is your God bigger than people? Is He so big that He can turn the fiery missiles people hurl at you into flash courses in wisdom and maturity? When we bristle and recoil at the barbs of others, we are implying that we have arrived. Is this true? Could we be giving off the air that we have it all together, the whole time our dirty linen is showing? Who knows that like our family? What if ninety-nine percent of what they say is false? How much growth can we enjoy if we turn the one percent into received counsel?

We have to be careful how we take what others say. If we do a number on ourselves and decide that we must be a real creep because everybody is picking on us, then we have still missed the point. Only when we thank God for the hurts as they come, are we free to then ask Him to minister life to us from these hurts. When we immediately become Father-focused, we are in the classroom of wisdom! He alone can sift the one percent good from a landslide of muck. When we thank Him first we are agreeing that He is in control of our life and that He has allowed this person's choice comments for a purpose. We leave that purpose up to Him; we're just declaring that we trust our Teacher!

The hard times are usually God's shortcuts to giving us the best. It took Joseph only 13 years to become second in command in Egypt. If we allow 12 years for regular schooling, four years for college and 2 years for a master's degree, and add some time on for experience, I think we could say he made it big in short order. We may not have liked the course work he had to take: Scrubbing: 101; Dungeon: 102; but was it worth it? Didn't God use this tough schooling to save the founding fathers of Israel?

If we could liken the hard times of life to mountains, then we could say that tunnels are the Lord's way to get us through situations faster. The problem with tunnels is, they're dark! We have to do a bunch of trusting. If you've read Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, you know the danger of tunnels! Oh

my, but there are scary things in the shortcuts. But the rope that binds us to our guide is praise! The cord is securely fastened to us by faith. If we believe absolutely in the integrity of His Word, then we can praise our way through the dark times. When we pop out on the other side of the mountain range, we find that our Guide has taken us to a land inaccessible by all conventional means. Only the path of trust, trod by thankfulness leads to the fullness of the Kingdom!

What about when we're the ones who messed up by our own dumb doings? Shouldn't we go through a period of beating on ourself? Of probation? Of purgatory? What good does this do? Isn't the only cure for stupidity, knowledge from God? If so, then the sooner we back up, yield to Him, the sooner we get "un-stupid." Satan gets double coupons when we flop around in self-abasement singing "dumb ole me." See how fast you can say, "Father, I praise You for Your forgiveness." The way out of the hospital bed of our accidents and failures is to quickly call for Doctor Jesus! In thankfulness for His unfailing love we turn our eyes off of failure onto the Fixer!

Our body can and will keep score as to how much anxiety we store in our minds. If my shortcomings generate anxiety, then I must cleanse this out as soon as possible before chemical reactions take place. Once the "depressing" hormones begin to secrete, my arteries, stomach, joints, will take the punishment. Before they catch it for my

bungling, why not turn to the Repairer of the Breach? Philippians 4:8 commands us to think only on certain things:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.

I can't obey this verse by sloshing around in failure, or by being flesh minded. Recall Romans 8:6, "For the mind set on the flesh is death..." How can it be otherwise? As long as we live in these tents, we're going to fail, right? God knows that. He's not asking us to ignore our failings, but as quick as possible, turn our eyes on Him. Philippians 4:8 is asking us to extract the gold from the ore, and throw away the slag! In every failure there is something we can praise God for. Find it! Throw away the worthless, hurtful trappings.

If it's appropriate to weep and mourn over your sin, then do so (James 4:8-10) and as soon as possible draw near to the loving Father. Godly sorrow leads to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10), the sorrow of the world leads to a life of regret that produces death! Regret is a bitter pill that the devil concocted to paralyze us; repentance is God's design to get us back into Father-focus! Can you say, "Thank you Jesus for not letting me get away with this"? It hurts to get caught in sin, but better that and repentance than the consequences of remaining in sin! What I'm

getting at is that a thankful attitude can break the "loser" mentality that goes with failure and sin. It gets our mind back to the Lord, where the impossible is possible.

HOLD THE VEGETABLES, PLEASE

Some may be wondering if we are to just stop being human. Are we not to have any feelings of our own? Are we to walk around like vegetables? Thoughtless, feelingless creatures, designed to be eaten by others? Of course not, silly! Our feelings are important and even old Joseph had them. He even expressed them. It's not wrong to express our feelings or concerns. Things get out of hand at the point when our input is not received and we get angry about it. Joseph let his brothers know that he wasn't happy about being sold into slavery:

Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen. Genesis 42:21

He let Pharaoh's cupbearer know he was unjustly imprisoned and pleaded for him to intercede for him. It's not our immediate responses that get us into the most trouble. It's what we do with these feelings. Joseph was ignored two times. What was his response? Trust! Even Jesus asked that He be spared the cup of death, yet He quickly added, "Nevertheless, as You will, Father." So, we can say that it's OK to have emotional responses, and even to convey them (most

times) to those inflicting us. But when we are ignored our faith will be revealed by our thankfulness in spite of the pain!

Wisdom is required if we are to flow in life as the Lord desires. To yield to the devil without a fight is both ignorant and suicide. The Word gives us the response we must have at all times: "Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). In trials we are to first submit every detail to God. The Psalmist told us to do this with thanksgiving and praise (Psalm 100). Our first response of submission and praise gives us the confidence to resist the devil with true authority! Although we're seated with Jesus in heavenly places, when we gripe and complain we will lack personal confidence and our foe will not take our "commands" seriously! The praise response sharpens our sword! Thanksgiving loads our gun! Our binding and loosing commands only work because of where we're seated! Grumbling keeps us from God's presence, and at a most distinct disadvantage for warfare! God wants us to stay in His glory so we can remain successful in our struggle against the devil. After all, Jesus is waiting until the last enemy is put under His feet. Remember what the Word says about His feet? The church is the one who must step on the devil and his kingdom. The longer we refrain from flowing in thankfulness to the Father, the longer we remain defeated and thus prolong our Master's return!

If we wrestle not against flesh and blood,

then we can praise God for people just the way they are and for the problems they stir up. We are not to praise Him for the devil, we're to resist the devil! Sometimes we open the door to the enemy. He usually employs people to do his dirty work. The result is that it is very easy to take out on his flunkies what he really deserves! I find my first impulse is usually to resist people and ignore the devil. And the last thing is to praise the Lord. Even when we are the ones that bring the onslaught on ourselves, the first order of business is to submit to God, then secondly to resist the devil. Then James tells us to cleanse our hands (4:8)!

Paul opened the door to a messenger of Satan. Why? Because of pride (see it in his own words—2 Corinthians 12:7f.). What was his way out? He drew near to the Lord. The Lord equipped him with the weapon of grace! And in so many words, the Lord said, "use the power of My grace to turn this thing around." What happens when you use the power of God against the messenger of Satan? You win! In this case, I firmly believe that Paul was referring to the persecution he suffered. Throughout the Old Testament, the word thorn was used to describe persecution. When God called Paul He told him that He would show him how much he would suffer for His name. Paul had planted bad seed when he was Saul. He had done some high powered persecuting of the believers. When he got saved, he was judicially forgiven of this, yet the law of sowing and reaping cannot be

broken. God says He will not be mocked, we will reap what we sow. Paul, subsequently was persecuted like no other human has ever been persecuted.

The fantastic lesson we can learn from this is how the Lord provides a way for us to make good crops from bad seed by the transforming power of praise. Grace comes from faith (Ephesians 2:8), and faith is nourished and released by praise. Grace is the power of God. Only the mighty power of God can take what was sown to do evil and turn it into good. Recall Joseph's words, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." Man planted bad seed, but God, working through the thankfulness of Joseph, turned it into salvation for His people!

If we could only praise God for the good things, we would spend little time in His presence. If we could only thank Him for the problems brought on by others, likewise we would praise rarely. Only when we have faith in His power to turn our mistakes around for good, will we learn the secret to living constantly in His presence!

THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

Our emphasis on thankfulness takes on new proportions when we see how God views our speech. In Proverbs 18:21 He tells us that He has placed the power of life and death in our tongues. I'm convinced this life is linked with praise and the death is linked to grumbling. In 1 Corinthians 10 we're told that when the Jews in the wilderness complained,

the destroyer moved in! Old Testament giants such as Jehoshaphat released the miracle power of Yahweh by praise. What comes out of our mouth can kill or give life. The salvation story, which comes out of our mouth, gives eternal life. How blessed are the feet of those who publish good tidings of redemption! In contradistinction, Nehemiah asked God to not forgive Sanballat because he demoralized the builders (Nehemiah 4:5). Our speech is to be closely governed:

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear. Ephesians 4:29

No wonder we're to pray with an attitude of thankfulness (Colossians 4:2) and to speak to others with graceful words (Colossians 4:6). We can actually produce grace by what we say. This grace is the power of God. Our words can release a miracle! If our tongue speaks from what fills our heart, then the secret is not freaking out when we slip and say something negative, but to be careful what we meditate on. Our heart must ponder the glories of our heavenly Bridegroom. Our thoughts must not linger on the flashing anger of the moment, but quickly go to the Father's fountain of cleansing and joy. Drinking His living water quenches the sting of fiery missiles and refreshes the weary soldier.

When problems catch us off guard and we blow it, remember that we will have plenty

more opportunities to flow in praise. Maybe next time our first response will improve! But, thankfulness when we regain our composure shows the determination of our life. Being committed to a lifestyle of praise will increase our batting average! Better late than never! Our goal is to minimize our down time and maximize our time in His presence.

**IN THY PRESENCE IS
FULLNESS OF JOY!**

*Then I was beside Him, as a master
workman; and I was daily His
delight, rejoicing always before Him,
rejoicing in the world, His earth, and
having my delight in the sons of men.
Proverbs 8:30, 31*

Solomon is writing in these verses as though wisdom is speaking to us. She was with the Lord in the beginning of time, creating, shaping overseeing. What does wisdom do? She always rejoices before the Lord! She delights. What a lesson for us. We want to stay in the presence of the Lord, don't we? We want Him to delight in us! According to these two verses, the way to remain in God's beautiful presence is to always flow in thankfulness, praise, and rejoicing.

I'm sure wisdom could have said she was grieved at the sons of men. As we look around at mankind's failures, we too can remain in grief. But, wisdom knows that faith receives what it pictures. Wisdom knows that this is how the Father operates. That is why He sees us complete in Christ (Colossians 2:10). Jesus

did not want to talk of things as they appeared, but as the Father saw them! He did not want to say that Lazarus was dead, but asleep, as the Father saw him. His disciples, as usual, stumbled because Jesus talked of things that were not as though they were, just like His Father (Romans 4:17 KJV.). We can rejoice in the sons of men if we see them through the eyes of faith—just like Jesus! Just like wisdom!

When we enter the Father's presence in prayer, we do so with thankfulness:

Let us come before His presence with thank-fullness; let us shout joyfully to Him with Psalms. Psalms 95:2

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thankfulness let your requests be made known to God. Philippians 4:6

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving. Colossians 4:2

Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in every-thing give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. do not quench the Spirit. 1

Thessalonians 5:16-19.

Notice the context of "quenching the Spirit" in the last verse. We quench the Holy Spirit when we gripe and act as though God doesn't care. We release the joy of the Lord when we give thanks in all things.

When precious ore is mined, one cannot usually see the sparkle of the gold or silver.

The crude rocks must be processed or milled. The ore is usually crushed, mixed with chemicals and the waste removed. It's quite an operation. I suppose if rocks had feelings they would complain: "Ouch, this hurts, please stop it! I can't take it any more!" But when the finished product is viewed, all fuss over its beauty. Now what's it like, Mr. Rock? James was trying to get us to see the tough times of life from this perspective:

*Consider it all joy, my brethren,
when you encounter various trials;
knowing that the testing of your faith
produces endurance. And let
endurance have its perfect result, that
you may be perfect and complete,
lacking nothing. James 1:2-4*

Our God will not allow the trials to get too hard for us (1 Corinthians 10:13). But keep in mind that the door of escape has written over it, "Give Thanks In All Things." When we pass into His presence, the mockery of our adversary grows dim, along with the intensity of the heat! While in praise, He will show us the solutions to our problems. His way of escape is discovered through praise! When we yield to Him rather than to feelings or the enemy, He comes to our rescue and makes us able to stand!

THE BOTTOM LINE

The twofold purpose for believers is to first give pleasure to our Lord, and secondly to take His gospel to lost humanity. Jesus' final words to His disciples told of His master

plan for reaching the world. He told them that He could not return until the whole earth had heard of His salvation (Mark 13:10). His method for successful evangelism is spelled out in Matthew 5:16:

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

How do we shine before this old world? The only way we can stand out is by expressing our faith as Joseph did in adverse situations. The lost will be drawn toward the light of praise. They will sense we know something that they don't; something that allows us to rejoice through the hard times common to all.

Have you noticed your own reactions to people? When you come into the presence of someone grieving, don't you want to shy away. Isn't your attention drawn toward those who are happy? Hurting people run from more hurts! That's why so many turn to booze and drugs. They are trying to run from their problems. The only solution for the agony of mankind is Jesus. Everyone must be born again. The world needs to know that to be saved and dwell in the presence of the Lord is what their soul is craving!

As we react to what life throws us with a truly thankful attitude, we emit an atmosphere conducive to evangelism! As we walk out our faith by demonstrating the calm assurance that we know our God is working all things together for our good, the lost will receive the

greatest testimony.

What will it be? Will you react to the hard times with thankfulness by faith, or will you respond as one unaware of the great drama going on behind the scenes?

Please send your comments and insights:

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